

PSYC8CD - COURSEWORK DISSERTATION: PSYCHOLOGY

## Brainwashing in a Large Group Awareness Training?

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The Classical Conditioning Hypothesis of Brainwashing

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## Table of Contents

DISCLAIMER.....	1
ABSTRACT.....	1
INTRODUCTION.....	2
LITERATURE REVIEW .....	3
Structure of the literature review.....	3
Brainwashing.....	4
The contentious definition of brainwashing.....	4
Brainwashing as currently defined .....	5
Key theories .....	5
Effectiveness (or lack of effectiveness) of brainwashing.....	18
Criticisms of brainwashing theory .....	19
Reponse to criticisms .....	22
Large Group Awareness Trainings (LGATs) .....	27
The history of LGATs .....	30
LGATs in South Africa.....	34
The relationship between reason and emotion .....	34
Classical Conditioning .....	35
Symptoms of hypomania/mania.....	39
THE CLASSICAL CONDITIONING HYPOTHESIS FOR BRAINWASHING .....	40
METHODOLOGY .....	44
Autoethnography.....	44
Contextualisation of autoethnographic account .....	45
Data collection .....	47
Data analysis .....	48
Validity, reliability and rigour.....	49
Research design .....	51
DATA ANALYSIS.....	52
“Death” and “rebirth” in the 2010 LGAT .....	52
The alternation between abuse and compassion.....	53
Abuse: .....	53
Compassion:.....	65

Confession and education.....	67
Confession.....	67
Education .....	69
Reframing.....	74
Thought-terminating clichés (TTCs) .....	78
Uncertainty/quick decisions .....	81
<i>Lifton’s twelve steps of death and rebirth</i> .....	82
(1) Assault upon Identity .....	83
(2) Establishment of Guilt.....	86
(3) Self-Betrayal.....	87
(4) Breaking Point: Total Conflict and the Basic Fear .....	88
(5) Leniency and Opportunity .....	91
(6) Compulsion to Confess .....	94
(7) Channeling of Guilt.....	95
(8) Re-education: Logical Dishonoring .....	96
(9) Progress and Harmony.....	97
(10) Final Confession: The Summing Up.....	99
(11) Rebirth.....	100
(12) Release: Transition and Limbo .....	101
THE LGAT “EXPERIENCE” .....	104
DISCUSSION.....	114
Dissertation summary.....	114
Limitations .....	114
Tentative explanation of the LGAT “experience” .....	115
Optimal duration/structure of abuse .....	116
Extinction/spontaneous recovery.....	116
Application to other “cult-like” organisations.....	117
Application to Evangelical Christianity (“Evangelicalism”) .....	120
Implications of thesis .....	124
Conclusion.....	125
REFERENCES.....	126
APPENDIX 1 - ETHICAL CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE .....	132

## **DISCLAIMER**

It is crucial when considering Large group Awareness Trainings (LGATs)<sup>1</sup> to pass judgment cautiously - while there are similarities between organisations (and within organisations) the factors potentially leading to harm and manipulation – the screening of participants, the degree of abuse and the use of supposed brainwashing techniques – may vary between trainings. It is evident that these trainings have similar sources, and they have multiplied through copies of the original trainings and copies of those copies. While highly scripted (and thereby easy to emulate) there would, however, have been natural evolution and some variation in their processes over time – it is important to bear this in mind when contemplating a ‘typical’ LGAT.

“Given the person-hours devoted to LGATs during the past two decades, it is astounding how little solid research has been conducted. Indeed, there is not enough research to make any sweeping generalisations about this genre of training program” (Langone, 1998, pp. 2-3).

The author has participated in one such training (“New Beginnings”<sup>2</sup>) – the rest of the information has been obtained through the described experiences of others. It is also imperative to note that brainwashing is a controversial subject (Anthony, 1999; Richardson, 2014) - that proponents of LGATs strongly contest suggestions of brainwashing and of harm arising as a result of participation.

## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation provides an analysis of the processes of “death” and “rebirth” employed by Large Group Awareness Trainings (LGATs), and suggests a theory of brainwashing based upon Pavlov’s concept of classical conditioning. An autoethnographic account of LGAT participation is supplemented chiefly with two varied accounts to provide insight into the experience, with emphasis placed on LGATs’ tendencies to devalue reason, exalt blind trust, elevate emotional experience as a source of knowledge and then trigger an emotional experience. The result, it is argued, is belief predicated upon a manipulated experience, rather than traditional evidence. It is contended that this process – which circumnavigates critical thinking - is a form of brainwashing, never before articulated.

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<sup>1</sup> Large Group Awareness Training (LGAT) is the generic term for a type of “enlightenment” training that provides seminars for up to hundreds of participants at a time. These trainings are the subject of the analysis of this thesis and will be explained in detail during the course of the dissertation. They are dealt with in the literature review on pp. 27-33.

<sup>2</sup> “New Beginnings” is not the real name of the training.

## INTRODUCTION

“While believing strongly, without evidence, is considered a mark of madness or stupidity in any other area of our lives, faith in God still holds immense prestige in our society. Religion is the one area of our discourse where it is considered noble to pretend to be certain about things no human being could possibly be certain about.”

— Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*

If not traditional evidence, what converts people to a given doctrine? Katherine Taylor (2004) notes that “cult victims” often have an emotional association with their beliefs. There is evidence that Large Group Awareness Trainings (LGATs) trigger a powerful emotional experience in participants, while employing a variety of tactics to undermine more traditionally rational processes for decision-making. The result is participants who do not trust their own thinking, but instead put faith in an emotional experience. It is not my aim to undermine empiricism<sup>3</sup> as a legitimate source of knowledge, but when emotional experience is deliberately manipulated, to mislead participants about the validity of the belief being propagated, then it is arguable that an unethical form of influence is being employed.

Using autoethnography<sup>4</sup>, supplemented by two pre-existing accounts, this dissertation analyses the conditions, exercises, and philosophies *typical* of an LGAT and hypothesises the process by which participants come to take on an abusive and philosophically weak doctrine. It is argued that, through a classical conditioning process of sorts, LGAT participants associate the (arguably defective) beliefs of the trainings with feelings of love, joy, confidence, optimism, energy and acceptance (which occur concurrently with the training). It is hypothesised that participants are convinced that their normal thinking processes are flawed – and should be abandoned - and that decision-making based upon emotional experience is a legitimate epistemology. This thesis assumes that the LGAT euphoria is related to the structure and content of the training and therefore evaluates the process of “death and rebirth” which occurs during LGATs in some detail. It is asserted that the manipulation of individuals towards decisions predicated upon emotional experience, rather than critical thinking, is a previously unidentified form of brainwashing.

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<sup>3</sup> Empiricism is a theory that states that knowledge comes primarily from sensory experience (Psillos & Curd, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Autoethnography, according to Maréchal (2010), is “a form of research that involves self-observation and reflexive investigation in the context of ethnographic field work and writing” (p. 43).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Structure of the literature review

This thesis aims to provide insight into the LGAT experience and advance a new hypothesis for brainwashing. The goal is not to ignore the numerous factors impacting brainwashing, but to simply focus on one crucial element that has been given little, if any, direct attention until now. The literature review therefore covers first generation brainwashing theorists like Lifton (1961) and Schein (1961), who studied prisoners of war (POWs) during the Korean War, and then looks at a more modern take on brainwashing advanced by psychologist Singer (1982), who was involved in the American ‘anti-cult’ movement for decades. This review establishes what has already been said on brainwashing and, importantly, what has not been said. It would be misleading to represent brainwashing as universally, or even generally, accepted so it is necessary to recognise criticisms to brainwashing and then respond to those criticisms. The section of the literature review entitled ‘brainwashing’ therefore defines brainwashing, establishes the core theories, reviews criticisms and then critiques these criticisms.

Since the brainwashing process advanced will be developed through analysis of LGATs it is necessary to explain what an LGAT is. Formal information on the history of these trainings is limited and, arguably, one-sided, and so one source (Pressman, 1993) has been cited extensively on this subject. From the other literature provided the reader should obtain a good sense of LGATs, their conditions, the controversy involved, the demeanour of trainers, and the stresses endured by participants. The potentially partial nature of the single source (with regards to their history) should, however, be kept in mind.

Because “reason” is presumed to be undermined in the proposed brainwashing process it is necessary to make clear what is meant by “reason”. This can become a philosophically slippery subject and so the literature review attempts to provide clarity. The new theory of brainwashing advanced during this thesis – the classical conditioning hypothesis of brainwashing (CCHOB) – also relies on an understanding of classical conditioning and of hypomanic/manic symptoms. For it to make sense the reader should have a firm grasp of classical conditioning and these symptoms and so these topics are also explicated.

## **Brainwashing**

### ***The contentious definition of brainwashing***

According to Robbins (2003, p. 172) models of brainwashing can be more or less inclusive, depending on which theorist defines the process:

Schein's (1961) model is the broadest and is clearly applicable to cults, as well as college fraternities, reputable religious orders, etc. Lifton's well-known model (1961) of 'thought reform' is applicable to various cults (Richardson et al. 1972; Stoner & Park, 1977, p. 272-276), and is probably applicable to any authoritarian and dogmatic sect... given the array of diverse models of varying restrictiveness, cults can 'brainwash' and be 'coercive' depending upon which model is employed.

Brainwashing is thus legitimate depending on how it is described. If it is defined loosely as 'manipulation' then brainwashing is real; however the more onerous the conditions to be met, the fewer environments will qualify as brainwashing. Because of this contentiousness the debate on brainwashing is precarious - critics can simply provide evidence that brainwashing, as they define it, does not exist. Anthony (1999, pp. 425-426), for example, attributes to Hunter (1953) the goal of brainwashing as "to radically change a mind, so that the individual becomes a living puppet, a human robot..." Robbins and Anthony (1990) ascribe this definition to Singer, a definition that Singer (1994, as cited in Anthony, 1999) fiercely rejects. With such clearly fictional definitions of brainwashing, it is little wonder that doubt about brainwashing's existence is pervasive.

The question by those concerned with influence should not be "Does brainwashing exist?" but rather "To what degree can people be influenced, and what are the individual characteristics, conditions, and processes that result in the most effective influence?" Researchers could then seek to answer the question: "What are the circumstances and processes which result in the greatest influence and are these processes ethical?" This thesis suggests a new conceptualisation of brainwashing and so, rather than referring back to existing criticisms, this theory should be evaluated on its own merits.

### ***Brainwashing as currently defined***

Singer (2003) describes brainwashing as “the exploitative manipulation of one person by another” (p. 53). She portrays a “psychological con game” (p. 54), where factors are manipulated causing changes in the “mind-set and attitudes of the targeted individual” (p. 54). Schein (1971) suggests a more stringent definition, describing a process capable of “producing genuine, extensive, and *lasting* belief, attitude, and value change in a person resisting such change” (p. 18); however he points out that “the term ‘brainwashing’ became associated with all Communist efforts to extract confessions and indoctrinate” (p. 16). Since that time Singer (2003) and others have used the term to describe the indoctrination processes of what they refer to as cults, and what others such as Anthony (1997) and Richardson (2003) refer to as New Religious Movements (NRMs).

Terms used to refer to brainwashing-type processes, according to Singer (2003) include ‘thought struggle’, brainwashing, ‘thought reform’, ‘coercive persuasion’, ‘mind control’, and others. While considered academically unsound (Lifton, 1961; Robbins & Anthony, 1990; Schein, 1971), brainwashing is the term which generates the most academic results when searched for and its generic nature makes it the most practical to use for this dissertation. “It is impossible to wash someone’s brain, of course, but the term has come to refer to any form of disfavoured persuasion” (Richardson, 2014, p. 98).

### ***Key theories***

Brainwashing theories, limited to those of Lifton (1961), Schein (1971), and Singer (2003), provide conditions and processes by which brainwashing is achieved. According to brainwashing critic Anthony (1997), fellow critic Richardson (2003), and cult experts Ofshe and Singer (1986), these theorists provide the core theories; those of Lifton and Schein are described as ‘first generation’, while of those Singer are described as ‘second generation’, or ‘American anti-cult’ theories. Anthony (1999) categorises Singer among the American anti-cult brainwashing theorists, which include psychiatrist John Clark, sociologist Richard Ofshe, psychologist Michael Langone, and psychiatrist L.J. West. Psychiatrist Robert Lifton (1961) identifies eight themes present in a thought reform environment; psychologist Edgar Schein (1971) names three stages, and psychologist Margaret Singer (1995) claims there to be six



conditions for brainwashing. These are the themes, stages, and conditions by which brainwashing is currently evaluated, and so it is useful to examine the content and limitations of these theories.

### **Lifton (1961) on brainwashing**

Psychiatrist Robert Lifton, informed by Erik Erikson's concept of the formation of ego identity, analysed fifteen Chinese citizens and twenty-five Westerners put through brainwashing by the Chinese government during the Korean War (Lifton, 1961). Because Lifton is a key theorist on brainwashing this section references his work exclusively and because his studies included only male POWS those indoctrinated will be referred to as "he"/"his". This is not to suggest that women are not equally vulnerable to influence. Lifton's work is useful in that he identifies themes and stages common to most brainwashing environments – this allows one to assess other environments to determine whether they meet the criteria for brainwashing he devised. The same cannot be said of Schein (1971) who, perhaps more accurately, depicts thought reform environments as being too heterogeneous to generalise.

Lifton (1961) explains that the thought reform process revolves around two extremes of treatment and two demands – the alternation between abuse and compassion, and the requirements of confession and education. Physical and psychological abuse is designed to bring about ego 'death' and the compassion and confession are the means by which 'rebirth' occurs. This process of death and rebirth has profound effects on the person in question's loyalties and beliefs, as well as his sense of being an individual and being part of a group. More specifically, this process of death and rebirth has a profound effect on a person's inner identity – "In the broadest terms, everything that happened to these prisoners is related to this matter" (p. 66).

### ***Lifton's twelve steps of death and rebirth***

Lifton goes on to break down the process of death and rebirth into twelve steps. These are listed and discussed below:

(1) *Assault Upon Identity*: During this stage identity is attacked. The individual is told that his/her identity is a façade. Prisoners faced constant assertions that they were not who they said they were, and were put through physical and emotional abuse. As a result prisoners broke down, losing identity and becoming more under the control of the interrogators. During this step Lifton notes a clear process of regression. Resistance was met with escalating abuse until autonomy was ceded by the prisoner. Physical and mental exhaustion was crucial in achieving surrender. Prisoners are described as being between the states of wakefulness and sleep – a “hypnagogic” state. This assault stage causes the death of the prisoner’s identity, and is crucial for the steps which follow.

(2) *The Establishment of Guilt*: prisoners were made to feel guilt for things they had done and things they had “failed” to do. They had to come up with elaborate confessions of their “crimes” against the Communist government and were heavily abused if their confessions were deemed inadequate. Prisoners became “so permeated by the atmosphere of guilt that external accusations became merged with subjective feelings of sinfulness – of having done wrong” (Lifton, 1961, p. 68). Prisoners eventually felt that their punishment was deserved.

(3) *Self-Betrayal*: involved renouncing people, groups, and behaviour which had previously formed a crucial component of their existence. This included friends, colleagues and religious beliefs. These people and structures were core to who these prisoners were, and disavowal constituted a betrayal of self. Insidiously this step was labelled “accepting help” when applied to a prisoner, and “helping others” when prisoners convinced others to renounce friends and beliefs.

(4) *Breaking Point: Total Conflict and the Basic Fear*. At this stage the prisoner is aware that he has allegedly committed crimes against the Chinese government, but is unsure of what these crimes are. He is in a situation where the government will never back down on its perspective – that he is guilty – so he must concede guilt. The prisoner is alienated from psychological support without which he cannot survive. He is concurrently put through self-

betrayal, confession, and the subsequent loss of identity. This increasingly causes a rift within himself, a sense of distancing between his former self and who he is becoming. Lifton explains that this causes *“one of the most primitive and painful emotions known to man, the fear of total annihilation”* (Lifton, 1961, p. 70). The environment supports the perspective that “total annihilation” is a distinct possibility, and certain prisoners did not just fear annihilation, they felt annihilated.

*(5) Leniency and Opportunity.* At this point, sometimes months into the indoctrination, relief is sought by the prisoner, and provided by the interrogators. While the environment does not relent on its principles – its insistence that the prisoner is guilty and must confess – it eases up enough for the prisoner to sense permeability between who he was and who he is asked to become. This sudden friendly treatment, rather than allowing backtracking, facilitates a greater absorption of the Communist principles. The impact of leniency cannot be overstated. Instead of viewing total annihilation as the only possibility, the prisoner is offered, *on the condition of a new identity*, cessation and consideration – a chance to escape from the horror of the previous months. Instead of challenging his captors, he sees reform as the gateway to respite and actively participates in the process from this point forward.

*(6) Compulsion to Confess.* The compulsion to confess begins before there are hints at kindness. From the outset, the message provided by the Chinese, and internalised by prisoners, is clear: *“only those who confess can survive”* (Lifton, 1961, p. 74). All abuse and leniency serves the purpose of emphasising this point. In the case of certain prisoners the guilt became even more profound as they *“came to believe in their own falsehoods”* (Lifton, 1961, p. 74). In doing so they were no longer acting the part of a guilty criminal – they began to take on the *“two basic identities of thought reform”* (Lifton, 1961, p. 74).

The first identity is the “repentant sinner”. This identity urges the prisoner to identify the evil within himself and to get rid of it (“break down”). The second identity is that of the “receptive criminal”. This identity begins to agree with the infallibility of the environment and makes an effort to reform (“rebuild”). Once the prisoner can find the sins within himself, and recognises the need for a new identity, he comes realises that, to make way for the new identity, he must get rid of the old one. As has been made clear, Lifton’s (1961) model of brainwashing suggests the death of one identity and the re-emergence of another.

(7) *Channelling of Guilt*. This stage uses “the people’s standpoint” to channel feelings of guilt into a “paranoid, pseudo-logical system” (p. 75). What up until this point has been unspecified is made to do explicit work for thought reform - the prisoner learns to identify “proof” of his wrongdoings. “*What was most prosaic, even generous, must now be viewed as ‘criminal’*” (Lifton, 1961, p. 75). Entrenched in this process is that the prisoner is condemned, or condemns himself, more for what he has been than for what he has done. At this stage of channelling the prisoner moves from feeling general guilt to feeling specific guilt.

(8) *Re-education: Logical Dishonoring*. Re-education begins formally with emphasis on group study, and takes prisoners from artificially knowing the Communist doctrine, to being able to use it and its reasoning to extend their self-abuse. Prisoners had to look at what they had done prior to imprisonment and to find fault with it. They were convinced that their actions were not only against Communism, but also in conflict with their own principles. Lifton speaks about the negative identity (parts of a person of which he is not proud), and the positive identity (parts that he likes and draws esteem from). Logical dishonouring aimed to maximise the negative identity, and minimise the positive identity, creating a sense of worthlessness. This stage is “*the most dangerous part of thought reform*” (Lifton, 1961, p. 78). Relative to the more superficial guilt previously experienced, here the prisoner experiences deep, internalised guilt. The very essence of his being is threatened.

(9) *Progress and Harmony*. To sustain the new identity the prisoner must develop a sense of harmony. As he begins to change the prisoner receives better treatment, and conforming to this closed system of reasoning holds benefits of its own. The prisoner can “experience the deep satisfactions of solving all problems; of group intimacy in living, working, and suffering; of surrendering himself to an all-powerful force, and sharing its strength; of laying himself bare in the catharsis of personal confession; of sharing the moral righteousness of a great crusade of mass redemption” (Lifton, 1961, p. 79). This component has clear parallels with

Schein's (1971) "refreezing"<sup>5</sup> which describes the conditions required for the brainwashing to "stick".

(10) *Final Confession: The Summing Up*. This takes the form of a brief statement admitting specific guilt for all "crimes" committed. It is the end result of a process of embellished confession, shaped by the interrogators, assisted by cellmates, and extracted by the captors over many months. Lifton highlights the many confessions of a particular prisoner (representative of almost all prisoners) leading up to the final confession – each marking a step further from his prior identity and closer to his reformed identity.

(11) *Rebirth*. During rebirth the prisoner emerges with a new identity. Not only this, but the identity which was broken down during thought reform – for example a doctor or priest – is allowed to re-emerge to some extent. The person is no longer a sinner deserving abuse, but rather a convert whose previous identity is recognised (while it is merged with the new identity).

They did not cease to be a priest or physician; rather each became a priest or physician sympathetic to, or at least in a working relationship with, Chinese Communism... If anything like a whole man is to walk out of prison, a good deal of the prisoner's old self will have to be resurrected (Lifton, 1960, p. 83).

It is important that "the imposed thought reform elements are strong enough to dominate the new combination" (Lifton, 1960, p. 83). This new blend of identities is the rebirth, strong enough to change the individual's worldview. "He identifies with his captors, and is happy in his faith" (Lifton, 1960, p. 84).

(12) *Release: Transition and Limbo*. Release into an environment which challenges everything a prisoner has been taught creates a new identity crisis. Prisoners often became caught between worlds, suspicious of the non-Communist position, but – with new evidence available – questioning what they had been told. "Once more he underwent a painful identity shift, encompassing what he had been before, what he had become in prison, and what he was in the process of becoming after release" (Lifton, 1960, p. 85).

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<sup>5</sup> "Refreezing" is the third of three brainwashing processes put forward by psychologist Edgar Schein (1971). It involves creating the conditions conducive to brainwashed material not being rejected by the person in question when he leaves the indoctrination environment.

### ***Lifton's eight themes of thought reform***

Lifton (1961) identifies eight themes, described below, which he believes to be present in a thought reform environment:

“I wish to suggest a set of criteria against which any environment may be judged – a basis for answering the question: ‘Isn’t this just like brainwashing?’” (p. 420).

“The more clearly an environment expresses these eight psychological themes, the greater its resemblance to ideological totalism” (p. 435).

(1) *Milieu Control* means “environment control”. Lifton describes the control of human communication as the most crucial of all of the conditions – “the psychological current upon which all else depends” (p. 420). It is explained that not only does this control all external communication but also internal communication – the way that the subject communicates with himself.

(2) *Mystical Manipulation* refers to events which take place in the environment that may seem spontaneous, but are actually orchestrated by the group. An example of this might be stooges who appear to be convinced by propaganda in an indoctrination environment.

(3) *Demand for Purity* describes the way that a leader divides people and thinking patterns into “pure or impure”. Prisoners were either western spies or reformed Communists. Subjects are judged in black and white terms, and all “‘taints’ and ‘poisons’ which contribute to the existing state of impurity must be searched out and eliminated” (p. 423). Because it is impossible to achieve the ‘purity’ demanded, the subject feels perpetual guilt.

(4) *Cult of Confession* feeds in from The Demand for Purity, as the guilt created can only be purged through ‘cleansing’ confessions. Confession allows the interrogator access to the person’s past. He does not only control what the prisoner does in the room and who he is in the room but, in reinterpreting the subject’s confessions, he takes control of the prisoner’s past. Chiefly confession causes prisoners to feel guilt, “the demand that one confess to crimes one has not committed, to sinfulness that is artificially induced...” (p. 425).

(5) *Sacred Science* describes the way that the philosophy espoused by the interrogator is beyond question.

“This sacredness is evident in the prohibition (whether or not explicit) against the questioning of basic assumptions, and in the reverence which is demanded for the originators of the Word, the bearers of the Word, and the Word itself” (p. 427).

Lifton speaks of the way that the doctrine transcends ordinary reason, yet claiming “airtight logic, of absolute ‘scientific’ precision” (p. 428). Whatever else sacred science achieves, its main function is to restrict individuality.

(6) *Loading the Language*. Just as “newspeak” was a way of talking used by Winston Smith in Orwell’s *1984*, so there is jargon in thought reform environments. Lifton acknowledges that this language exists in all cultural, or organisational groups – stating “It is in part an expression of unity and exclusiveness” (p. 429) – but argues that in a totalist environment it is more extreme.

The language of thought reform is saturated by the thought-terminating cliché (TTC).

The most far-reaching and complex human problems are compressed into brief, highly reductive, definitive-sounding phrases, easily memorised and easily expressed. The major effect of loading the language is that the subject is constricted in terms of his communication and since language is so central to all human experience, his capacities for thinking and feeling are immensely narrowed (p. 430).

(7) *Doctrine over Person* refers to the way that the interrogator processes the experiences of subjects through his philosophy. Participants are pressurised into revealing their “stories” for interpretation. The interrogator takes what they give him, applies his philosophical formula, and returns the reinterpreted story back to them. “...the resulting ‘logic’ can be so compelling and coercive that it simply replaces the realities of individual experience” (p. 431). Because of the presence of the sacred science, any historical events brought up will be processed through the group’s philosophy. “The underlying assumption is that the doctrine – including its mythological elements – is ultimately more valid, true, and real than is any aspect of actual human character or human experience” (p. 431).

(8) *Dispensing of Existence* refers to the way that those running thought reform environments lay claim to who “lives” and who “dies” – between “the people” and “the nonpeople” (p. 433). Those who do not submit to the dogma are rejected, while those who do submit are welcomed. Crucially “the thought reform process is one means by which nonpeople are permitted, through a change in attitude and personal character, to make themselves over into people” (p. 433). This theme relates to the rebirth component of Lifton’s twelve steps and is central to the LGAT process. Those accepting the LGAT doctrine are bestowed acceptance by the trainer – in the 2010 LGAT described in the analysis section of this dissertation this dispensing of existence was not subtly implied, but took the form of an elaborate ceremony.

### **Schein (1971) on brainwashing**

Like Lifton (1961), Schein (1971) performed his research in the context of the Korean War, stating that it “was an outgrowth of research which began in 1953” (Schein, 1971, p. 7) and that the purpose of the study was “to analyse the experiences of a small number of American civilians who were POWs of the Chinese Communists between 1950 and 1956” (Schein, 1971, p. 15). He appears more cautious than both Lifton (1961) and Singer (2003) to claim common themes in the brainwashing process, indicating a wide variation in the experiences of American prisoners. He does, however, provide some structure in the form of Schein’s three stages of coercive persuasion:

### ***Schein’s three stages***

Schein’s (1971) model describes influence as occurring over three successive stages: (1) unfreezing; (2) changing; and (3) refreezing. Unfreezing involves destabilising POWs through the introduction of a need for change; changing involves the provision of new arguments; and refreezing involves integrating the new equilibrium into the rest of the personality through “reward and social support” (p. 120).

### ***Unfreezing***

Unfreezing involves the demand to confess and “refers to those experiences or events which tended to strengthen forces towards confession and weaken forces against



confession” (p. 121). Schein’s (1971) model, which relies heavily on confession, therefore has clear parallels with Lifton’s twelve steps of death and rebirth. Schein (p. 121) lists, as forces to confess, among others, “fear for self or others”, and “desire to comply to another”. As forces against confessing, Schein (p. 121) provides, for example, “fear of violating one’s own values”, and “unwillingness to be coerced”. The conflict of these competing forces was supplemented with physical exhaustion and sleep deprivation (Schein, 1971), a process emphasised by Lifton (1961), and Singer (2003).

One of the main resistances to unfreezing and confession was that the prisoner was aware that he had not committed the crime.

“One of the central ones was simply the unwillingness on the part of the prisoner to confess to something which was not true” (Schein, 1971, p. 120).

Confession to a clearly fictitious crime is different from the brainwashing described by Singer (2003). It is surely more difficult to convince a person of something easily comprehensible and objectively false (e.g. “You are a spy”) than of something esoteric and subjective (e.g. “You are *responsible* for every bad thing that has ever happened to you”). One is a statement of fact while the other is a philosophical position, and while Lifton (1961) and Schein (1971) acknowledge individual traits, social conditions and specific processes as factors which impact influence, an obvious – yet unscrutinised – factor must be the nature of the doctrine which is being advocated. The success of modern processes of thought reform, if they are more successful, may be because the subject of indoctrination is more philosophically convoluted and naturally appealing than Communism was to the POWs.

### ***Changing***

This step occurred after the prisoner was unfrozen, and was the process of cognitive change. “Once he was willing to confess, he had to have information which told him what confession meant and what he was to confess to” (Schein, 1971, p. 129). This information came from controlled mass media, the interrogators, or himself, but primarily this information came from the prisoner’s already converted Chinese cellmates. The unfreezing process could cause an “identity crisis” (Erikson, 1956, as cited in Schein, 1971), and so creating a new identity involved discovering new attitudes and beliefs which could be

confirmed by those around you. “If the prisoner was in an environment in which the only reinforcements available were contingent upon his accepting a particular set of beliefs and attitudes about himself, it was likely that he would eventually accept such beliefs and attitudes” (Schein, 1971, p. 131). The process of changing involved the prisoner moving from feeling that there was a strong need to change (unfreezing), to gaining some understanding of how he should change or what attitudes and beliefs needed to be reformed; to become acceptable to interrogators and cellmates.

### ***Refreezing***

The aim of refreezing was to stabilise the changes made. “This process implies that the new belief must be integrated into other parts of the person and must be supported and reinforced by the behaviour of significant others” (Schein, 1971, p. 136). Schein explains that a physically coerced confession would be retracted immediately afterwards unless refreezing had caused that confession to “stick”. Refreezing speaks directly to the concept of compliance versus genuine attitude change – the difference between, for example, normative and informational social influence. For there to be a genuine attitude/belief change the change must appear rational from the new perspective adopted by the prisoner, and this was often reinforced by the approval of others in the brainwashing environment. The degree to which new attitudes and beliefs remained when away from the support of the new group depended on the degree to which they were integrated with the rest of the prisoner’s personality.

Schein (1971) suggests that refreezing requires the change to “appear rational from the new perspective adopted by the prisoner”. This is where the CCHOB departs decisively from earlier theories. The assertion in this dissertation is that the change must, as stated by Schein, “appear rational” but the CCHOB suggests that the appearance of rationality occurs without a rational process being involved. According to the CCHOB, in the ‘brainwashed’ mind the new belief makes sense, but he has not gone through a process of reason to reach this position. Schein (pp. 137-138) describes “Aspects of the imprisonment experience relating to refreezing” and, in line with his belief that the prisoner must be rationally convinced of his new belief, he lists crucial “refreezing” elements such as Communist propaganda and study of Communist materials. While not emphasising the emotional

component to the extent of the CCHOB, Schein (p. 138) does note that change in prisoners tended to endure in those who found “*social, emotional, and informational support for their new beliefs and attitudes*”.

### **Singer (2003) on brainwashing**

Psychologist Margaret Singer’s interest in brainwashing was as a result of her involvement in the anti-cult movement, which came to prominence in the decades which followed the 1978 Jonestown disaster. Her seminal work, “Cults in Our Midst” reviews a number of supposed cults such as Heaven’s Gate, Falun Gong, Aum Shinrikyo, Hare Krishna, the Reverend Sun Myung Moon, as well as organisations such as Large Group Awareness Trainings (Singer, 2003). According to Robbins and Anthony (1990, p. 297) “Margaret Singer maintains that her theory, SMSPI (systematic manipulation of psychological and social influence), summarises and integrates the best research on mental coercion conducted by the most authoritative researchers, especially Robert Lifton and Edgar Schein”.

While Lifton (1961) describes thought reform as a matter of “death and rebirth” (p. 66), and what Schein (1971) describes as unfreezing, changing and refreezing, Singer (2003, p. 62) speaks of as “a gradual process of breaking down and transformation”. There are semantic differences, but all major theorists support the idea that the person in question is broken down and rebuilt, and in this way the first and second generation models are related. While the CCHOB relies to some degree on the breaking down of the participant, identity attack is a relatively small component and plays a different role in the new theory. In order for brainwashing through the CCHOB to occur, the person must doubt their ability to reason. This implies that a part of their identity (rationality) must temporarily be disabled, but not that their entire identity be demolished and reconstructed.

### ***Singer’s six conditions***

Just as Lifton (1961) has eight themes and Schein (1971) has three stages, so Singer (2003) has six conditions for brainwashing, based on dealings with over five thousand former cult members and their families (gary11412, 2008). “The following conditions

create the atmosphere needed to put thought-reform into place. The degree to which these conditions are present increases the overall effectiveness of the program” (p. 64):

*(1) Keep the person unaware that there is an agenda to control or change the person.*

This, according to Singer (2003), is achieved by taking gradual steps, none of them large enough to raise concern. There may be exercises later in the process which would be rejected outright if these exercises were used earlier. Singer suggests that people adapt without realising it.

*(2) Control time and physical environment (contacts, information).* Singer explains that one does not have to spend every minute in a brainwashing environment for it to have power over you. As long as the participant/member’s time away from the environment is occupied with thoughts about being in the environment the hold is not broken.

*(3) Create a sense of powerlessness, fear, and dependency.* This is achieved by destroying the ability to act independently. Singer mentions removing people from their families and support structures. The group attacks your worldview, while presenting a new worldview that is supposedly approved by everyone around you. As the group denigrates your worldview, you are not allowed to question their perspective, because “leadership constantly suppresses questions and counters any resistance” (p. 66).

*(4) Suppress old behaviors and attitudes.* Singer explains that you learn very quickly that certain behaviors and attitudes are welcomed while others are fiercely contested. What she is describing, from a theoretical perspective, is operant conditioning. This is a similar concept to classical conditioning – the difference being that with operant conditioning rewards and punishments are used to condition desired behaviours. The difference is subtle, but with the CCHOB you are not rewarded for learning desired behaviours – you associate the beliefs with a positive emotional experience.

*(5) Instil new behaviors and attitudes.* As with suppressing old attitudes, Singer makes the point that it is through operant conditioning that new attitudes are learned. Approval in this environment comes only from conforming, even if you do not understand exactly what it is you are conforming to.

(6) *Put forth a closed system of logic.* This condition mirrors Lifton's (1961) sacred science quite closely, as it describes an environment which "permits no feedback and refuses to be modified except by leadership approval or executive order" (Singer, 2003, p. 68). If any complaints are made by individuals the leaders will claim that it is not the fault of the group's philosophy, but the individual who is at fault. This relates closely to the CCHOB – that reason is devalued and replaced with unquestionable dogma.

### ***Effectiveness (or lack of effectiveness) of brainwashing***

Lifton (1961) is cautious about the power of brainwashing, stating that while an image of brainwashing as an "all-powerful, irresistible, unfathomable, and magical method of achieving total control over the human mind" (p. 4) is caricatured and exaggerated, thought reform remains "one of the most powerful efforts at human manipulation ever undertaken" (pp. 4-5). To quantify the success of thought reform, consider that Lifton describes just "three such people" of the twenty-five he interviewed to be "apparent converts" (p. 117).

Schein (1971, p. 18) reached a similar conclusion:

If one conceives of brainwashing as a process of producing genuine, extensive, and *lasting* belief, attitude, and value change in a person resisting such change, then only the small number of American civilians imprisoned on the Chinese mainland are true cases of brainwashing.

He also distinguishes between indoctrination and social control:

the much-feared Communist program of brainwashing was really more of an intensive indoctrination program in combination with very sophisticated techniques of undermining the social structure of the prisoner group, thereby eliciting collaboration which in most cases was *not* based on ideological change of any sort. In other words, the indoctrination was not very effective but the social control exercised by the Chinese Communists was (Schein, 1956, as cited in Schein, 1971, p. 8).

Singer (2003) places more confidence in brainwashing, referring to "the myth of the invulnerable mind" (p. 54) and stating: "...it has become clear over the years that everyone is susceptible to the lure of these master manipulators" (p. 17). While not providing

evidence of the effectiveness of her version of brainwashing, Singer suggests that the brainwashing she has observed in cults/NRMs is more effective than was observed by Lifton and Schein in Communist China. “Cult members who were once ordinary citizens have been persuaded by each of these and other groups to carry out group whims – including murder, suicide, and other violent acts – at the behest of the cult leader” (p. 1). Singer concedes that only a portion of those targeted are brainwashed: “Not everyone who is approached by a cult recruiter ends up joining the group, and not everyone who joins stays forever” (p. 5).

Singer also makes the valid point that studying the effectiveness of brainwashing is difficult, explaining that cults carry out “impermissible experiments” (p. 79).

Professionals engaged in legitimate supervised medical and psychological research are held to certain standards that have been in place since the end of World War II and the establishment of the Nuremburg code of ethics, which states that in any setting where any type of human experimentation is done, the experiment cannot be performed without the informed consent of those who are to be participants (p. 79).

As per Singer’s definition of brainwashing potential victims are both unaware that they are being manipulated, and degrading processes are being used by the ‘brainwashers’. It is therefore impossible to study brainwashing, other than through retrospective accounts of supposed brainwashing experiences.

### ***Criticisms of brainwashing theory***

Szasz (1976, p. 10) states “We do not call all types of personal or psychological influences brainwashing. We reserve this term for influences of which we disapprove”. Critics of brainwashing theories, such as Anthony (1999) and Richardson (2003) make it clear that there are two broad types of brainwashing theories, and that one should be careful to distinguish between the two. The first, and more recent, theory is described by Anthony (1999) as “the American anti-cult brainwashing theory” (p. 423). It is referred to by Richardson (2003) as a ‘second generation’ theory, developed initially by Margaret Singer, and associated with psychiatrist John Clark, sociologist Richard Ofshe, psychologist Michael Langone, and psychiatrist L.J. West (Anthony, 1999). According to Richardson (2003, p. 160),

second generation theories claim that “physical coercion has been replaced by ‘psychological coercion,’ which is supposedly more effective than physical coercion...”.

According to Anthony (1990, as cited in Anthony, 1999, p. 424), “the brainwashing paradigm was developed originally by the American CIA as a propoganda device to explain why a few POWs appeared to convert to communism while imprisoned during the Korean War.” The reason that brainwashing theory exists in NRMs, according to Richardson (2003), has nothing to do with manipulation and everything to do with: (1) parents who can’t accept their child’s ‘decision’ to join the group; (2) former members who don’t want to take responsibility for their group involvement; and (3) deprogrammers<sup>6</sup> who need justification for their new profession. The position taken by Anthony (1999) is that American anti-cult brainwashing theory (Singer) “simply adopted the CIA brainwashing theory and applied it to new religions” (Anthony, 1999, p. 425).

According to Robbins and Anthony (1990), while Singer claims that her version of the brainwashing paradigm is “a synthesis of the views of legitimate experts on Communist mental coercion, primarily Lifton and Schein, in fact her argument is point-for-point a presentation of Hunter’s journalistic robot brainwashing paradigm that was systematically evaluated and repudiated by those very researchers” ( pp. 301-302).They assert that “the main problem with Singer’s extrinsic conversion model is that it has never achieved any sort of scholarly or scientific credibility” (p. 301). They argue that Singer’s SMSPI theory (1982) has “never been published and has thus not been available for scholarly evaluation and critique” (p. 297).

The second type of theories, referred to by Richardson (2003) as ‘first generation’ theories, are those generated by psychiatrist Robert Lifton (1961), and psychologist Edgar Schein (1961). These theorists are given more credibility by critics – referred to as “the most authoritative researchers” (Robbins & Anthony, 1990, p. 297); their theories as “scholarly work”, and “classical research” (Richardson, 2003, p. 162). It is claimed, however, that the processes described by these researchers are ineffective and rely extensively on physical

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<sup>6</sup> Deprogramming is the controversial process of removing cult/NRM members from their groups in order to undo supposed brainwashing.

coercion. According to Richardson (2003) they are thus irrelevant regarding NRMs, or organisations which do not employ physical abuse.

A strong case is made by Anthony (1999, pp. 423-424) that brainwashing is considered by many academics, relevant institutions and US courts to be pseudoscience. Anthony (1999) argues that in numerous publications brainwashing theory was proved to be false by generally accepted scientific research on Communist indoctrination practices in North Korea and China.

The viewpoint expressed in these publications has been widely accepted by scientists who study new religions (see Barker, 1984; Bromley, 1998; Richardson, 1993) as well as professional associations that represent their interests (American Psychological Association, 1987; Society for the Scientific Study of Religion et al., 1988; Society for the Scientific Study of Religion and American Sociological Association et al., 1989), and also by courts who have ruled on the question of whether testimony based on the brainwashing theory is admissible as scientific expertise (Anthony, 1999, pp. 423-424).

Perhaps the most damning evidence against brainwashing is provided by Lifton (1961) and Schein (1971) themselves. Lifton (1961, p. 117) states that just three of twenty-five US POWs he interviewed were “apparent converts”, while Schein (1958, as cited in Robbins & Anthony, 1990, p. 302) states “Considering the effort devoted to it... the Chinese program was a failure”. According to Robbins and Anthony (1990, p. 298) “the most widely accepted and authoritative scholarly research on mental coercion in the Chinese thought reform and Korean prisoner of war situations demonstrated that coerced conversions did not occur”.

The position taken by critics is, therefore, that (1) second generation theories are based upon the CIA propaganda theories of Edward Hunter (which are pseudoscience); (2) second generation theories do not employ physical coercion (which was a crucial component of Lifton and Schein’s processes); (3) the effectiveness of second-generation theories has never been presented for scrutiny in a peer reviewed journal; and (4) even if Singer’s (1982) brainwashing theory was based chiefly on first generation theories, these theories are described as ineffective by Lifton (1961) and Schein (1971) themselves.



### ***Reponse to criticisms***

In response to critics, proponents of brainwashing such as Singer assert that their description of brainwashing has been misrepresented. “More specifically she maintains that her cultic brainwashing theory does not claim that cultic influence overwhelms free will” (Anthony, 1999, p. 439). The description by Singer is not of subjects resisting influence and failing to do so, but rather of being manipulated through subtle, yet powerful, techniques. Singer, therefore, claims that Anthony (1999) uses a straw man argument, generating a flimsy and misrepresentative version of her position and then knocking it over, rather than challenging her actual views. Singer (1994, as cited in Anthony, 1999, p. 439) in evidence of this, claims that Anthony knowingly attributes a ridiculous notion of brainwashing to her:

Distilling the assertions made by Mr. Anthony ... they ... essentially attribute to me what he calls a Robot Theory – a preposterous and certainly unscientific theory that subjects of coercive persuasion were rendered automatons. Mr. Anthony had to have known that his attribution to me of such a bizarre theory was wholly false. That ‘Manchurian Candidate’ theory simply never appeared in any of my writings, in any of my testimony, or in any of my statements.

Anthony (1999, p. 443) also states that Singer, “in her 1995 book on cultic brainwashing written for a popular audience, claims that her theory is related to research by Edward Hunter”, pointing out that Hunter’s theory has been shown to be spurious. A review of the revised edition of Singer’s book (2003) shows brief mention of Hunter and his role in coming up with the word brainwashing, but other than that Singer professes no overlaps between the theories. Anthony (1999) asserts that because Hunter and Singer’s theories are related, the exposing of Hunter’s theory as pseudoscience means that Singer’s theory is, likewise, pseudoscience. If, however, the two are unrelated then Singer’s SMSPI theory must be addressed on its own merits.

In evidence of an endorsement of Singer’s theory – or at least of a relationship between the theories of Lifton (1961) and Singer (2003) - one of the “most authoritative researchers” (as described by Robbins and Anthony, 1990, p. 297) Robert Lifton writes the foreword to Singer’s 2003 book on cults and brainwashing. In it he praises Singer, stating “Margaret

Thaler Singer stands alone in her extraordinary knowledge of the psychology of cults” (Singer, 2003, p. XI), and “We do well to learn all we can from her hard-won experience on preserving the freedom of the mind” (Singer, 2003, p. XIII). If Singer’s brainwashing theory was the preposterous automaton model suggested by Anthony (1999) then brainwashing authority Lifton would not be so eager to associate himself with her work.

Anthony (1999, p. 424), speaking to the permanency of brainwashing, describes the effects purported by Hunter (and therefore Singer) as follows: “This new personality was, moreover, assumed to be enduring and *lasted indefinitely*, even without subsequent trance induction or further conditioning.” Regarding the way that secondary theorists, like Singer, misrepresent the findings of Lifton and Schein, Richardson (2003, p. 162) states “First, the early classical research by Schein et al. (1961) and Lifton (1963) revealed that, contrary to recent claims (by Singer), the techniques were generally ineffective at doing more than modifying behavior (obtaining compliance) even for the short term.” So Anthony (1999) and Richardson (2003) claim that Singer exaggerates the permanency of the process. Consider this when juxtaposed with Singer’s (2003, p. 78) own words:

We see from years of research with prisoners of war, hostages, battered wives, former cult members, and other recipients of intense influence that changes made under this influence are not stable and not permanent. The beliefs a person may adopt about the world, about a particular philosophy, and even about himself or herself are reversible when the person is out of the environment that induced those beliefs.

This is very much in line with Lifton’s (1961) statement about “discordant noise” (p. 421) breaking the environment control.

Describing the ‘first generation’ indoctrination processes studied by Lifton (1961) and Schein (1961), Anthony (1999, p. 434) says “... Communist thought reform amounted to no more than subjecting prisoners to severe physical coercion and/or threat of death for noncompliance, and then subjecting them to intense propaganda with respect to Communist ideology.” Richardson (2003) likewise contends that ‘second generation’ theories cannot claim the results achieved by ‘first generation’ theories because they do not

include physical coercion. The emphasis placed on physical processes suggest that Anthony (1999) has either not read Lifton or Schein's work, or that he misrepresents it.

Lifton (1961, p. 420), describes "features common to all expressions of ideological Totalism" based on extensive interactions with forty POWs. He identifies eight themes considered core to a thought reform environment, all of which involve psychological processes, and none of which involve physical abuse or threats of death. "The more clearly an environment expresses these eight psychological themes, the greater its resemblance to ideological totalism; and the more it uses such totalist devices to change people, the greater its resemblance to thought reform" (Lifton, 1961, p. 435). Likewise Schein (1971) goes to great lengths describing the conditions present in a brainwashing environment and, as with Lifton (1961), the prominence is placed on psychological processes. During his explanation of "refreezing" Schein makes the specific point that if a person is physically coerced into a confession he would retract it immediately afterwards unless refreezing had caused that confession to "stick" (Schein, 1971). While physical abuse was certainly present in the Chinese brainwashing environment, it seems that Anthony and Richardson place too great an emphasis on it, while understating the role of psychological processes.

Regarding Lifton and Schein's research, Anthony (1999, p. 434) also claims that "these subjects of Communist thought reform had never converted to communism at any point". Lifton (1961, p. 117), however, describes a portion of those who were depicted by the media as brainwashed as such:

However one may deplore journalistic sensationalism, there is no doubt that these people did undergo a startling personal change in their view of the world. To talk with one of them immediately after his arrival in Hong Kong was, to say the least, an impressive experience. They seemed to speak only in clichés, parroting the Communist stock phrases and defending the Communist position at every point.

Schein (1971) likewise acknowledges that coercive persuasion was not successful but that, even with a very stringent definition of brainwashing, a certain number of American civilians imprisoned on the Chinese mainland were truly 'brainwashed'. Anthony (1999), therefore,

misrepresents the effectiveness of thought reform, while misleadingly claiming that physical coercion and credible threats of death were at the heart of the process.

There are further subtleties in terminology which may confuse matters. Brainwashing critics Anthony and Robbins (1992, p. 5) state that "... concepts such as brainwashing or mind control connote *involuntariness*". Singer does not, however, claim brainwashing to be involuntary in the sense that it takes place in spite of the knowing resistance of the person in question. This may have been the definition of brainwashing used by Lifton (1961) and Schein (1971) - Schein suggests a process capable of "producing genuine, extensive, and *lasting* belief, attitude, and value change *in a person resisting such change*" (p. 18); but this does not reflect the brainwashing described by Singer (2003). In fact, even Schein highlights the need to look at coercive persuasion "in terms of a general theory of influence rather than to see it as a peculiar, uncommon, or bizarre set of procedures designed to make man do something 'against his will'" (pp. 138-139).

Singer (2003) describes brainwashing as involuntary not as "against the person's will" but in the sense that the subject is unaware that the process is happening. In fact the first of Singer's six conditions for thought reform is "Keep the person unaware that there is an agenda to control or change the person" (p. 64). She also states that "Brainwashing is not experienced as a fever or pain might be; it is an invisible social adaptation. When you are the subject of it, you are not aware of the intent of the influence processes that are going on, and especially, you are not aware of the changes taking place within you" (p. 61). This is a crucial difference between first and second generation theories. It might be assumed that POWs during the Korean War were fully aware that their captors were trying to manipulate them; however in modern brainwashing environments the 'brainwasher' appears as an altruistic mentor who, while harsh, is thought to be on the target's side.

In light of this the argument might be made, to counter suggestions by Anthony (1999) and Richardson (2003), that physical violence is counter-productive as a means of thought reform. Singer (2003) describes a process that is more manipulative, and less forceful, than what is described by Lifton (1961) and Schein (1971). While a body of evidence to support the effectiveness of Singer's process is yet to be formally produced, it is plausible that the

ineffectiveness of Chinese techniques was partially because prisoners were brutalised – and it was explicit that there was an attempt to brainwash them.

Interestingly enough, Orwell was perhaps the first to note that language, not physical force, is key to manipulation. In fact, growing evidence in the behavioural sciences reveals that a smiling Big Brother has greater power to influence an individual's thoughts and decision making than does a visibly threatening person (Singer, 2003, p. 56).

Singer's research is criticised by Robbins and Anthony (1990), described as having "never achieved any sort of scholarly or scientific credibility" (p. 301), and her SMSPI theory is decried for having never been made available for scholarly critique. Lifton and Schein are, alternatively, lauded as the experts. It is unacceptable that Singer did not present her research for peer review; one might consider, however, that Lifton (1961) and Schein (1971) drew their findings from samples of forty, and fifteen people respectively, while Singer's sample of brainwashed individuals over a period of forty years is far more comprehensive. Schein (1971, p. 13) states:

In choosing the subjects for interviewing we were not attempting to obtain a representative sample of civilian repatriates. Rather we were seeking people who had experienced the full force of thought reform in a prison setting and either had been influenced or resisted influence successfully. Our final sample therefore consists of only fifteen people...

Schein is careful to put his research in context, and warns readers that the limited sample is not representative in any way:

It is our hope that many of the assertions we make throughout the report will be treated primarily as hypotheses contributing to the understanding of events which have been little understood thus far, and that the reader will approach our study with a spirit of inquiry rather than with a hope of finding final answers (p. 13).

In contrast, to quote Singer from an interview broadcast on Youtube, "I've talked with... I stopped counting when I got to five thousand former cult members and their families... and so that for forty years I've been working with people that have been captured by cults"

(gary11412, 2008). Volume does not equate with quality research, but Singer's vast exposure to cults/NRMs should not be dismissed as entirely inconsequential. Likewise, the small samples investigated by "the real experts" should be acknowledged by Anthony, Richardson, and others whose positions benefit from the depiction of brainwashing compiled during the Korean War.

In addition to the inconsistencies, and apparent misrepresentations by Anthony and Richardson, certain arguments about 'mind-control', like that of Coleman (1984), are self-defeating. Coleman (1984) makes the humorous case that the only people who believe in brainwashing are those who have been indoctrinated by deprogrammers<sup>7</sup> into believing in it.

By the time such persons are interviewed by mental health professionals, great pressure (particularly through the manipulation of guilt) has been applied to adopt the mind-control claims of parents and deprogrammers. Not surprisingly, many persons subjected to such imprisonment and high pressure manipulation have become true apostates... (Coleman, 1984, p. 323).

There may be instances where proponents of brainwashing change their theories after receiving criticism, but it appears that at least some of the criticisms mounted against brainwashing are criticisms of positions not supported by mainstream proponents. The debate between proponents and opponents of brainwashing theory rages on. In light of this it is hoped that the CCHOB will be approached in the spirit of curiosity; that it will not be crudely equated with, and written off as, an existing theory – and that it will be evaluated on its own merits.

### **Large Group Awareness Trainings (LGATs)**

Large Group Awareness Training (LGAT), known by some as 'new age transformational training' is the generic description for a type of group training which began in the late 1960's to early 1970's in the US. Typically these courses run over four to five days, and are described by Langone (1998) as being "part psychotherapy, part spirituality, and part business" (p. 1). They involve long lectures couched in esoteric philosophy, various exercises

and often brutal interactions with the leader, or trainer. Words such as 'breakthrough', 'unique', 'your full potential', 'must be experienced', and 'changed my life' (p. 1) are used by proponents to describe the experience, although some observers have raised concerns about the authoritarian nature of certain trainings and the potential for manipulation and harm (Langone, 1998; Pressman, 1993; Singer, 2003). Singer (2003) describes LGATs as a form of cult: "Today, in fact, the fastest growing cultic groups, competing with the religious cults for members, are those centered around New Age thinking and certain personal improvement training, lifestyles, or prosperity programs" (p.13).

Langone (1998, p. 1) describes Erhard Seminars Trainings (or 'est') as the most successful LGAT and depicts it as being "structured around an intense weekend experience which brings together several dozen or several hundred people and a 'trainer' with one or more assistants.

People are together morning, afternoon, and evening. Breaks, even for the bathroom, tend to be highly structured and limited. Participants are led through a long series of exercises that proponents say are designed to cut through psychological defences, increase honesty, and help people take charge of their lives (p. 1).

Langone, while acknowledging that firm data on the matter is not available, estimates that "at least a million people in the United States have participated in at least one LGAT" (p. 1).

A description of the general day to day processes of LGATs is provided by psychologist Margaret Singer. Singer (2003) attended six prominent LGATs, in addition to conducting interviews with dozens of LGAT graduates. "I have studied the training manuals and videos used to train trainers and have interviewed a number of trainers" (Singer, 2003, pp. 191-192). Singer explains that LGATs are usually between four and five days long, and emphasises that they are marketed in a way that provides no suggestion that they are "highly confrontational" (p. 192) and psychologically stressful for many. Singer then goes on to provide a day to day summary:

Day one is used to demonstrate the leader's absolute authority. The trainer takes control of the environment: he gives off the impression that he is powerful, in-charge, and that no one is to challenge him. He sets the precedent early on that anyone who questions him will be

“humiliated and verbally mashed” (p. 193). Singer suggests that trainers are well-prepared to deal with any challenges. The trainer tells participants that the program is effective and that only by being coachable, or obeying, will they get these results.

Day two focuses on the LGAT philosophy, which claims that you have caused everything that has ever happened to you, whether that be the parents you have “chosen”, the mental illness you may be suffering from or “having been molested by your stepfather as a child” (p. 194). “Your life is not working!” the trainer or leader yells, while he implies his is. If you just ‘get it,’ you’ll be able to ‘make your life work’ (p. 194).

Day three includes a number of exercises, most frequently “trance-inducing guided imagery” (p. 194). These exercises frequently involve regression – taking participants back to their childhoods to think about terrible things that have happened to them.

Exercises about your mother and father, the promises you’ve broken, and the promises to you that others have broken – all the sad memories of your life up to now are brought forth. By the end of the third day, participants have been opened up psychologically (p. 194).

On day four the mood begins to change from one of heavy oppression and anxiety to one of greater equality between the trainer and participants. “much group sharing occurs, and the leader begins to change from the stern, domineering taskmaster into a seductive, charming, loving daddy or mommy who wants you to buy the next courses” (p. 195).

On day five the mood is very positive and it involves activities such as dancing and sharing. A good deal of effort is spent convincing participants that they need to sign up for the more advanced course and that participants should recruit family and friends to attend the graduation, typically held a day or two after the course ends. “At the end of the day, a surprise is staged, with friends and family unexpectedly appearing to congratulate the graduate” (p. 195). LGATs claim results ranging from an increased ability to relate effectively with others, to improved personal productivity and effectiveness, confidence, improved decision-making, as well as living passionately and without regrets (Zapolski, 2013). A significant portion of participants appear to experience a physical high which lasts a few days to a few weeks after the training.



Two major concerns are raised about participation in LGATs. “Some observers and scientific researchers have also associated some LGATs with at least the potential to cause psychological distress to some participants. Some compare the trainings to thought reform programs, or brainwashing...” (Langone, 1998, p. 2). Singer (2003) makes both of these claims, arguing that LGATs “use similar intense coordinated persuasion processes” (p. 4) to cults, and makes note of numerous psychological casualties she has witnessed as a result of participation. The point is not that many people do not feel they benefit from these trainings, but rather that the trainings may harm some people, and that support for them may be manipulatively obtained. The first LGAT (“est”) *may* have been more abusive than current trainings, but this does not mean that current trainings are safe:

I took est in the 1970’s, when I was very young, very naive and very impressionable. I learned I am emotionally a very strong person, so I got a lot out of it and suffered no ill effects. Not so with many of the attendees however. It was nothing to see seemingly strong people broken down psychologically until they were lying fetal on the floor, screaming, blubbing and drooling, completely out of control, right next to me. My husband at the time was one of them (de Michaelis, 2009).

There is little quality research on the relationship between LGAT participation and psychological casualties - Finkelstein, Wenegrat, and Yalom (1982) suggest that more objective research in this area is required; however they explain that a significant portion (six per cent) of the first LGAT’s participants report having negative experiences (Babbie & Stone, 1977, as cited in Finkelstein, Wengrat, and Yalom, 1982).

### ***The history of LGATs***

While influenced by a number of other organisations, ‘est’, formed by Jack Rosenberg (aka Werner Erhard) in 1971, is widely considered to be the first LGAT (Langone, 1998; Pressman, 1993). Tracing the history of est, therefore, goes a long way to understanding the influences of these trainings. “Erhard Seminars Training (est) was the most successful of these groups, and it has been widely imitated. Even though it no longer exists, in the minds of many est is identified with the entire LGAT movement” (Langone, 1998). Est was part of what became known as the ‘human potential movement’, a phrase coined in 1965 by George Leonard, the

San Francisco-based bureau chief of the popular magazine, 'Look'. Leonard was a close friend of Michael Murphy who had started the highly influential Esalen Institute in 1962. This organisation is described by Pressman (1993) as "one of the country's first 'growth centres', devoted solely to exploring the frontiers of the human psyche" (p. 12). It is also an institute that, according to Pressman, had a significant impact on Erhard.

At around a similar time a humanistic psychology group, inspired by Abraham Maslow, and whose theories were guided by such figures as Rollo May, Aldous Huxley, Arthur Koestler, Lewis Mumford, and Carl Rogers, was formed (Finkelstein, Wenegrat, & Yalom, 1982; Pressman, 1993). Rogers was a supporter of "small encounter groups", yet he did not approve of the way large encounter groups would eventually be used by est. Encounter groups, as used by Rogers, involved a group of people who, under the expert guidance of a leader, met to increase self-awareness and to change behavior through interpersonal confrontation, self-disclosure, and emotional expression. There are certainly similarities between this description and what takes place in an LGAT. According to Pressman (1993, p. 15); however, Rogers expressed his concerns as such: "I've never been through est, and I don't think I want to. Their goals are not too bad actually, but their means are horrendously authoritarian... I feel that they have completely lost the distinction between means and ends".

Werner Erhard was also influenced by Alan Watts and, through his radio talks, Erhard became acquainted with Watts' irreverent approach to Zen. Pressman (1993) saw Watts as the antithesis of the caricatured Zen master – he is described as a drinker, a smoker and a womaniser, the type of Zen master who, according to Pressman, might appeal to Erhard. Pressman further claims that two self-help books "discovered during his book-selling career" (p. 16) were instrumental in Erhard's move from "book salesman to mind salesman" (p. 16). The first was a book called 'Think and Grow Rich' by Napoleon Hill. Referring to Erhard, Pressman (p. 18) states "... he looked to the simplistic ideas of Napoleon Hill as a rich source of homilies and tenets that eventually would work themselves into both the core tenets of est and into Erhard's own thirst for fortune and power".

The second book believed to have heavily influenced Erhard and est was written by a plastic surgeon named Maxwell Maltz. 'Psycho-Cybernetics', written in 1960, describes the way that machines work and then applies "the science of machines to the human mind" (Pressman, 1993, p. 20). Maltz wrote, as is endorsed by Werner Erhard and est, that people could change their self-image. "The key, he said, was to focus on 'experience' rather than on things people have learned intellectually" (Pressman, 1993, p. 20). During est participants were heavily ridiculed for thinking, as opposed to experiencing. "Est graduates for years were admonished never to tell others about what occurred inside est training sessions. It was okay only to 'share' their 'experience' without explaining any of the details of the training" (Pressman, 1993, p. 20). Maltz had similarly written in the preface to his book "This book has been designed not merely to be read, but to be experienced" (Pressman, 1993, p. 20).

Another contributor to the development of est, according to Pressman (1993), was Scientology.

Just as Maurer expected, Erhard was quickly taken by Scientology – the organisation, the wealth of materials that screamed Hubbard's name at every turn, the tantalising technology and courses that spread the Hubbard gospel to his flock that gathered under the Scientology banner (Pressman, 1993, p. 25).

Pressman (1993, p. 23) further quotes Erhard as saying, "I have a lot of respect for L. Ron Hubbard, and I consider him to be a genius and perhaps less acknowledged than he ought to be".

Onto Scientology. While with Grolier, Werner took up Scientology and distinguished himself by having been "expelled from the church," according to one spokesman. In fact, Scientologists get a sort of glint in their eyes when Werner is mentioned, and a public information officer maintains "we feel he took a lot of data from us and called it his" (Brewer, 1975).

Sobbing on the Floor. To varying degrees, the same technique is used in Gestalt therapies, Primal therapy and the "auditing" of Scientology, but in the est training it was done by almost 250 of us, lying on the floor, writhing and gesticulating amid a din of whimpers, sobs, retching and orgasmic groaning (Brewer, 1975).

The link between Scientology and Erhard is not readily acknowledged by proponents of est and its descendants; however similarities have been noted by Scientologists. One might consider as evidence the testimony of an ex-Scientologist in the 2003 French investigative journalism special "Voyage Au Pays Des Nouveaux" ("Journey to the Land of the New Gurus"). During this program Mona Vasquez, who describes herself as having been involved in Scientology for seven years, reacts to undercover footage of the Landmark Forum. (Landmark Education bought Werner Erhard's technology in 1991) (Pressman, 1993).

"Yes I was also stupefied, I should say. But not in the same way as her... to answer you I was glued to the video clips. I was a little uncomfortable because I heard all the terminology from Scientology. There was a white board at the beginning with exactly the same words Hubbard would use, the founder of Scientology. I worked in Denmark at the parent organisation for Europe so I was at the heart of Scientology so I know the terminology very well, and all of it is the same" (dialogueireland, Landmark: Journey to the Land of the New Gurus ~ France 3 documentary;, 2012).

While the organisations, books and philosophies which have already been mentioned shaped Erhard's particular LGAT, est, there was one organisation which, according to Vahle and Bazy (2002) led to nine of the earliest LGATs. Operating from 1968 to 1973, "Mind Dynamics, founded by Alexander Everett, was the major forerunner of LGATs. Although Mind Dynamics was only in existence for a few years, it sparked an entire industry of similar trainings" (Navaroo & Navaroo, 2002, p. 54). According to Pressman (1993) Everett had been influenced by a program called Silva Mind Control, and the courses offered by Mind Dynamics from 1968 were based to some degree on this organisation. Vahle and Bazy (2002) claim that the two prominent early LGATs, est and Lifespring, came about as a direct result of Mind Dynamics -"Lifespring is, perhaps, the next best known program after est" (Langone, 1998). According to Pressman, Erhard became a trainer with Mind Dynamics in 1970 and this experience was crucial in the formation of his own organisation, est, in 1971.

## ***LGATs in South Africa***

As estimated by Langone (1998), there are hundreds of LGATs around the world. How then did they find their way to South Africa? The most likely conduit is a South African 'cleared' Scientologist (Wachter, 2005) named Pat Grove who, according to Beit-Hallahmi (1992), moved his organisation to Israel under dubious circumstances.

A 1984 *Newsweek* report on cults around the world included a reference to a South African cult, based in Johannesburg and known as I AM. Its founder, Pat Grove, was also facing criminal charges but was planning to expand his activities overseas" (Smolowe et al., 1984, as cited in Beit-Hallahmi, 1992, p. 124). "A couple of years later, I AM became known all over the country (Israel), its growth far surpassing that of est (Beit-Hallahmi, 1992, p. 124).

During an interview captured on YouTube (AhavaVeShalom1, 2011) Grove claims to have started his trainings in 1969 and in the forty-two years since to have trained around 80,000 people. He takes credit for instructing many LGAT operators -"there are various people who have taken the work... some with my permission and some without my permission..." - and estimated that between his trainings, and the trainings of those he had coached, in "Israel, London, Australia, South Africa, Ireland, Holland, Greece etc." close to a million people had been through "his" courses. The course described in this thesis ("Field Notes") can be traced back to Grove, who has trained a number of 'gurus' operating in South Africa.

### **The relationship between reason and emotion**

Because it is maintained during this dissertation that reason is devalued, while emotion is heightened, and that this impinges upon optimal decision-making, it is necessary to address the role of reason and emotion in decision-making and the formation of beliefs. A compelling neurological text on the relationship between emotion and reason is Descarte's Error, a book written by Antonio Damasio in 1994, Professor of Neuroscience, Neurology and Psychology at the University of Southern California. The thrust of this book is that emotion and reason are inextricably linked - that emotion guides decision-making ("The Somatic Marker Hypothesis") - and that reason without emotion inevitably fails. He is careful to point out that because of this relationship extreme emotions can, and do, have

disastrous effects on rational decision-making. Damasio (2006) warns that it is not a question of reason or emotion being the correct mechanism by which to make choices or form beliefs. Just as reason alone is not optimal, so too is it often sub-optimal to use emotion alone, or – more realistically – to use a combination of reason and emotion where emotion is too dominant.

To be sure, on certain circumstances, emotions can be a substitute for reason. The emotional action program we call fear can get most human beings out of danger, in short order, with little or no help from reason... In effect, in some circumstances, too much thinking may be far less advantageous than no thinking at all (p. xvii).

This is not to deny that emotions and feelings can cause havoc in the processes of reasoning under certain circumstances. Traditional wisdom has told us that they can, and recent investigations of the normal reasoning process also reveal the potentially harmful influence of emotional biases (p. xxii).

This thesis asserts that emotions are heavily impacted during LGATs and that this results in a flawed “decision” to take on the LGAT’s principles. The argument is not that emotion should be removed, but rather that too much emotion – when coming to making decisions about taking on the certain beliefs - can mislead otherwise rational individuals.

### **Classical Conditioning**

While new discoveries in the field of classical conditioning are constantly being sought, the reality is that Pavlov’s formulation of the theory has received little revision in the seventy-five years it has been around. The uncontested conceptualisation of the concept, as provided by mainstream textbooks, is therefore a fair working model upon which to base a theory of brainwashing predicated upon classical conditioning:

In the three quarters of a century following Pavlov’s work, the accumulation of factual information about classical conditioning has continued, but there has been little conceptual progress. The only thing we have now that approximates a workable general theory of conditioning was introduced more than 30 years ago and continues to receive a good deal of respectful consideration despite a variety of generally recognized

shortcomings that little has been done to repair; nor does a systematic review of recent papers in leading journals give any good reason to think that a more satisfactory theory is in the making (Bitterman, 2006, p. 365).

Classical conditioning occurs when a response typically associated with one stimulus becomes associated with another stimulus, and is “one way we acquire new information” or learn new things (Barlow & Durand, 2002, p. 21). Crucially one of the stimuli would not naturally lead to the desired response and must be conditioned to do so (Barlow & Durand, 2002; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2011). The original experiment relating to this concept was performed by Ivan Pavlov, who would ring a bell before feeding dogs. Food is something that naturally results in salivation – a ringing bell is not. Pavlov found that after repeatedly ringing the bell shortly before feeding the dogs, he could ring the bell (without feeding the dogs) and they would salivate. The dogs formed an association between the bell and the food. They had been classically conditioned to salivate when they heard the bell.

In terms of technical terminology the food is an “unconditioned stimulus” (US) – this is because no conditioning is required for the dog to salivate when presented with the food. Salivation at presentation of the food would be considered an “unconditioned response” (UR) because it occurs naturally. The bell would be considered the “conditioned stimulus” (CS), because classical conditioning is required for the dog to associate the bell with food. Salivation at the sound of the bell would be a “conditioned response” (CR) – through classical conditioning the dogs have responded to the bell in the same way that they would normally respond to food (Barlow & Durand, 2002, Nolen-Hoeksema, 2011).

“Human brains tend to associate two stimuli perceived at the same time” (Taylor, 2004, p. 27).

The CCHOB asserts that one can get a person to form an association between an emotional experience and a particular belief system if they are presented at the same time, and that this is a form of classical conditioning – the belief system (which may not naturally elicit joy, love, and acceptance) becomes the conditioned stimulus and the euphoria becomes the conditioned response. Nolen-Hoeksema (2011) provides the example of a person creating a strong *negative* association with a place based on just one incident. This is useful to note

because, while the “incident” of euphoria associated with the CCHOB occurs over a matter of days or weeks, it is not a repeated stimulus, as might normally be associated with classical conditioning:

“For example, a college student who failed a test in a particular classroom may break out in a cold sweat when she enters the room again – this response is the result of classical conditioning” (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2011, p. 40).

Barlow and Durand (2002) make a similar note about chemotherapy – that just one application of chemotherapy can lead to patients reacting very badly to anything associated with the treatment:

“Thus the nurse, associated with the chemotherapy becomes a conditioned stimulus. The nauseous sensation, which is almost the same as that experienced during chemotherapy, becomes the conditioned response” (Barlow & Durand, p. 22).

Barlow and Durand (2002, pp. 21-22) make the pertinent observation that conditioning is one way we acquire new information, “particularly information that is somewhat emotional in nature”. The assertion of this thesis is that LGAT participants learn to associate an *emotional experience* with an unconditioned stimulus (the principles of the training), so this emphasis on an emotional association is significant. Taylor (2004) claims this emotional association is crucial in the psychology of cults.

Two other aspects of brainwashing also need to be taken into consideration. The first is the strength of the beliefs involved, and their association with emotion, both during the brainwashing itself and later, in the victim’s response to attacks on their new beliefs. People who work with victims of cults, for example, often observe that new beliefs are associated with extremely emotional states. Challenging such a belief rationally is difficult if not impossible. The victim not only perceives any such challenges as hostile but refuses to engage in rational debate; the new beliefs are ‘sacred’ and beyond the reach of reason (Taylor, 2004, p. 12).



In the case of the CCHOB, the assumption is that the ideas of indoctrination themselves are conditioned stimuli – that they would not have value on their own - but that they become associated with positive feelings. Taylor (2004) describes how the concepts used by brainwashers are often difficult to follow and would probably be rejected on their merit (they would not be understood). In the jargon of classical conditioning, the beliefs of the indoctrinators are not unconditioned stimuli, but conditioned stimuli. She refers to the conditioned beliefs of cults as “ethereal ideas”:

“Ethereal ideas are so ambiguous that they are often interpreted very differently by different individuals... This ambiguity makes them hard to challenge with rational debate... As well as being abstract and ambiguous, ethereal ideas are value-laden... Viewed as supremely important in themselves, they come with huge accumulated emotional baggage, and encourage a sense of superiority in believers” (Taylor, 2004, p. 27).

Research has also shown that if, for example, people are artificially implanted with a negative emotional association to a given word (through hypnosis) they will interpret situations which contain that word in a negative way (Haidt, 2007).

We then embedded one of those two words in six short stories about moral violations (e.g., accepting bribes or eating one’s pet dog) and found that stories that included the disgust-enhanced word were condemned more harshly than those that had no such flash (Haidt, 2007, p. 1000).

One third of people in a similar experiment indicated that the person in the (ostensibly neutral) moral situation was immoral and they “invented reasons to make sense of their otherwise inexplicable feeling of disgust” (Haidt, 2007, p. 1000). “Moral reasoning, when it occurs, is usually a post-hoc process in which we search for evidence to support our initial intuitive reaction” (Haidt, 2007, p. 998). The argument which relates to this dissertation is that if people have incredibly positive emotions artificially associated with a given argument they may “invent reasons” to make sense of their inexplicable feelings of positivity and euphoria. If one’s intuitive reaction has been manipulated it is plausible that feelings of euphoria result in a post-hoc process in search of evidence to support that intuition.

## **Symptoms of hypomania/mania**

The argument will be made that the euphoria of LGATs is very similar to the highs experienced by people with bipolar disorder. Furthermore it will be asserted that in the vast majority of participants LGATs trigger symptoms that resemble hypomania, rather than mania. This is an important distinction to make because not only is hypomania exceedingly pleasurable, but it does not negatively impact functionality.

“Hypomania involves the same symptoms as mania. The major difference is that in hypomania these symptoms are not severe enough to interfere with daily functioning and do not involve hallucinations or delusions” (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2011, p. 187).

Bipolar disorder is a mood disorder which affects approximately one to two per cent of the population at some time in their lives (Jamison, 1995; Merikangas et al., 2007, as cited in Nolen-Hoeksema, 2011; Miklowitz, 2011). It is characterised by shifts in mood from depression, to elevated states known as hypomania and mania (Miklowitz, 2011). There are other disorders that share certain similarities with hypomania/mania – namely ADHD, borderline personality disorder and schizophrenia – however, a person with sufficient experience and expertise in recognising bipolar disorder is quite capable, when provided with sufficient evidence, to make distinctions between these illnesses. Certain patterns of behaviour are unmistakably hypomanic/manic in nature (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2011).

Symptoms of mania include an elevated mood, euphoria, sociability, optimism, financial omnipotence, power, well-being, energy, productivity, increased self-esteem (confidence), decisiveness, and impulsive behaviour (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2011). Miklowitz (2011) echoes what is said in Nolen-Hoeksema, emphasising an elevated mood, euphoria, expansiveness, a decreased need for sleep, inflated self-esteem, increased talkativeness, an increase in activity and energy, changes in perception, and impulsive, often reckless, behaviour. Finally Jamison (1995) verifies these symptoms, adding heightened imaginative powers (creativity) and intensified emotional responses (Jamison, 1993) - an endorsement compelling not only because of her current status as a Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Johns Hopkins University, her position as Co-Director of the Mood Disorders Centre, but also her experience of living with bipolar disorder for more than four decades.

## THE CLASSICAL CONDITIONING HYPOTHESIS FOR BRAINWASHING

“If someone doesn’t value evidence, what evidence are you going to provide to prove that they should value it? If someone doesn’t value logic, what logical argument could you provide to show the importance of logic?” (Harris, 2011).

An element of influence which is not addressed by existing brainwashing theories is that of classical conditioning. The familiar image of classical conditioning is that of Russian scientist Pavlov ringing a bell and then giving dogs food. In this scenario the food naturally elicits salivation from the dogs while the bell does not. After ringing the bell and then feeding the dogs a few times the dogs learn to associate the bell with the food, and they salivate as soon as the bell is rung. Crucial to understanding the CCHOB is the fact that the bell has no nutritional value to dogs. Dogs and people may, however, through classical conditioning, unconsciously associate something that has no intrinsic value with something that is actually of use to them. This dissertation argues that brainwashing occurs in LGATs through an association between an emotional experience and the principles of the training, which just happen to occur at the same time. This thesis hypothesises that it is not the principles, or doctrine, of the training which brings about this euphoria, but that this emotional experience is due to the conditions of the training - the oscillation between abuse and compassion, sleep deprivation etc. (See section “Tentative explanation for the LGAT ‘experience’ – p. 114”). The emotional experience is like the food being given to the dogs while the principles of the trainings are like the bell. Because participants are unaware that their confidence, euphoria etc. may have been caused by the conditions, rather than content, of the training they may form an incorrect causal link between the principles and their newfound sense of confidence and joy.

Crucial to the CCHOB are a number of steps. The first steps render reason defunct as a mechanism for challenging the philosophy being indoctrinated; the next set of steps promote general trust and elevate emotional experience as the sole mechanism for making decisions and forming beliefs. Once this has been achieved the participant is vulnerable - susceptible to ignoring rational defenses and uncritical of emotional experience as a source of knowledge. The final step of the process involves triggering a powerful “experience”, which participants associate with the principles/doctrine of the LGAT.

- Step 1 – Destroy the participant’s ability to reason. This is achieved through philosophical undermining of reason as a source of knowledge, as well as through intimidation, sleep deprivation, and attacks on the participants’ identities. Inaccessible content and processes, like reframing and thought-terminating clichés, which make questioning very difficult, are also used.
- Step 2 - Elevate blind trust (particularly in the trainer) to a virtue. Convince participants that unconditional trust, in the context of the training environment, rather than being foolish/naive/gullible, is a positive human trait.
- Step 3 – Elevate emotional experiences as evidence of the validity of a process/doctrine. By spending a considerable period of time denigrating traditional evidence, using selective examples to criticize science (E.g. “At one time all of the best scientists in the world were certain that the earth was flat...”), and arguing that one’s feelings are completely reliable, LGATs convince participants that only experience can be trusted in their forming of new beliefs.
- Step 4 – Trigger an emotional experience paired with group’s doctrine. According to the CCHOB LGAT participants will associate the experience with the principles of the LGAT without processing these principles rationally.

A compelling example of an emotional “encounter” taken as evidence is provided on YouTube by neuroscientist Sam Harris. This is not intended to be provocative (I am aware that religion is an emotional subject for many) – it simply demonstrates how vulnerable even the smartest, and most scientific, are to “experience”.

I think that the best way to address the compatibility of science and religion is in the person of Francis Collins. I don’t know if you know him, he ran the Human Genome Project for the US; he’s a medical geneticist, obviously a person with a great career in science... and he’s also an evangelical Christian... Now I can’t say he’s not a scientist, but what I can say is that the place in his book where he tells you where his doubts were truly removed – his conversion experience – is... erm... testifies to the way the human mind can be partitioned... where a scientist can lapse in the most egregious way in terms of his scientific standards... and... the passage goes like this:

‘I was hiking in the Cascade Mountains, and came upon a beautiful, frozen waterfall... and my doubts were removed... I fell to my knees in the dewy grass and surrendered myself to Christ.’

That’s virtually verbatim... so I would suggest that it should be obvious to all of you – and it certainly should have been obvious to Francis Collins – that if a frozen waterfall can testify to the divinity of Jesus, then anything can mean anything (Fnd, 2014).

“While Collins argues for the rational basis of his faith, passages like this make it clear that he ‘decided’ (his word) to believe in God for emotional reasons” (Harris, 2009).

LGATs attempt to destroy reason. They attack it conceptually, arguing philosophically that it is a flawed mechanism for making decisions and forming beliefs. More directly they intimidate, harass, and devalue individuals who question (Brewer, 1975; Haaken & Adams, 1983). Other mechanisms that make critical thinking difficult include reframing and thought-terminating clichés. LGATs also trigger an “experience”, which appears as the training ends, tends to peaks after a few days, and then subsides. If LGATs are able to convince tired and confused participants to abandon reason, to trust instead what they are feeling, and then trigger feelings of joy, power, confidence, energy and love, then a powerful new brainwashing technique may have been found.

The mainstream theories of Lifton (1961), Schein (1971), and Singer (2003) are similar to the CCHOB in that they all suggest that individuals are broken down and that an unquestionable doctrine is presented (e.g. “The sacred science”). They differ, crucially, in that they do not elaborate on the degree to which reason is denigrated and how this denigration is merely the groundwork for a powerful conditioning experience which follows. An inability to question, (as expressed by Lifton, Schein, and Singer) must be supplemented with a profound distrust of reason, a profound trust of experience, and the triggering of an emotional experience in order for brainwashing through classical conditioning to occur. This is where the CCHOB departs from existing brainwashing theories.

It is vital to stress that the CCHOB does not suggest that other factors are not at play during brainwashing. Without specific analysis of these concepts, it can be convincingly argued that: (1) the subject of influence (e.g. Communism vs. LGAT doctrine), (2) authority figures,

(3) social influence, (4) identity and (5) social identity theory, among other concepts, have a crucial part to play in brainwashing processes. For example, Steps 1 and 2 – devaluing individual reason and elevating blind trust - would work hand-in-hand with the elevation of the trainer as an authority figure. If a person trusts himself less and trusts someone else more then influence becomes more likely. Similarly “the implied consensus of other participants” can be seen as an authority (informational social influence<sup>8</sup>) and Steps 1 and 2 of the CCHOB might increase the likelihood that participants would outsource decision-making to the group. There is no reason to believe that the CCHOB is mutually exclusive from other explanations of influence and it is hoped that it will supplement, yet challenge, conventional understanding.

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<sup>8</sup> Informational social influence occurs when group influence results in internal compliance, or a change in beliefs. This is as opposed to normative social influence, which is when people do not necessarily change their beliefs but conform in order to be liked or accepted (Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 2005; Kelman, 1958).

## **METHODOLOGY**

The aim of the methodology is to provide confidence in the processes used to gather evidence in support of death and rebirth, and in the type of evidence submitted in support of the CCHOB. Firstly, the fit of an autoethnographic approach to the subject under investigation will be defended, and secondly the steps taken to make this autoethnographic account more robust will be clarified. Following this the process of data collection and data analysis is elucidated, after which validity, reliability and rigour is reviewed. The final stage is to describe, step by step, the research design: the order of events from data collection to discussion.

### **Autoethnography**

The central approach used in this study is autoethnography. To provide a complete picture of the relevant benefits and limitations of this approach it is critical to turn to the literature and to assess the merits of this approach given the topic of this thesis. *Autoethnography*, according to Maréchal (2010), is “a form of research that involves self-observation and reflexive investigation in the context of ethnographic field work and writing” (p. 43). The dominant thread in the data presented is a description of an LGAT, from the perspective of the author. Because the chief hypothesis of this thesis is that classical conditioning is used by LGATs as a form of brainwashing, it is vital that a detailed account of what takes place in an LGAT is established. It is necessary to have a full picture of the processes employed by LGATs in order to determine whether the suggested hypothesis makes sense. According to Pavlenko (2002, 2007) the personal narratives of autoethnography give us insight into the private world of the researcher, and this is certainly the case with the data provided.

The autoethnographic account was written in the days following the course, based upon a few notes taken between sessions, but largely based upon memory. Given the stress and sleep deprivation endured during the training, the account cannot be viewed as a perfect recollection, but should be viewed as a subjective account provided in difficult circumstances. Having said that, this is the only account of such an experience which might retain its validity.

The alternative to autoethnography, which has been provided by LGAT critics such as Dr Margaret Singer (who observed six LGATs), is that of a dispassionate observer – of someone who did not actually take part in the trainings. Since what are being commented on in this thesis are not only the processes which participants were put through, but also the experience of those processes, there appears to be a great benefit to an autoethnographic account which provides personal insights. As asserted by Plummer (2001), “What matters is the way in which the story enables the reader to enter the subjective world of the teller -to see the world from her or his point of view, even if this world does not ‘match reality” (p. 401).

The most common criticism of autoethnography is of its strong focus on self. Autoethnographies are criticised for being self-absorbed, egotistical, brooding and one-sided (Atkinson, 1997; Coffey, 1999). It seems that the greatest advantage of autoethnography, its subjectivity, is also its greatest perceived weakness. In the case of a type of training billed as practical, rather than understandable, the subjectivity of the author should be celebrated, rather than sullied. LGATs are described as "experiential" by many proponents (Brewer, 1975) - something that cannot be described but which a person has to have personally been through. The perspective then of a dispassionate observer, like Dr Margaret Singer, is considered by many to be incomplete. Only the naive perception of someone with no prior knowledge of the training, like most who actually participate, provides a complete perspective of the experience of it and so autoethnography is probably the most valid method of researching an LGAT.

### **Contextualisation of autoethnographic account**

A vital point made by Ellis (2004) is that the self-reflection of an autoethnography should not stand alone – that it should be supported by, and connected to, wider issues. This thesis takes heed of that advice constructs a more complete picture of the LGAT experience through a variety of eclectic perspectives. In summary of the major contributors to this picture the following list emerges:



1. "Field Notes": This is the autoethnographic account written by the author of this thesis. It is made up of a 33-page document compiled shortly (in the days, rather than weeks) following participation in the 2010 training.
2. "Brewer, 1975": This is a complete account written by a journalist, Mark Brewer, who took the "first" LGAT, est, in the early 1970's. This account was published in the magazine Psychology Today in August 1975. It is an 18-page account.
3. "Haaken and Adams, 1983": Janice Haaken, Ph.D. is a psychologist, and Richard Adams, Ph.D. is a sociologist. The two of them participated in, and observed the "second" LGAT, Lifespring, and published their work in the journal 'Psychiatry' in August 1983. This complete account is 18-pages.

These major accounts are similar in that they all describe complete trainings. They differ, quite valuably, in that the first was written by a person with no psychological training, the second by a journalist, and the third by academics. There are overlaps, therefore, in the descriptions but, crucially, the emphasis and interpretations of incidents and phenomena vary from source to source. Crucially there are also time lags between studies. The earliest account was published in 1975, the second was from a training in 1981 and the final training occurred in 2010. This creates a more compelling argument that the major components highlighted by all three did occur, and the consistency over time suggests that one can generalise to some degree about an LGAT experience. In short the use of numerous sources, which vary in terms of intent, perspective and time period, adds validity and reliability to observations based solely upon "Field Notes" drawn up by the author.

There are other less major contributors to the data. These commentators supply key insights; however, their input is not provided in the format of complete accounts of particular LGATs. Instead they have had experience with numerous LGATs and have made more generalised statements about what they have observed in terms of processes, and in terms of the response of participants:

4. "Singer, 2003": Margaret Singer, Ph.D. was a psychologist who authored the book "Cults in Our Midst". Chapter 8 of this book is dedicated to LGATs, where Singer provides her observations on these trainings. On court orders Singer attended six LGAT sessions, and interviewed dozens of participants. She also "studied the training

manuals and videos used to train trainers” (p. 192) and “interviewed a number of trainers” (p. 192).

5. “Pressman, 1993”: Steven Pressman is a journalist who wrote the biography on Werner Erhard – the man who created the first LGAT, est, in 1971.
6. “Hassan, 1988”: Steven Hassan is a former member of the Unification Church, a group he (and many others) consider a cult, and is author of the book “Combatting Cult Mind Control”. Through his involvement in the cult industry he has had contact with LGATs – groups he believes use ‘mind control’ processes - and he makes a few specific statements about them.

The use of a variety of sources connects the cultural, political, and social meanings and understandings to the autoethnographic account, as per Ellis (2004). For a more cultural and social perspective on the experience of LGATs, social media has also been employed. Graduates of courses have shared their experiences on discussion forums ([www.culteducation.com](http://www.culteducation.com)) and on YouTube. These individuals have not been coerced to provide evidence in support of the claims of this dissertation, and the unsolicited nature of their testimonies should be kept in mind when evaluating the validity of the evidence. By drawing information from such a wide and representative population the data collection has been a good deal more rigorous than would have occurred through a single source.

So as not to provide only one side of the story, the descriptions of LGAT effects have also been taken from LGAT supporters, including participants, spokespersons of well-known LGATs, the head of a company who insists his employees take these courses and the trainer of the 2010 LGAT himself. They provide corroboration of the euphoria experienced by almost all LGAT graduates. Evidence from those who might oppose the suggestion that brainwashing is taking place is that much more compelling, because they are not looking to support this assertion.

### **Data collection**

As is typically the case for autoethnographic studies, the researcher did not go through the experience for the purpose of collecting data, rather the experience was assembled and ordered retrospectively (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). The data collected for this research

is in the form of a first-person narrative – the researcher having taken part in an LGAT in 2010 - written in the style of a journalist or novelist, before any exposure to brainwashing theory. After the training was completed, but before brainwashing was at all familiar to the researcher, he compiled a 33-page document describing what had taken place in the 2010 LGAT. In this sense the data, while a subjective account, is not influenced by preconceptions of what brainwashing is supposed to be. According to Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011), narrative autoethnographies are presented in the form of stories “that incorporate the ethnographer’s experiences into the ethnographic descriptions and analysis of others” (p. 6).

I was deeply disturbed by the abuse I had experienced, and witnessed, during the training yet equally fascinated – as someone who had lived with bipolar disorder for seven years - by the hypomania-like symptoms I observed in the vast majority of participants. I was driven to write my account (Field Notes) by a desire to make sense of the processes which, in my opinion, managed to manipulate a roomful of intelligent people and a deep concern that other people may experience mental health issues as a result of participation (this concern was confirmed by the subsequent discovery of considerable evidence of psychological casualties caused by LGATs (Haaken & Adams, 1983; Pressman, 1993; Singer, 2003)). Because I had been sent on the training by my employer (as part of their induction program), because almost every member of this company appeared to fanatically endorse these trainings, and because it was there was no time for effective reflection during the training, I decided that I should document the experience and investigate the processes in a less pressurised setting. The account was written in 2010, years before I started to study psychology, so it was not compiled with a master’s thesis in mind and there were no alterations (other than basic editing) to these notes for the purposes of this dissertation.

### **Data analysis**

“Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organises and describes your data set in (rich) detail” (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Because the themes present in Lifton’s (1961) “brainwashing” theory – “death and rebirth” – are similar to themes which exist in the LGAT account, Lifton’s model of death

and rebirth appears to be the most appropriate way to analyse the LGAT processes and experiences of participants. Understanding LGAT processes is central to understanding the claims of the proposed brainwashing theory. Thematic analysis will be used to establish the degree to which abuse, compassion, confession, and education – as occurred in Lifton’s (1961) analysis of POWs – occurs in an LGAT. Thematic analysis will also be used, importantly, to establish whether hypomanic/manic symptoms are seen in LGAT graduates. The literature on bipolar disorder will be held up against the behaviour and reported/observed experiences of LGAT graduates to see how closely the two resemble each other. This will either support, or add scepticism to the proposed brainwashing hypothesis. It is important that the “Steps” suggested as part of the CCHOB are shown to occur during the data analysis. The data will either support or disconfirm the existence of the proposed CCHOB “Steps” in LGATs.

### **Validity, reliability and rigour**

Validity, as defined by Hammersley (1990, p. 57) is “truth: interpreted as the extent to which an account accurately represents the social phenomena to which it refers.” The validity of this study relies extensively on five claims:

1. LGATs attempt to undermine participants’ ability to reason.
2. LGATs attempt to elevate unconditional trust to the status of a virtue.
3. LGATs convince participants that an “emotional experience”, rather than reason, is a valid source of knowledge.
4. LGATs somehow cause a powerful, and positive, emotional experience in graduates of their courses.
5. People may form associations between this experience and the principles of the LGAT through classical conditioning.

The analysis section reveals the common practise in LGATs of “destroying” reason. This is achieved through philosophical undermining of reason and through intimidation, sleep deprivation, attacks on the participants’ identities, inaccessible content and other manipulative processes, like reframing and the use of thought-terminating clichés, which make questioning very difficult. In terms of the second claim, analysis also reveals the use of

exercises and philosophy which promotes blind trust, rather than critical and cautious deliberation. Participants are made to feel that unconditional trust is not naïve, or gullible, but instead that it is a virtue. Both the literature review and the analysis demonstrate that LGATs view experience as far more valid than reason. Experience is presented by LGATs as the only epistemology and so claim three is validated. Considerable effort is devoted to explaining the regularity and nature of the LGAT “experience”. Reputable sources on hypomanic/manic symptoms are compared with observations of, and statements made by, LGAT participants, trainers, proponents, and opponents, to establish that the euphoria, referred to by members of one LGAT as “the experience” or “getting it” (Fehlberg, 2014) is practically guaranteed. The process of classical conditioning is well-established and its application in the CCHOB is plausible.

Establishing that each of these five claims is true, or likely, does not prove that the CCHOB is efficacious, however and, as has been stated by Singer (2003), research on the effectiveness of brainwashing is limited by ethical concerns. It does, nonetheless, offer a novel alternative to existing brainwashing theories (which do not enjoy universal support) and will hopefully encourage a renewed appraisal of this interesting and significant area of human influence.

Reliability is described by Hammersley (1992, p. 67) as “the degree of consistency with which instances are assigned to the same category by different observers or by the same observer on different occasions.” This refers, in the case of this study, to the degree to which the results would be accurately replicated. What adds considerably to the reliability of this data are the varied, but similar, accounts of LGAT experiences. If only one account existed it might be easy to dismiss the description of the author’s “Field Notes” as a one-sided rant without grounding in reality; however similar experiences provided by various authors lends itself to a more credible overall argument. There is little doubt that if an impartial researcher reviewed the LGAT experiences, using Lifton’s model of death and rebirth as a template, that they would find significant evidence of abuse and compassion, of confession and education, as has been found in this study. Any person who is intimately familiar with the symptoms of bipolar disorder would also find in the descriptions of the LGATs’ effects symptoms which closely resemble hypomania/mania.

The CCHOB is not a theory that any researcher would have arrived at. It involves the observation, as made by Taylor (2004) (and many others), that beliefs are often closely tied to emotions, and it requires a basic understanding of classical conditioning. It also requires the observation that reason is heavily devalued during LGATs, which lays the groundwork for a conversion based upon emotion. The observations made in this study are, therefore, valid, reliable, and repeatable; however the intellectual leap to the suggested model of brainwashing is not a leap that would ‘reliably’ have been made by another researcher. Having said that, there is nothing obscure or complicated about the proposed model– that people may be convinced to disregard reason in favour of an emotional association is plausible and this emotional association has been noted by other researchers, such as Taylor (2004).

### **Research design**

The following steps take the research from start to completion:

- (1) Collect data. The primary data (“Field Notes”) were collected using an autoethnographic approach. Secondary sources “Brewer, 1975” (a magazine article) and “Haaken & Adams, 1983” (an academic journal article) were obtained through a review of the literature.
- (2) Analyse the processes, atmosphere, and philosophy which results in “death and rebirth” during an LGAT (based upon Lifton’s process of death and rebirth).
- (3) Analyse the processes, atmosphere and philosophy within these processes used to devalue/discourage reason during the LGAT.
- (4) Analyse the processes, exercises, and philosophy within these processes used to exalt blind trust/emotion/intuition.
  - Establish that LGATs attempt to convince participants to trust their “experience”.
- (5) Establish that LGAT participants undergo a powerful emotional “experience”.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Please note that references during the analysis to “The Guru” and “the trainer” are references to the same person. In the autoethnographic field notes he has subjectively been referred to as “The Guru” as this tongue-in-cheek description best captures the way that he presented himself to, and was seen by many of, the participants. In the rest of the analysis he is referred to as “the trainer”.

### “Death” and “rebirth” in the 2010 LGAT

Psychiatrist Robert Lifton wrote one of the earliest accounts of brainwashing based upon interviews with POWs held during the Korean War (Lifton, 1961). Lifton highlights a process of abuse and compassion: a core feature of LGATs, and a pattern crucial to the CCHOB. He further speaks of confession, and education, as well as “death” and “rebirth” - all central to LGAT processes. Using Lifton’s (1961) breakdown of processes leading to “death” and “rebirth” LGATs will be examined, to see the degree to which this occurs. The education process of the LGAT – the inculcation of guilt, the devaluing of reason, and the elevation of experience – will also be assessed in the context of Lifton’s model.

Lifton (1961) explains that the thought reform process revolves around two extremes of treatment and two demands:

- (1) The alternation between abuse and compassion
- (2) The requirements of confession and education.

The abuse, both physical and psychological, is designed to bring about ‘death’ and the compassion and confession are the means by which ‘rebirth’ occurs. This process of “death” and “rebirth” is first broken down into **twelve steps**, which Lifton (1961) claims are present in a thought reform environment. Therefore, in describing the “abuse” a number of the twelve steps of “death” will be covered, and likewise, when describing “compassion” the steps which link to “rebirth” will emerge. Certain elements of the twelve steps relating to confession and education will also come up, so, to avoid redundancy, only when ideas unique to the twelve steps show themselves will they be identified and elucidated.

## **The alternation between abuse and compassion**

During the 2010 LGAT there was an alternation between abuse and compassion, a pattern noted by Dr Margaret Singer in other LGATs:

“After several days of being dragged down into the pits the final day of exercises is usually designed to pump you up” (Singer, as cited in Mathison, 1993).

However, while a pattern of “abuse for three days” followed by “affirmation on the last day” can be seen in the 2010 LGAT, there were also fluctuations between cruelty and compassion on a daily level. The 2010 LGAT environment was extremely stressful, with the trainer viciously attacking participants, screaming at those who didn’t follow instructions, putting us through exercises that made many feel exposed, and guilty, but then equally of guiding us through relaxing visualisation exercises and, later in the process, smiling and telling jokes.

### ***Abuse:***

The relevance of the abuse to the CCHOB is that it undermined the self-belief of participants, which destroys the ability to question or reason. It is also suggested, in a later section called “Tentative explanation of the LGAT ‘experience’”, that the pattern of abuse described in LGATs may be the cause of the post-training euphoria. While, at this stage, this hypothesis is in its infancy, it remains useful to establish the extent of abuse endured in LGATs. This detailed description, it is hoped, may be used in the future to understand how a positive emotional experience is triggered by LGATs.

He went on a violent rant about the destruction of rain forests, the depletion of the fish in the sea, the pollution we were creating and the greed and selfishness of every single one of us. He screamed and he smashed his board and he stamped his feet and he told us that we were all assholes. He told us this over and over and over again. He told us over and over that we were stupid, and that he cared nothing for our opinions or the way we thought (Field Notes, 90-95).

A very similar approach was employed in the first LGAT, est, as described by journalist Mark Brewer in 1975:



He goes for the throat. They were present, he roared in command voice, because their lives did not work. Their lives were shit. Hopeless. They did not know what they were doing, did not know how to experience life, were struggling, desperate, confused. They were ASSHOLES! Tony savoured the word a moment, used it again, and thenceforth, as is a matter of course in the training, the recruits were always referred to as assholes...until they "got it (Brewer, 1975).

Brewer (1975) explains that LGAT trainers often spell out the fact that abuse will take place during the training:

He began to describe all the pain and stress and discomfort and anxiety they were going to feel in the long hours ahead. Like an interrogator assuring a captive that he will inevitably crack, Tony took pleasure in predicting the sheer desperation with which each trainee, hours and hours hence, would desire merely to talk, stand up, leave the room, smoke a cigarette, go home, take a shit, anything. How they would feel hatred, boredom, ripped off... (Brewer, 1975).

The trainer during the 2010 LGAT gleefully made similar promises:

"Today and later on we're going to play some games..." He seemed to take pleasure in knowing what was in stall for us "... and in these games you're not going to have much fun!" (Field Notes, 417-419).

With unsurpassable precision, one of the est staff made clear their intent – that the point of the est training was to cause the "death and rebirth" of participants (Lifton, 1961, p. 66).

"Therefore, yelled Tony, "We're gonna throw away your whole belief system. ... We're gonna tear you down and put you back together" (Brewer, 1975).

The way that people thought (their "reasoning") was attacked, and replaced by est-think:

while Tony bombarded them hour after hour about how their lives and their thinking were all fucked up, the training would shake, confuse and finally, in a great majority of cases, dislodge the old ideas and behavior patterns. And then in would go the desired est

perceptions, and ultimately the notion that you are perfect the way you are (Brewer, 1975).

This abuse was not an exception during the training – it was a core and enduring feature over the majority of the four days. A perfect example of this individualised abuse was when the trainer screamed at an elderly woman for simply sitting in the wrong chair:

“The facilitator noticed her “error” immediately and sprung on her with all of the contempt of an abusive husband. “These are your rules!!!” he screamed, as she sat frozen in fear, uncertain of what to do next. “You agreed to these rules!!! And you knew that you had to move and you still didn’t!!! Where is your integrity??!!” I was floored – shocked beyond belief at the malice that this bully emptied out on a clearly confused older woman. It breaks my heart that I said nothing as he continued “... So what are you going to do then??!!! You know you’ve broken your rules!! How are you going to keep your integrity??!!” Someone quickly jumped up and offered to swap places with the woman. As she took her new seat the facilitator repeated, as if a great lesson had been taught, “It’s your integrity.” He glared at us all and then, in that rhythmic style, he repeated himself once more: “It’s... your... integrity” (Field Notes, 171-181).

The seating arrangements “justified” abuse by the trainer for people who were too slow to take their seats, or who sat in the same seat more than once. The cruelty to the elderly woman previously mentioned was a form of this abuse.

The music used to signal our hasty sprint to our seats was played for us and it was an incredibly loud and powerful classical piece that one might associate with the arrival of Superman or the sudden appearance of the Almighty God. We were told how to stand when we got to our seats – arms outstretched as if we were being crucified and our eyes pointing to the heavens – and at the pinnacle of this piece of music, when everyone had clambered to a seat, the facilitator would stride to the front (Field Notes, 159-165).

Haaken and Adams (1983) noted the exact same pattern of tension created in their training:

The theme song from Star Wars was played ceremoniously at the beginning of each sessions, and participants were to be seated in their chairs by the conclusion of the music. Frantic compliance to this rule was remarkable even though its purpose and the consequences of noncompliance were unclear (Haaken & Adams, 1983).

The tongue-lashing received by all participants for “failing” on the red and black game is another perfect example of the psychological, guilt-laden abuse:

Despite all the bullying and anger that had preceded this, “The Guru” managed to take his venom and intimidation to a new level. He stamped his feet, he screamed, he swore, he smashed the board with his fist, he spat unbridled fury at us all and as a climax, he tore the score sheet down, crumpled it up and threw it on the floor. Our evening ended with him storming from the room and one of the all-whites<sup>9</sup> telling us that the evening had come to an end (Field Notes, 549-554).

The description of psychologist and sociologist Haaken and Adams (1983) of the red and black game provides some sense of the consistency of LGAT procedures throughout the years:

One example involved a game called "Red and Black," which required the group to divide into two teams and develop strategies, based upon a set of rules, for achieving the greatest number of points. Neither team was able to recognize that the main contingency for getting the maximum number of points was that both teams succeed. Essentially, if one team lost, both lost. And both teams did lose. This exercise could have been an occasion for discussing the cultural context of competition and aspects of our society which make it difficult to identify cooperative contingencies. Instead, the trainer castigated participants, finally stating with disgust, "You all make me sick." Since the exercise was at the close of the evening, we were to go home and reflect upon what we had learned. Many participants were silent and tearful as we closed the evening session (Haaken & Adams, 1983).

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<sup>9</sup> “All-whites” was a description used during the 2010 autoethnographic account of the LGAT (“Field Notes”) to describe the volunteers, who all dressed exclusively in white.

The abuse was not always as overt as screaming. Certain exercises were psychologically straining, such as the “I can see right through you and read your body language” exercise:

One of the other exercises on Thursday night was an “I can see right through you and read your body language” demonstration by “The Guru” (the facilitator). What happened was that we had to go up – four at a time – and stand in front of everyone else while “The Guru” essentially told us bad things about ourselves based upon how we stood, held our hands etc. It was all done in an exceedingly knowing tone and often the attendees adopted how he suggested they were standing, even when they weren’t really doing it before. As some examples he would look at someone and say:

“Look at this one... hands together covering his genitals... very scared... trying to protect himself”, or

“Look at her, so scared, so scared... frightened of letting anyone know her secret, trying so hard to maintain this appearance of confidence...” or

“See how his shoulders are forward – this shows how he has the weight of the world on his shoulders, (speaking to the person he was describing): “Aren’t you tired of having the weight of the world on your shoulders?”

“Some appeared to take the exercise quite lightly (although all, including me, I’m sure felt a little uncomfortable being put in the spotlight like that), but a couple of the girls broke down into tears after very little pushing. To demonstrate his “compassion” “The Guru” would not push much after a person broke down (Field Notes, 343-346).

A draining exercise which occurred more than once was the “What do you want?” exercise:

Another Friday exercise was one performed in the “dyad position”. The dyad position was sitting on a chair opposite someone else (in this case someone else attending the course) with your knees lightly touching the other person’s, your hands on your own knees and eye contact maintained at all times (a position in which you are in someone’s personal space, which will lead to tension). This exercise was to flush out all of the desires (personal, material, relational etc.) that you had and was performed with one person repeatedly asking the question “WHAT DO YOU WANT?” As the responder you

had to come up with new answers every time that this was asked, which of course was impossible. We were told not to hold anything back and from my partner I had the outpouring of her heart – wanting acceptance and to feel loved, breaking down in front of me as I heard myself asking the question over and over again. “What do you want? What do you want? What do you want?” “The Guru” encouraged the person asking the question to do anything that it took to get answers from the responder. “Shout! Stamp your feet! Swear! Do whatever you have to, short of standing up from your chair or using physical violence!!”

I tried to maintain an encouraging tone, but felt awkward about being a participant in the bullying. After that “The Guru” swept among the group, swearing and threatening – telling us to divulge all of our material and other wants. When a long period of time had passed, we swapped responsibilities with our partners and they had the chance to put us under the same pressure. Looking around (despite the rules) I noticed that a number of people had broken down into tears. Like many of the exercises during the training, this one was a confessional – hidden secrets and desires were being brought out, often revealing more than the participants would otherwise choose to (Field Notes, 466-487).

Consider the striking similarities between this exercise, used in 2010, and the exercise used in the Lifespring training in 1981:

A form of exercise used repeatedly throughout the training involved highly structured interactions in pairs. Each member of the pair faced the other in the “open position” (legs uncrossed, one hand placed on each leg), and eye contact was to be sustained for the entire exercise. If participants deviated from this position—for example, by breaking eye contact or crossing their legs—the assistants instructed them to resume the open position. We found that the experience of having our movements monitored throughout the five days (while being told to be spontaneous) was particularly unsettling, evoking feelings of powerlessness and dependency. The prolonged eye contact required in all pair exercises had a certain hypnotic effect in that it became increasingly difficult to withdraw from the influence of the exercise (Haaken & Adams, 1983).

During the 2010 LGAT participants were not just controlled in terms of how they sat, how they spoke, their access to the time, their access to exercise, their access to bathrooms, the speed with which they needed to hurry down food. They were not just screamed at, they did not just go through lectures stretching hours convincing them that they were assholes and that every bad thing that occurred on the planet was because of people like them. They were not only purged of all inner personal thoughts and these thoughts were not only reinterpreted and redelivered to them in a format that induced guilt, shame, embarrassment and fear. These participants were not just overloaded with information presented in a forceful, convincing and yet esoteric manner and they were not just too intimidated and emotionally and intellectually exhausted to question what was being told to them. They not only had the normative social influence of the seeming approval of the other participants with whom they could not communicate, they also had the tacit approval of the world, whose input was effectively screened from the view of participants throughout the training. In addition to normative social influence, there was informational social influence, as it was hard for participants to not outsource certain decisions to group members who must have at least seemed to have a better idea about what was going on. These participants were not just deprived of sleep and space for reflection and they were not only exposed to a person built up as an ultimate authority figure on the subject under question – how to view their lives. They didn't experience some of this – they went through all of this. Not only this, but participants were put through painful regression exercises where they were guided through their most painful memories of childhood. One might scoff at the idea that a four day “group training” could have a significant impact on individuals, but therein lies their defence and their power – how could a training course harm a normal person?

“The Guru” took us through a guided visualisation process – inviting the entire group to regress into their most painful memories of childhood. This process of regression was something highlighted by Lifton (1961).

‘Close your eyes... close your eyes. Good... great... relax. What you're going to do is go back into your childhood. Look and see. Find an event that caused you pain... made you feel small or uncomfortable or molested in some way. Recreate that event here. Bring that event here.’ This exercise proved immensely difficult for many participants – one of whom I later found out had been sexually abused as a child. It was incredibly stressful for

a participant with any degree of empathy to watch as people broke down all around us (Field Notes, 502-507).

Brewer (1975) describes a similar version of guided meditation used in est:

We were told to choose one big problem that we wanted to solve and were then coached for hours on how, under the trancelike "directed meditation," to dredge up from memory all the actions and emotions associated with the things until we ultimately reached the cause of it whereupon, like the pains of the day before, the afflictions would miraculously disappear (Brewer, 1975).

To an impartial observer participants were abused for significant portions of the training. The exercises were chiefly psychologically abusive; however sleep deprivation, eating restrictions and a limited ability to move (for up to three hours at a time) were physically taxing.

On Friday morning I was up at 06:00, and after the 'excitement' of the night before it had taken me until around 03:00 to drive home and fall asleep the previous night. I'd had little time or mental energy to properly think through the events of the night before and before getting to work I needed to complete my homework (Field Notes, 392-395).

"Breaks for the remainder of the course were generally fifteen minutes only and the first seven minutes had to be spent on our own – no eating, no drinking or checking of cell phones until the final eight minutes (Field Notes, 403-405).

By day three I was completely exhausted and the strain of the exercises was weighing on me heavily.

...after two nights of very little sleep and three days of mental and emotional destruction, I just set myself the goal of making it through the course and making big decisions about my career later. One after the next people went up and broke down... (Field Notes, 693-696).

By day four I was a wreck – Lifton (1961) states that prisoners were between the states of wakefulness and sleep – a “hypnagogic” state. I could relate, and was falling asleep on my feet. Brewer (1975) explained the similar long hours experienced by est participants during the seventies:

“est is a company whose primary business is the sale of a "standard training" which currently goes for \$250 a head and lasts from 15 to 18 hours each Saturday and Sunday for two consecutive weekends” (Brewer, 1975).

He also explained the physical restrictions typical of est:

During the training, no one would move, talk, smoke, eat, or take notes, and no one would leave the room at any time for any reason unless a formal break (of which there would be a maximum of two each 16-hour day) was announced (Brewer, 1975).

A seemingly innocuous exercise which took place during the 2010 LGAT was a cross-dressing exercise. While ostensibly innocent, this exercise effectively made participants the inferiors of the trainer (it’s hard to maintain self-respect after such a performance).

All of the guys were told to dress up as little girls – make-up and dresses were provided – and then we had to rehearse a song to be sung back to the girls. We had to mimic a three or four year old girl as closely as possible and try to be shy and cute, while singing and providing actions. The song went as follows:

‘Ten little fingers, ten little toes, long curly hair and a turned up nose, big brown eyes and a cute little figure, watch out guys when I get bigger!’ (Field Notes, 626-627).

Singer (2003) explains, from her experience of a number of LGATs, that such cross-dressing exercises are commonplace in these trainings:

Some of the procedures used in certain of the large group awareness training (LGAT) and their offshoots contain processes to humiliate people (they resemble fraternity hazing events). The only rationale I can conjure up for these is to imagine that humiliating people would get them over their shyness, which is not true. Nor can I see a correlation to work or anything that might be remotely helpful to employees in exercises that have



an obese woman don a bikini and go on the street singing and trying to get a band of men to follow her, as one woman reported, or that have people cross-dress and act out caricatured opposite-sex roles, as others have reported (p. 189).

Another example of this switch between abuse and compassion could be seen in the trainer's encouragement of personal disclosure:

If people said the wrong thing "The Guru" would scream things like "That's not a goal!" or taunt them for expressing their goal in the wrong way – "You think that's important? Pathetic!" He'd also encourage personal sharing, by telling us it would allow us to get more from the course – people who didn't share were given the reverse psychology of "Fine!... it's your course..." A couple of people opened up about their insecurities regarding feeling unworthy, being taken advantage of, about putting on false appearances and a few of these people broke down into tears as they shared. 'The Guru' switched off the malice for a few brief seconds on these occasions to, once again, demonstrate his empathy (Field Notes, 355-363).

It is worth considering at this point the reasons that the vast majority of participants do not get up and walk out and, while one can only speculate, the following factors may play a role. The first consideration is that the marketing of these courses occurs almost entirely via word-of-mouth. It is generally a trusted friend, or relative who – in a euphoric state (the "guest evenings" occur two days after the trainings end) – convinces the new participant to attend. Graduates are told not to reveal details about what actually happens, but rather just how they feel (Singer, 2003). Because they do not understand the experience, and have been convinced that understanding the experience is not important, graduates tell new recruits that they should expect it to be very tough, but that it is all worth it in the end. When new participants are psychologically attacked early on in the training many may trust that it is part of a process beyond their understanding and that they should see it through.

In addition to family and friends, many senior executives at large companies have bought into these trainings and require their employees to attend. The effect of this is twofold – firstly, employees may see their employers as authority figures and, like a friend or family

member, trust their judgment and, secondly, it may be very difficult to walk out of a course that one's employer fanatically supports.

“The primary barrier to leaving, of course, is that they might lose their jobs by offending the boss who sent them to the program and perhaps seems enamored of it” (Singer, 2003, p. 207).

The trainer also makes participants feel like they could not possibly understand the process, implying that to challenge it or reject it before going through it would be enormously arrogant. The trainer explains that “there are things that you know that you know, things that you know that you don't know, and things that you don't know that you don't know”. He tells participants that the training deals with “things that you don't know that you don't know”, which places participants in a position of inferiority, and claims that if they do exactly what he tells them to the training is guaranteed to work.

Another tactic used to prevent participants from leaving is the “antibiotics analogy”:

After that we were given the analogy that the training was ‘like a course of antibiotics’ in that you had to go through the entire process for it to work. He further explained that, like antibiotics, stopping half way through would actually be bad for us (Field Notes, 131-134).

To précis what has been said so far, participants are likely to trust the recommendation of friends, family, colleagues, or employers; they may be very nervous about offending the employer (or friend); they are made to feel that they would be arrogant to question a process that they could have no way of understanding; and they are threatened with the apparent danger of leaving early. The next factor encouraging participants to stay is the cost of the training – New Beginnings, for example, charged about R4,000 per person for four days – which could not be recovered unless you took part in every exercise. If brainwashing is being used in a training it is useful to declare that only those who had fully submitted themselves to this brainwashing can dispute the validity of the training. By this logic, if a participant realises half-way through the course that he is being manipulated he cannot leave and obtain a refund.

“In fact, you could only ask for a refund if you’d gone through the whole course and participated in all exercises” (Field Notes, 134-135).

Other psychological tactics were used, such as playing on the insecurity of many people that they never see things through in their lives. The trainer suggested that anyone who got up and left was the type of person who would give up on life and that these ostensibly terrible people would attempt to bring the group down to their level. In doing this, he pre-empted anyone challenging him and planted the seed that anyone who walked out was a selfish failure. Statements such as the following were made during the 2010 LGAT:

“Some people don’t have the courage to look honestly at themselves. They give up on themselves and then they try to take other people down with them.”

Many participants may push through the training because they are curious about the promises made. Because they may have no way of understanding how abuse can lead to confidence and joy (as they may have witnessed in the person who recommended they take part) it is reasonable to think that many people would be not leave because they want to find out how this occurs.

A major reason that participants do not leave is that they are convinced that they have “chosen” to do the training. In keep with the LGAT philosophy, they are told that they are entirely “responsible” for being there, and that they have made a commitment to complete the training. This is technically true, but it fails to acknowledge that participants are often unaware of the abusive nature of the training when they make this commitment. By this logic, one could lie about any product and then when the customer complains blame the customer for his gullibility. The great irony of the LGAT philosophy of accountability is that it shields them from taking responsibility for many of their abuses:

Trainees are repeatedly reminded, for example, that they have chosen to take est training. When trainees attribute their decision, as they inevitably will, to recommendations, testimonials, or personal pressures to which they have been exposed, they are told that it is ultimately they who have chosen to heed the advice, believe the testimony, or yield to the pressure which they would prefer to see as the determinant of their decision (Finkelstein, Wenegrat, & Yalom, 1982).

Something else to consider is that acknowledging abuse is not easy and the longer a person “accepts” abuse the more difficult it may be to admit that it has taken place. A participant who, for some of the already described reasons, decided to remain in an LGAT for the first ten hours may have been screamed at, shamed, and generally bullied in front of a roomful of people. This person may choose at this point to believe that they have allowed themselves to be abused, or they may choose to believe that they have pushed through a challenging and necessary experience on the path to enlightenment. There is a powerful unconscious motive to buy into the option which makes them feel empowered, rather than victimised.

Finally, there is a great deal of social influence to remain seated, and this builds as the course progresses. A person who gets up and leaves is effectively saying to everyone else (dozens to hundreds of people) that they have been abused by a stranger for the last e.g. ten hours. Participants who have bought into the training may be incredibly hostile to this suggestion and the social pressure to not antagonise the group (or the trainer) is significant.

***Compassion:***

There were occasions, woven into psychological abuse, where the trainer demonstrated compassion. This occurred during certain exercises, but more specifically the relief of stress occurred in the form of guided relaxation exercises that were interspersed between traumatic sessions. These hypnotic sessions were placed strategically, and quite evenly, between sessions of emotional abuse or psychological strain and they always began with “Uncross your legs, uncross your hands... close your eyes, close your eyes, close your eyes...”

What followed was clearly a form of hypnosis. The facilitator then began to speak in a hypnotic, dreamy voice, asking us all to relax and to think of our favourite beach. He asked us to imagine every detail, from the feel of the sand to the sound of the waves to the warmth of the sun to the colour of the water. After dwelling on this experience for some time – I kept my mind occupied elsewhere, never getting fully involved in the process – he started to slowly count down from twenty to one, a clear giveaway of any hypnotic procedure. As we approached one he asked us to slowly “come back into the

room, to become aware of the people around us and the layout of the hall” and then he “brought us back”, although we had to keep our eyes closed (Field Notes, 292-303).

About twice a session throughout the course we would be told to “Uncross your arms, uncross your legs, close your eyes, close your eyes, close your eyes,” and we would have to listen to a song. I remember a few Neil Diamond songs, a Jack Johnson song, Cat Stevens’ “Morning has Broken” and others that were less familiar, but we were always told to relax and focus carefully on the words. (Field Notes, 382-386).

Brewer (1975) described an almost identical process from the est training:

It began with Tony telling the trainees that they were going to enter a meditational state and transport themselves to an idyllic beach. As a respite from hours of harangue, the prospect was received like water on the desert, and with all bodies properly positioned in the chairs and all eyes shut, Tony began to direct their minds in the droning repetitive monotone of a language record, he bid them, "... Create a space in your left foot. ...Good: ... Create a space in your left foot. ...Thank you. ...Create a space in your left foot. ...Good."

Tony led the group through three long processes that night, beginning each one with the same hypnotic direction ("...Create a space in your head...") and then the rambling creed, impressing their minds with positive attitudes and reinforcing his suggestive power (Brewer, 1975).

These relaxation sessions – almost anti-stress processes - provided much needed respite from the ordeal of the sessions. As a final process of compassion there was a great deal of dancing, joy and hugging on the final day of the training, while the attitude of the trainer switched sharply from abusive to friendly and affirming:

As the final exercise all participants were made to stand in two circles, one inside the other, and exchange one of four possible gestures with a person from the other circle. You could have no contact, you could shake the person’s hand, or you could hug them. Some basic hand signals were used to indicate how you would interact with the other person. We all had to stand opposite each other person in the training to do this exercise

and hugs were shared by every pair during the exercise. This exercise fitted in well with the final day's ambience of joy and acceptance (in contrast to the atmosphere of guilt, stress, blame and humiliation from the previous three days) (Field Notes, 823-830).

The same type of process took place during the Lifespring training in 1981:

Participants assembled in two concentric circles, facing each other. Each facing pair was to simultaneously indicate one of four possible gestures of intimacy: no contact; a handshake; holding hands; or an embrace. After completing this brief, silent interaction, the lines shifted and new pairs were formed, repeating the procedure. Most pairs embraced so that by the conclusion of the exercise, close contact had been made among the majority of participants (Haaken & Adams, 1983).

The 2010 LGAT appears to clearly meet the criteria of an environment which constantly shifted between abuse and compassion, and which also had a greater movement from abuse to compassion over the four day process.

## **Confession and education**

### ***Confession***

Confession and education were core themes of the 2010 LGAT. Confession clearly did not take the form of prisoners confessing to being spies against the Communist government (as was the case in Lifton's 1961 analysis of POWs); however confession and education existed in the 2010 LGAT in other forms. During the Korean War the Chinese indoctrinators were trying to convince the POWs that they were spies and that the Communist Party was beyond reproach. Coerced confessions, therefore, took the form of elaborate descriptions of how prisoners had worked against the Chinese Communist Government and of how noble the Communist government was. During the 2010 LGAT the trainer was trying to indoctrinate participants with the idea that they had caused everything (good and bad) that had happened during their lives and so the "confessions" by participants were related to the indoctrination theme of "I am responsible!"

Shifting from the emphasis upon submission and trust, the trainer suggested that we were totally responsible for all events, in our lives--"100 per cent accountable"--including

the selection of our parents. An exercise designed to illustrate the theme of "taking full responsibility" involved the use of pairs... Several people told stories about having been beaten by a parent as a child. We were then instructed to retell the story from a position of 100 per cent accountability--in other words, how we "set things up to be that way. (Haaken & Adams, 1983).

It's Your Own Fault. Gradually, Tony moved on to another mainstay in the est body of knowledge, the idea of "taking responsibility for your life." It is basically the perception that your problems aren't caused by sickness or fate or other people, they are caused by you, and until you accept that, you'll never solve any of them. Not surprisingly, almost everyone in the room had an example of some exception in his own case, but Tony would have none of it. He wouldn't have cared if you'd been gang-raped or born with a brain defect, it was no goddamn excuse (Brewer, 1975).

The same philosophy is employed by est's offspring, Landmark Education:

Basically, the leader had people stand up and share stories, which were heart breaking. One women's kid was run over by a car and as she sobbed people weren't allowed to comfort her. This guy wasn't a shrink and kept telling her that she was responsible for her pain due to the meaning she placed on the incident (jman76, 2008).

To convince participants of this philosophy it was essential that participants purged themselves of all of their inner thoughts, their problems, their desires, and their fears. The trainer heavily emphasised that participants would only obtain maximum benefits from the training if they shared all and sharing was encouraged by mandatory applause from the group. Not only did the trainer encourage sharing, but certain exercises such as "What do you want?" forced participants to make public every thought running through their heads. What began as cathartic exercises quickly shifted to confessionals – blame was placed upon participants for whatever they brought up and so their statements were turned from innocent expressions of anxiety into sources of guilt and shame. This was a process seen in the earliest LGAT, est:

“During est’s early years, Erhard sometimes went so far as to assert that 6 million Jews had been ‘responsible’ for their own deaths during the Holocaust of World War II” (Pressman, 1993, p. 72).

There was no therapeutic skill in the way these people were guided to take the new perspective and no respect for individual differences – a statement like “If you want to make a breakthrough you have the opportunity to make a breakthrough” was delivered to a rape victim who was clearly neither ready nor able to make that immediate change. Some of these confrontations carried on for what seemed like hours - all of them I would describe as highly charged and exceptionally confrontational - and all of them ended with “The Guru” getting in the last word... and the participant grasping clumsily at the elusive wisdom provided. This “wisdom” was inevitably that whatever problem you were having was your fault and your fault alone – this was the doctrine of the course (Field Notes, 373-381).

This acceptance of blame was skilfully positioned by the trainer as “taking responsibility” - an *empowering* step towards growth and breakthrough, rather than the guilt-inducing mechanism it truly was. (Reframing concepts is a core part of the LGAT process). For example, the participant mentioned above related her account of being raped and the trainer argued his philosophy on responsibility until she accepted that she had allowed herself to be raped. Through this process the account became a confession – the discussion continued until the participant “confessed” to being responsible. Not only this, but it was made clear that the highly draining “discussion” with the trainer would not come to an end until you had seen things from his perspective. This is very similar to the process endured by the American POWs – they were made to believe that it was only through confession that they could emerge as reformed or “reborn” Communist citizens.

### **Education**

Education in the 2010 LGAT, like in Communist China, took place from the moment the course began. While delivered in an intimidating way, the training was basically a series of lectures, interspersed with exercises, flooding participants with the theme of indoctrination. The key idea was that you were an asshole and that everything that had ever happened to



you, good or bad, was your fault. Simultaneously the philosophy that your reasoning process was flawed, and that emotional experience was the most trustworthy epistemology, was heavily imprinted upon participants:

In my opinion, you are an asshole... and the more time you spend with me, the more available that's going to become to you – what an asshole you actually are...You'll disappear from life; you'll disappear from this room... because you're so stupid that you don't even know why you're here... because some of you are so stupid! (Field Notes, 101-105).

Whether the person spoke about being bullied at school, beaten by a spouse or gang-raped the guru would always insist that the person in question “took responsibility” for what had happened. While many people challenged the guru's logic the end result was always the same – the guru reinterpreted the experience using the philosophy of the course (Field Notes, 367-371).

The subject matter of this “education” was deliberately confusing and it appeared that the lectures were designed partly to impart this esoteric concept (“you are an asshole and are responsible”), but more specifically to render critical thinking defunct. While Lifton (1961) and others emphasise re-education as a process of thought reform, it seems highly relevant that LGATs not only attempt to insert new belief systems, but systematically attempt to destroy the very ability to question those belief systems. The first step of the CCHOB is to “destroy reason” and LGATs use many tactics to achieve this end.

As stated by Thomas Jefferson:

“Ridicule is the only weapon which can be used against unintelligible propositions. Ideas must be distinct before reason can act upon them” (Walker, 2015).

Intellectual posturing and the devaluing of reason are key differences between thought reform during the Korean War and brainwashing as supposedly takes place in LGATs today. There is no mention in Lifton (1961), or Schein (1971) of instilling in prisoners a philosophical stance which devalues reason, and which sets the groundwork for nonsense to

bypass their reasoning faculties. Singer (2003) does speak of the use of jargon (p. 185), but she fails to emphasise the focus on non-think and the devaluing of reason.

Through long lectures, verbal abuse, sleep deprivation, mental exhaustion, confusing philosophy, and repetition participants are convinced that they should not think, but should instead just trust their emotions/experience (which is simultaneously being controlled). Participants were advised to be “open-minded” (a thought-terminating cliché and euphemism in this instance for “naïve”) and there was extreme group pressure on people who were not. When unconditional trust is positioned as being “open-minded” it seems that only the most persistent participant will continue to question the trainer. If a participant continued to question he/she was made out by the trainer to be belligerent, big-headed and attention-seeking. If you can convince a person that using reason is unwise, then it becomes a great deal easier to slip faulty logic past a damaged intellectual defence:

For hours on end, however, out of boredom or real doubt, the trainees poured their resistance to this *unthink* into the microphones, and each time Tony was on them like a SEAL commando.

"But don't you have to believe in something to...."

"Don't give me your goddamn belief system, you dumb motherfucker!" he roared at one guy, charging off the dais. "That doesn't work! That's why your whole life doesn't work. Get rid of all that shit! (Brewer, 1975).

“Belief, reason, logic and understanding were shown to be nonexperiential, and these second-hand mental exercises had to be abandoned to get at the meat of life” (Brewer, 1975).

“Large group awareness trainings rest upon vitalistic or antipositivistic assumptions: a central place is accorded to subjective experience and objective research is not highly valued” (Finkelstein, Wenegrat, & Yalom, 1982, p. 517).

“The trainees are told that they fail to truly experience events because of their beliefs, to which they cling obstinately and which are the enemies of direct experience. The trainer

argues that belief systems, understanding, and reasonableness isolate the trainees from the direct experience of reality which alone could make their lives work” (Finkelstein, Wenegrat, & Yalom, 1982, p. 520).

During the match stick exercise<sup>10</sup>, in the 2010 LGAT for example, participants were effectively prevented from reflecting or thinking in any way. As soon as a person paused an all-white would shout at the person – vilifying rational thought and exalting the practice of acting without consideration:

We were also told that the only assistance from our all-white would come in the form of brief applause for doing something right or the statement “The universe applauds action, not thought” if we paused or tried to think about the answer (Field Notes, 423-426).

During est participants were convinced that being confused was actually a step in the right direction. “Natural knowing”, a euphemism for knowing without understanding, was raised as the lofty goal of all attendees:

And after each "sharing" Tony thanked the offerer and the other 249 "assholes" applauded briskly, as previously instructed, and the sharer generally sat down in confusion. Which was all right, Tony assured them all, because confusion was the first step toward 'natural knowing,' the very pinnacle of est-think (Brewer, 1975).

Brewer (1975) highlights a central idea proposed during the est training – that the course could not be understood and that only experience counted. This effectively operationalises Step 1 and Step 3 of the CCHOB. Step 1 involves destroying reason and Step 3 elevates emotional experiences as evidence of the validity of a process:

“This rule stems from the est maxim that the training cannot be explained or understood, but only experienced” (Brewer, 1975).

Crucially, as an adjunct to this mind-set, imprinted in LGAT graduates and possibly the most common characteristic of course converts, is their unquestionable belief that only those who have participated in the trainings can offer any comment on their nature, their

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<sup>10</sup> The match stick exercise was a brain-teaser that required participants to make four equilateral triangles from six matches and some Pres-stick.

methods, their history and their potential for causing harm. Course converts have bought in completely to the belief that experience is the only valid epistemology. They are unaware that this experience is being manipulated and that this is the foundation of the CCHOB.

Haaken and Adams (1983) approach the matter not from the perspective of a journalist, but as a psychologist and sociologist respectively. They emphasise the fact that regression is induced in participants to the point of pathology - that participants become unable to distinguish what is real from what is unreal; what is true from what is false. This is effectively the same as not being able to distinguish something evidence-based from something feeling-based:

“By pathological, we mean that the training systematically undermines ego functioning and promotes regression to the extent that reality testing is significantly impaired” (Haaken & Adams, 1983).

The critical distinction in determining pathology in group members concerns the extent of regression – i.e., the dominance of primitive fantasies or impulses and the level of ego control maintained. By ego control, we mean the capacity for reality testing, for mobilizing adaptive defences, for distinguishing between internal and external events, and for bringing affective states under rational control (Haaken & Adams, 1983).

Haaken and Adams (1983) make the unique, and crucial, point that LGATs place value on feelings, while devaluing reason (CCHOB Steps 1 and 3).

“Many of the encounter groups of the human potential movement have been described as regressive because of their disinhibitive effects and their tendency to stress abandonment to strong emotions while disparaging reasoning and intellect (Back 1972, p. 79; Schur 1976, pp. 48-53, as cited in Haaken & Adams, 1983).

Emotion – “affective states” – was certainly, manipulated during LGATs according to Haaken and Adams (1983):

“As with many of the encounter groups and sensitivity training workshops of the 1960s and 1970s, the structure and content of Lifespring training had a disinhibitive effect.

Reasoning and intellectual processes were minimized while affective states were intensified” (Haaken & Adams, 1983).

As has been made clear by my own field notes, as well as Haaken and Adams (1983) and Brewer (1975), logic was heavily devalued during these trainings. Just as reason is attacked during LGATs, the content of LGATs is inaccessible for many participants (Step 1). Taylor (2004) describes how the concepts used by brainwashers are often difficult to follow and would probably not be accepted based upon their arguments. The principles themselves might be easy enough to latch onto (and repeat knowingly) – it is just that understanding the principles may have been outsourced to the trainer.

### **Reframing**

Other processes, such as reframing, are designed to shut down questioning. One of the central concepts of LGATs is that of “content versus context” – the distinction between the event and the story one tells about that event. It is not surprising then that, as well as impressing upon participants that they should reframe negative life events in a more “empowering” way, LGATs themselves reframe their own negative attributes in a more glowing light. Specifically, LGATs present their own flaws as flaws of the participants and hide their deception behind philosophy which, to an untrained eye, appears sound.

It is necessary, for example, to avoid the linguistic trickery used by those claiming that LGATs do encourage reason, but that they just encourage “a different kind of reason”. This semantic gymnastics was evident in the 2003 French Documentary on Landmark Education (Landmark: Journey to the Land of the New Gurus ~ France 3 documentary:, 2012). During the program a woman protests that she is being “harassed” by Landmark employees’ “incessant phone calls”. The response of the leader, rather than offering an apology, is to insist that this “harassment” is just her “story” and that she is not open to the possibility that these Landmark employees are trying to “support” her. LGAT trainers, because of their authority, are able to invalidate criticism and turn legitimate concerns into “evidence” of a “whiner”. This sort of invalidation suppresses participants’ confidence in their ability to question and makes them susceptible to influence through an emotional experience.

Similarly a woman is brought to tears during this Landmark Education course by the trainer, who insists that she is an “asshole” who does not love her daughter, but purposefully destroys her daughter’s relationships. This woman has volunteered to stand in front of a room of dozens of strangers so that she can learn how to resolve issues she has with her daughter - she is aware that she has played a significant role in her daughter’s unhappiness with men (because of her own issues with men) and is taking a courageous step forwards. This is a short extract of the more than an hour long exchange which took place:

NARRATOR: The public humiliation has now been going on for 30 minutes. Under the violent words, Daniele cracks...

TRAINER: You spend your life whining... “Boo hoo hoo... I’m not happy” (mocking). At the same time you assassinate everyone. Seriously – there are limits.

DANIELE: I admit... I admit that I tried to...

TRAINER: You’re the one who did it!

DANIELE: I admit that I managed to convince her that men are jerks...

TRAINER: No! To destroy her romantic life!

DANIELE: Yes.

TRAINER: Bravo! So don’t be indecent and say you love her.

DANIELE (crying): But since I didn’t want her to...

TRAINER: You claim you want her to be happy... You make it so she’s unhappy... it’s a racket... it’s inauthentic.

DANIELE (crying): But she’s in a relationship and she needs to...

TRAINER: And now you want to get her away from this guy who you got her together with. Or some other guy, or to make it so she isn’t with any others...

DANIELE (crying)...

TRAINER: You have destroyed what is possible in her life! You! And you have the indecency to say that you love her.

DANIELE (crying): I admit it, yes, I admit it. But what do I do about it?

TRAINER: Stop feeling guilty, to begin with!

NARRATOR: 50 minutes later Daniele is worn out. It doesn't matter, he pushes even harder.

TRAINER: Guilt is even more disgusting. You spend your life kicking yourself to make yourself feel better, by letting those you've destroyed die off. If you want to do something for her, I don't know – you could kill yourself. No, that's not good enough. No, kick yourself. Find something that makes you suffer. Get cancer. Make it last for twenty-nine years so you suffer and die. That way you feel better about your daughter croaking (dialogueireland, Landmark: Journey to the Land of the New Gurus ~ France 3 documentary:, 2012).

A common response to any reference to this footage is that it is taken out of context, but when possible LGATs will reframe their abuse in more positive terms. (I am unsure of what “context” could legitimise a person with no therapeutic training shaming a clearly distressed woman in front of dozens of strangers). The Landmark Forum disclaimer, for example, rather than explaining that participants, like Daniele, will be harrassed and humiliated during the training employ a string of euphemisms:

Through a series of philosophically rigorous and open discussions, voluntary sharing of your experience and short exercises, the Program provides an opportunity to explore basic questions that have been of interest to human beings throughout time and to examine many aspects of your own life (dialogueireland, 2011).

“Philosophically rigorous discussion” seems to be an extraordinary euphemism for the interaction between the LGAT trainer and Daniele. Landmark Education is one of the few LGATs which provide a “comprehensive” warning to participants, but the warning suggests that if something goes wrong then the problem lies with the participant, not the program. They reframe psychological attacks on participants as “exploring new thoughts and feelings”

and normalise the guaranteed feelings of fear, uncertainty, frustration and manipulation as things we all feel “from time to time”.

The experience of the Program is unique to each individual and there is no way to predict in advance exactly what you may think or feel. It is normal for some people to experience unwanted or unfamiliar emotions from time to time, such as fear, anger, sadness, regret, hatred, irritation and impatience. For most participants, exploring thoughts and feelings that they have not fully explored before is a useful and positive learning experience. Some participants have found that exploring life’s issues honestly may evoke uncomfortable and unpleasant feelings (dialogueireland, 2011).

Landmark Education, to avoid legal consequences, makes mention of the fact that some people respond very badly to their programs, but they reframe this distress as an “unwillingness” on the part of the participant to honestly address difficult issues. Rather than accepting responsibility for a program that affects some people badly, they suggest that certain people are unwilling (a choice) to look honestly at themselves. The implication is that people who have the courage for self-reflection will have no problems. If nothing else, this is a shrewd way to win the participation of new members – everyone likes to believe that they have the courage to look honestly at themselves.

For others, the Program may occur as physically, mentally and emotionally seriously distressing. If you are unwilling to encounter any of these powerful experiences in yourself or in others, or if you have any concern about your ability to deal with such experiences, THE MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS WHO ADVISE LANDMARK EDUCATION (“OUR ADVISORS”) STRONGLY RECOMMEND THAT YOU DO NOT PARTICIPATE in the Program (dialogueireland, 2011).

On the face of it Landmark Education has done everything to warn potential participants of harm. They have cautioned potentially damaged individuals to stay away, but participants may not realise they are vulnerable until they actually experience pathological symptoms for the first time. A common mental illness such as major depression affects as many as 16% of the US population at some point in their lives (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2011), this illness frequently presents itself for the first time in a person’s mid-20’s to mid-30’s (Weissman, et



al., 1996), and acute stress is considered a major contributing factor to its onset (Hammen, Kim, Eberhart, & Brennan, 2009). Many participants may have never experienced any form of mental illness, and may have no reason to believe that they are psychologically vulnerable, but the extraordinary stress of the training may be the very thing which triggers a condition like depression.. The take-home message of the disclaimer is not “Our program unpredictably causes harm to certain individuals” but is instead “Psychologically weak individuals, who lack the courage to look honestly at themselves, may be harmed. You need to decide – based on this limited information – whether you are one of these individuals”.

“The Program is designed for people who clearly understand they are responsible for their own health and well-being before, during and after the Program” (dialogueireland, 2011).

It takes a person with a wealth of introspection and psychological reticence to say “I’m too much of a coward to look honestly at myself and involve myself in the (completely innocuous-sounding) ‘philosophically rigorous and open discussions, voluntary sharing of your experience and short exercises’. I have no official diagnosis of mental illness, but I am a fragile individual”. LGATs provide superficial and reframed descriptions of their content, taking advantage of illusory superiority<sup>11</sup>, while superficially meeting the legal criteria for informed consent. Reframing like this dismantles a person’s normal thinking process, and disables the ability to question.

### **Thought-terminating clichés (TTCs)**

Lifton’s (1961) theme of Loading the Language makes mention of environments saturated with TTCs. What was true of the Communist environment is true of LGATs, and these mechanisms serve the purpose of quelling debate and quashing reason. Their intended (frequently achieved) impact is to shut down the argument, making the person questioning look foolish, obstinate, or arrogant. TTCs effectively destroy thinking and, as put by Lionel Trilling, they create “the language of nonthought” (Lifton, 1961). Examples of TTCs from LGATs I have encountered include “you cannot judge it without experiencing it”, which

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<sup>11</sup> Illusory superiority is a cognitive bias whereby individuals overestimate their own qualities (such as mental stability), relative to others, particularly when those abilities are subjective (Hoorens, 1995; Shedler & Mayman, 1993).

elevates experience and devalues reason, or other evidence. My experience of LGAT proponents is that they see it as arrogant to think that you could review numerous LGAT descriptions (testimonies), as well as literature on philosophy, physiology, brainwashing, social psychology, and neuropsychology, in addition to hundreds of pages of dialogue from proponents and opponents of LGATs and then question the processes being used in a given LGAT.

Another TTC from LGATs is “content versus context”. This phrase captures the core LGAT philosophy. It is used to invalidate a person’s experience – suggesting that their version of events is just one possible interpretation – and is a Machiavellian application of social constructionism. The suggestion is that there is “what happened” and there is “the story you tell yourself about what happened”. Derren Brown – the British mentalist and master manipulator – claims that elements of post-modernism, or social constructionism, can be misused for undue influence. This TTC of “content versus context” and the discussed impact of confusing content on reason – both core features of LGATs - are highlighted by Brown as potential instruments for deception:

In time, as we slipped into post-modernism, a fetish developed for all truth being relative. Our ‘truths’ and ‘meanings’ were simply products of our own value systems, and to suggest that one belief was somehow better or more valid than another was at best deemed old-fashioned and sweet; at worst it was treated by certain commentators and self-styled intellectuals as symbolic rape. This relativism – both the extreme opposite of fundamentalism and yet an effective means of promoting dangerous and unfounded ideology by disregarding the value of evidence – was typically enshrouded in layers of purposefully obscure language, as if exhaustingly impenetrable wording was necessary proof of superior thought (Brown, 2007, pp. 263-264).

“Content versus context” when used by LGATs is also an extreme application of Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy’s (REBT’s) ABC framework, first outlined by Albert Ellis in the 1950’s (Neenan & Dryden, 2000). The irony is that REBT, a form of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, is a major branch of psychology. LGATs, which employ a bastardised form of REBT, have their roots in Scientology, which is heavily critical of psychiatry and psychology. It is interesting that LGATs have taken one of psychology’s core therapies, removed

accountability, regulation, and safety precautions, applied it to a largely unscreened group (as opposed to an individual in a controlled environment) and then claimed it as their own. The simple explanation of the ABC framework is that there is an “activating event” (A), and that the “belief” (B) attached to that event leads to the “consequence” (C) (Neenan & Dryden, 2000). The consequence is thus dependent upon how one interprets the event – essentially the same philosophy that LGATs employ when they suggest participants are entirely “responsible” for the “stories” they tell themselves. The crucial difference between REBT, which is in fact a fairly confrontational technique (Neenan & Dryden, 2000), and LGATs’ processes is that REBT occurs in a safe one-on-one situation, free from abuse, ridicule or public humiliation, and is conducted by a qualified mental health professional.

TTCs used by LGATs also include the concept of “being coachable”. Anyone who questions the trainer is shamed for being “uncoachable” – the positive trait of wanting to understand or question is deftly switched with the negative trait of being pig-headed. Similarly, trainers will accuse those who challenge them of “wanting to be right” and that – to these ostensibly detestable people – “being right” is more important than making progress. Participants are urged to let go of “being right” and to trust the process.

The aim of LGATs is to disable your trust in evidence and so a variation of the following statement is a common TTC: “At one point the brightest minds in the world thought that the earth was flat...” The honest implication of this is that science has been wrong in the past – the TTC suggestion from it is that “science is completely fallible and anything that I tell you – no matter how ridiculous – cannot be questioned based on science”. Brown (2007, p. 266) summarises this mistrust of science, which is advocated during LGATs:

Also, ‘science’ comes down to the work of individual scientists, all of whom are prone to profit motives, corruption or tunnel vision, so how can we possibly accept what they say as objectively true? And isn’t it the case that anything science says now will be disproved anyway at some point in the future?

LGATs want to disable your ability to question. The following TTC was used by est, it is used by Landmark Education, it was used by our chairman when describing “What you learn” on the training, and it was used by the 2010 LGAT trainer:

“There are things that we know that we know,” she said as she marked off one small slice of the pie. “There are things that we know that we don’t know.” She marked off another quarter slice. What was left, she said, as her hand swept across the remaining half of the pie, was everything “that we don’t know that we don’t know.” That, concluded Scheaf, is “what the Forum is all about” (Pressman, 1993, p. 269).

“There are things that you know that you know...” He walked up to the white board and began to draw a pie chart. The section of “what you know that you know” made up a thin slice. “...Then there are things that you know that you don’t know... For example I know that I know very little about nuclear physics...” Another thin wedge was added to the pie chart. “What remains...” he said very knowingly “... is WHAT YOU DON’T KNOW THAT YOU DON’T KNOW!” This made up the vast majority of the chart. “This is what you’re going to learn about on the course” (Field Notes, 17-23).

Consider what this tactic achieves. This philosophy asserts that you effectively know less than nothing about what is being advocated by the trainer. Before the training you did not even know that the things on which the trainer is a supposed expert existed. It is implied that you would have to be arrogant to argue about these things. This thinking, if taken on board, renders you impotent to challenge the trainer on anything. Because it engages humility, most participants buy into this line of thinking, creating social pressure, for those who may be sceptical, to conform. All of these TTCs undermine rational thought and render participants vulnerable to influence through a powerful emotional experience.

### **Uncertainty/quick decisions**

A constant feeling of uncertainty can be added to the “abuse” component of the 2010 LGAT – a lack of confidence in one’s own understanding of events. Uncertainty, like previous elements, is the enemy of reason. Like a blatant taunt to participants, grasping hopelessly for the elusive logic of the lectures there, across the back of the 2010 LGAT training room, extended a banner which read “What is it you are pretending to not understand?”

“Instructions were quite unclear regarding how the exercise (or most exercises) was to work, no examples were ever provided and there was a giant banner overhead from where we were sitting which read “What is it you are pretending to not understand??”

Inevitably this lead to “errors” on the behalf of the participants, which “justified” the verbal abuse which “The Guru” used to correct the error” (Field Notes, 348-353).

Of course Lifespring, in 1981, had an almost identical banner:

This nativistic approach to knowledge was dramatized by a banner across the front of the room which "grew" in size each day. The enigmatic phrase, which spanned twenty feet by the fifth day, was "What am I pretending not to know?" (Haaken & Adams, 1983).

Not only was reason heavily devalued during the LGAT, but an emphasis was made on making time-pressurised decisions with limited evidence. This may not appear like something you could be convinced to do, so it is worthwhile considering the plausibility of this tactic. The success of Malcolm Gladwell’s book “Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking” indicates how open people are to the idea that evidence is not always necessary to make key decisions. Gladwell does not have a meagre, nor apparently injudicious, following and “Blink” has sold over two million copies (Donodio, 2006). The premise, similar to that proposed by LGAT trainers, is that quick, instinctual decisions are often more accurate than decisions based upon considered deliberation. LGATs will take the premise, which might be useful in certain situations, and suggest it is universally applicable. Many make the assumption that they are too logical to believe the type of nonsense purported by LGAT “gurus”, but they miss the fact that LGAT trainers circumnavigate logical defences, entering stealthily through the back door. This door does not hold logic as a defence and, in fact, prides itself on belief without the “trappings” of considered thought or a rational epistemology.

The key points to remember about LGAT education are (1) LGATs convince participants to not trust reason; (2) LGATs use reframing and other esoteric philosophy to shut down questioning; (3) LGATs deprive participants of sleep and put them through mentally taxing exercises; and finally (4) LGATs maximise affective states and encourage participants to trust these states, rather than rational thought.

***Lifton’s twelve steps of death and rebirth***

### ***(1) Assault upon Identity***

There are overlaps between “Assault upon Identity” and the “abuse” already dealt with. Things previously mentioned as “abuse” – the three hour introductory talk convincing participants that they were assholes responsible for the planet’s woes; the further lectures and explanations that rendered the opinions of participants as worthless; the threats of pain, discomfort, desperation, boredom, and hatred; the constant mockery about logic and how participants had to abandon logic to survive the training; the stress of simple things like seating positions; the abuse of the older woman for sitting in the wrong chair; the incensed blame brought on by “failing” in the red and black game; the “I can see right through you exercise” where participants were made to stand in front of the group and be taken apart by the trainer; the “what do you want?” exercise and the purging of all inner thoughts brought about by that exercise (the self-betrayal involved in the “what do you want?” exercise for becoming involved in the abuse of one’s partner); the guided regression into painful childhood memories, the dressing up like a little girl and singing a song, all under the blanket of sleep deprivation and constant verbal abuse – all fits the description of “Assault Upon Identity”.

In particular the first three hours of the 2010 LGAT was an attack on the identity of the participants. The trainer effectively unleashed a vicious monologue, calling all participants “assholes”, blaming us for every problem in the world, and repeating over and over again just how “stupid” we all were. We were no longer individuals - we were grouped together as “assholes” who were the cause of every bad thing in the world.

He told us that the thinking that had got the planet to the way it was could never get it out of the state that it was in. In order for us to change and for the world to change we had to completely change the way that our minds worked (Field Notes, 106-108).

This attack on the identity of participants continued throughout the training, notably whenever a person disagreed with the trainer. In these instances he would scream at the detractor, telling him that he didn’t “give a shit” what the participant thought, asserting that the only opinion which counted was his own.

“In this room... let me just set things right... in this room you’re going to do things one way – my way” (Field Notes, 149-150).

During this step Lifton (1961) notes a clear process of regression and this most definitely occurred during the 2010 LGAT. Firstly, guided visualization exercises were used to access painful childhood memories:

I believe that the “confronting your mother / father” exercise was also on Friday. This was also performed in the dyad position, but this time each person was put with an all-white. Before this exercise “The Guru” had explained a new word to us. The word was “FLOP” or Fundamental Life Operating Principle. A FLOP, it was explained, was that very first incredibly painful experience when one of your parents, or both, had broken your trust and hurt you in some way. “The Guru” wanted all of us to “deal” with this hurtful experience and this would be done by simulating a confrontation with each of our parents on this ordeal from early in our lives. As well as that there was an exercise that had participants sitting opposite “all-whites” who were pretending to be their mothers/fathers (Field Notes, 488-498).

These exercises were, apparently, designed specifically to induce regression in participants. This sort of exercise was also used extensively during the Lifespring training of 1981, described by Haaken and Adams (1983):

A number of dyadic exercises which re-enacted parent-child relationships were included in the training as a means of resolving conflicts through brief, intense encounters with parent surrogates. These exercises also contributed to the regressive pull of the early phase of the training. The first involved one partner standing and assuming the position of a parent while the other gazed into his/her eyes from the perspective of childhood memory. As feelings of infantile helplessness in relation to a powerful parent were evoked, participants displayed more childlike behavior, such as giggling and eager compliance to the trainer. Another exercise required that one partner attempt to gratify all the childhood fantasies of the other--fantasies of what the perfect parent would have provided.

Assault upon identity, as described by Lifton (1961) also involves escalating abuse until autonomy is ceded by the prisoner in question. During the 2010 LGAT one thing that was quickly learned was that the trainer was willing and able to escalate verbal abuse to destroy anyone who challenged him. When I disputed the trainer on his description of depression, he had the final word, screaming at me to get off the floor and to sit with my eyes closed:

“Have you ever noticed how a depressed person walks? Yes, his head is down and his shoulders are slouched forwards!! Do you know why he walks like this??” Again, the all-knowing tone of imminent wisdom-release was adopted. “Because if he just put his shoulders back and lifted his head he’d start to FEEL BETTER!!!” he declared. “He wants the world to pity him and so he holds onto that feeling...”

He didn’t stop there and took a dig at suicide, something that has - as a person with bipolar disorder - sometimes appeared to be the only option for me during my periods of depression. “Do you know what suicide is?” he asked the attentive participants. “Suicide is the ultimate act of feeling sorry for yourself. It’s the ultimate act of “I’ll show you!!” to the world.” I was furious. Before I’d experienced bipolar disorder I had no idea how low a person could feel and it had been a long-standing goal of mine to educate the public on the reality of mental illness. What this “guru” was saying was entirely untrue and I challenged him. “Isn’t that a bit of a simplistic take on suicide?” I asked. You can only imagine what happened.

“I don’t give a shit what you THINK!” he snarled.

“What you’ve just said is ridiculous,” I replied. Despite my fear - and I was intimidated by this person and all of his weird, trance-like helpers - I was determined to have my voice heard, but despite my efforts I was screamed down. Everyone else remained silent. After that he asked everyone to demonstrate their commitment to letting go of their grungies by standing up and putting their chairs away in the corner. Everyone did this except for me. I sat resolutely, but was screamed at to get out of the way and to sit on the side with my eyes closed. This I did” (Field Notes, 262-283).

Brewer (1975) noted the same method by which challenges to the trainer were simply overwhelmed by these professional tyrants:



In a sealed ballroom of the Sheraton Palace, the trainees sat in their chairs for an exhausting 10 straight hours, while Ted broke the mind into five nifty functions, which he rammed down their throats as much by virtue of his own tenacity and the hopelessness of arguing as by the relative plausibility of it all, or the already well-conditioned receptiveness of the audience (Brewer, 1975).

Lifton (1961) also notes the crucial role of physical and mental exhaustion in achieving surrender, saying that prisoners were between the states of wakefulness and sleep – “a hypnagogic state” (p. 67). The hours that the 2010 LGAT ran over ensured that all participants were sleep deprived and the nature of the training ensured mental exhaustion. Almost every exercise was psychologically taxing and some, such as the “What do you want?” exercise were incredibly draining.

While substantial differences exist between what took place in Communist China and the 2010 LGAT, there is little doubt that an assault upon identity did take place during the 2010 LGAT. Because Lifton’s (1961) prisoners were interrogated as individuals, their specific vocations were targeted by the Communists. In the case of the 2010 LGAT the assault was on a group and so a general assumed identity of “a good person” was attacked, with the assertion that all participants were not good people, but “assholes”. One might argue that the 2010 LGAT was less effective because the interrogation was not focused on an individual. Rather than diluting the impact of the process, however, the fact that the 2010 LGAT was a group interrogation may have, in fact, enhanced it. The effects of social influence are well documented and the group process of the 2010 LGAT may well have been a more effective form of an identity assault.

## ***(2) Establishment of Guilt***

According to Lifton (1961) during the establishment of guilt prisoners were made to feel extreme culpability for both things done and not done. They were made to create elaborate confessions of their “crimes” and were abused if their confessions were inadequate in any way. Prisoners became “so permeated by the atmosphere of guilt that accusations became merged with subjective feelings of sinfulness – of having done wrong” (p. 68).

As explained in “assault upon identity” the overriding theme for much of the 2010 LGAT was that participants were “assholes” whose selfish way of thinking had caused all of the problems in the world. Participants were also heavily encouraged throughout the training to talk through their problems, for which they are made to “take responsibility”. The effect of taking responsibility for many was an extreme sense of guilt, and “sharing” was the equivalent of confession. Lifton (1961) explains that prisoners eventually started to feel that their punishment was deserved and that they should expect more of it. This could be seen in the 2010 LGAT - for the first day of the 2010 LGAT there was some resistance to the abuse, but by day two this resistance had completely dissipated.

It appeared that participants had accepted the blame for their “selfish” way of thinking and that the cruelty of the trainer was somehow justified. The establishment of guilt was not an incidental element of the 2010 LGAT but was an explicit driving force from the moment the training began until the course came to an end. Participants were systematically persuaded and coerced into believing that they were responsible (i.e. “guilty”) for everything that had ever happened to them. There can be no more powerful form of confession than the internal acceptance that you are guilty for everything.

### ***(3) Self-Betrayal***

This step involved renouncing people, groups and behavior which had formed a crucial component of the prisoners’ prior existence. These things made up a great deal of the prisoners’ identities and so by disavowing them they were betraying themselves. This step did not take place during the 2010 LGAT in the way described by Lifton (1961). As a group, participants were never made to expressly renounce religious beliefs or to speak against friends and family. Of course, the powerful and overriding message conveyed by the trainer was that *anyone who had not taken the training was a selfish “asshole”* and so by accepting this perspective we were inadvertently accepting that our family and friends were “assholes” too. By failing to defend our own position, as good citizens, we tacitly supported the notion that our family, friends and colleagues were selfish assholes too. Regarding self-betrayal there were also exercises which forced participants to be complicit in the abuse of others. This caused me a great sense of self-betrayal although I do not know how it impacted the others. As mentioned earlier, during the first “What do you want?” exercise

we were told to do whatever it took to get the person we were working with to reveal their innermost desires:

“Shout! Stamp your feet! Swear! Do whatever you have to, short of standing up from your chair or using physical violence!!” (Field Notes, 478-479):

During the match stick exercise we had to “support” others (much like Lifton’s “helping others”) by gathering around them and clapping loudly while they tried to solve the puzzle. I felt I added stress by participating; people were in tears as I clapped loudly in their faces and they attempted to solve the puzzle. Moving us from passive victims of the abuse to active abusers facilitated self-betrayal. I acted in a way that was out of character, in effect renouncing some of my core beliefs. This occurred to a minor degree in the 2010 LGAT but, as Singer (2003) describes it, taking part in the abuse of others does bond you to the group, and makes it more difficult for you to question things going forward:

The final factor that closes the trap’s door is the cult member’s active participation. Whether or not you care to admit it, you have invested in cult life. It’s hard to leave that – partly because there is part of you that wants to believe that this really is going to work, and partly because of the shame and guilt you feel. You’ve been party to activities that in normal life you’d probably never have considered – acts that are morally reprehensible, actions that you never would have believed you could have carried out or witnessed. That kind of guilt and shame keeps people in cults. It keeps them from simply saying, “I’m going to get up and go now” (Singer, 2003, p. 273).

#### ***(4) Breaking Point: Total Conflict and the Basic Fear***

At this stage Lifton (1961) describes the prisoner as accepting responsibility for having done many things wrong, although he is not necessarily sure what these things are (it represents a general rather than specific feeling of guilt). He also knows that his interrogators will never withdraw from their position – that he is guilty and so the only way to move forward is to accept responsibility. The atmosphere of the 2010 LGAT is one of general as well as specific guilt – the general guilt comes from the three hour speech at the start of the training, interactions with the trainer during the training and exercises such as the red and black

game. Feelings of specific guilt come from the one-on-one interactions between participants and the trainer and the highly valued confessions which routinely took place.

Lifton (1961) explains that while this is going on prisoners are still being put through the process of self-betrayal, confession, and the subsequent loss of identity. He goes to explain that as this occurs the prisoner goes on to experience *“one of the most primitive and painful emotions known to man, the fear of total annihilation”* (p. 70). The environment supports the perspective that “total annihilation” is a distinct possibility, and certain prisoners did not just fear annihilation, they felt annihilated. During the 2010 LGAT participants did experience self-betrayal, they did go through a form of confession, and their identities were undermined and attacked. The fear of total annihilation, as described by Lifton, is more extreme than what was personally experienced during the 2010 LGAT; however, a strong sense of being mentally and physically exhausted – of being at a complete breaking point – was experienced by the start of the fourth day of the training.

I personally took an enormous amount of strain from taking part, not only from the way that the exercises and lack of sleep impacted me, but perhaps more specifically because I did nothing while people around me were harassed, harangued, berated, and bullied.

For someone who’s used to getting eight hours of regular sleep a night this was very taxing. Add to this screaming, intimidation, guilt, hypnosis, visualization, blasting music, bizarre rituals, nonsensical exercises, singing anthems, watching the breakdown of good people all around you and pseudo-philosophy in the tensest environment imaginable, and you have a theoretical understanding of how I was feeling on Sunday morning. I assure you that the reality of it exceeds your academic grasp (Field Notes, 726-731).

Brewer (1975) makes it clear that participants of est were meant to “crack”:

"The Sunday night massacre," as one timid little man termed it, epitomized the aim of the first weekend. As in any serious training, the overriding effort is to hound and confuse the subjects until they crack under the pressure, and, in the helplessness of that moment, embrace the system (Brewer, 1975).

While the rates at which pathological breakdowns occur during trainings are not available, they have been witnessed often enough for critics to take notice. This provides some sense that participants are pushed quite close to a “breaking point”, a point perhaps difficult to associate with a four-day training program:

“Also a plethora of allegations has been raised, some in civil suits, pointing out that individuals have suffered mental breakdowns and psychological harm as a result of participating in certain training programs” (Singer, 2003, p. 187).

These damages ranged from death by drowning and suicide to both brief and prolonged stays in mental hospitals. I have kept track of the individuals involved in the nearly sixty legal cases in which I was a consultant. Some of them have got their lives going again, although with the fearful recall of what it was like to lose mental and emotional control. A few are still hospitalised as long as ten years after their breakdowns during or immediately after the training (Singer, 2003, p. 192).

Singer is not the only person to comment on psychological breakdown during LGATs. Here Pressman (1993) describes research done by psychiatrists Glass and Kirsh:

In March 1977 the psychiatric journal published the first of two articles by Glass and Kirsh (the second one appeared the following December) that described five patients who had developed psychotic symptoms, including paranoia, uncontrollable mood swings, and delusions in the wake of taking the est training. In one case, a thirty-year-old man had ceased group therapy treatment immediately after completing est in 1973 because he was convinced that the est training supplied all the answers he needed for his own mental health. Six weeks later he abruptly broke off contact with his family, confined himself to his house, and spent days praying (p. 192).

In this case it is the executive director of New York City’s Lincoln Institute for Psychotherapy who comments on the results of the est training. Rather than describing these breakdowns as fringe events, he paints the picture that casualties from the est training were quite common:

“Most of the people I’ve seen at our clinic – and they come in after the training in fairly substantial numbers – have suffered reactions that range from moderately bad to dreadful,” the executive director of New York City’s Lincoln Institute for Psychotherapy reported in 1978. “They are confused and jarred, and the same pattern – elation, depression, feelings of omnipotence followed by feelings of helplessness – is repeated over and over again” (Pressman, 1993, p. 194).

Perhaps most revealingly, a psychotic breakdown took place during the Lifespring training, participated in and observed by Haaken and Adams in 1981. There is something to be said for the fact that one of very few professional accounts of an LGAT happens to contain a clear case of psychosis:

Following the morning break, one of the more actively involved participants, Patrick, leaped up and took the position of the trainer on the podium. Initially it appeared that Patrick was acting out against the trainer by mocking him and by ignoring rules. However, it soon became apparent that he had decompensated--his speech was incoherent, he was out of contact with reality, and he appeared to be hallucinating. The trainer approached him and told him to stop "game playing." His "other choice" was to "go to a place where they allow people to play crazy games." Patrick merely gazed vacantly at the trainer and continued to mutter Lifespring phrases. Various participants, responded by encouraging Patrick to "go for it" and "let it all out." They did not understand that he had already "let too much out." His apparently fragile defences had been repeatedly challenged by the trainer, who had often accused him of "bullshitting," (Haaken & Adams, 1983).

### ***(5) Leniency and Opportunity***

Having experienced a severe assault upon identity, the establishment of guilt, self-betrayal, and because prisoners were approaching their breaking points the Chinese interrogators would, at this stage of the indoctrination process, provide reprieve. Whilst in Communist China this would occur sometimes two months into the process, everything was condensed in the 2010 LGAT and so the major expression of leniency and opportunity occurred at the end of the third day of the four day LGAT training. Lifton (1961) explains that the

environment did not move away from its principles – it simply eased up enough for the prisoner to feel a sense of permeability between what he was and what he is asked to become. In the 2010 LGAT this process took the form of the strange “graduation ceremony” which occurred on Saturday night.

On Saturday night, the strangest of all of the exercises took place. Much like the “I know you better than your mummy / evaluate you by how you’re standing exercise” each participant was asked to go and sit in a chair, alone at the front of the hall, while “The Guru” – flanked by his all-whites – sat, as if in heavy concentration, and assigned each person a word. He imparted these words as though they were gracious gifts, benevolent offerings from a great and wise being. One person was given “mountain”, another was given “waterfall”, one was given “orchid” and I was given “lightning”. After each person had been studied, deliberated on and enough summoning of his almighty powers had taken place, words were assigned to each of the twenty-four attendees. We were then told that we had ten minutes to find ourselves a spot and to work out how to describe our words in a way that let him know something about ourselves. I should have learned to expect the unexpected, but I was confident. To me lightning was quick, spontaneous, it could cause devastation but also great beauty, it was misunderstood for a long time, it was bold and it was brilliant... I had some ideas. After ten minutes we were brought back into the hall and the exercise began.

I should probably describe the layout of the chairs for this exercise as it comes into play later on. As I mentioned “The Guru” had his chair at the back of the hall and his all-whites (eight to ten of them) sat on either side of him. In front of these chairs, at the front of the hall, was a single chair (for the person being evaluated) and all of the participants’ chairs were placed down the sides of the hall facing inwards (twelve on each side). As we took our seats “The Guru” invited someone to be first to share. He explained that if any of us felt that the person speaking was on the right track we should stand up and if he stood up then everyone should stand up. We were all quite uncertain about what was expected, but a couple of people gave it a go.

The first person to take the chair was mocked. He had been given the word “mountain” and described how a mountain was big and... “Do you think that is why I gave you the word mountain?” he asked, slowly emphasizing every syllable.

“Yes?” the person responded.

“You are mistaken,” “The Guru” replied, both knowingly and condescendingly.

One after the next people got up and tried varying approaches, but each time they were shut down. This carried on for a long time and it seemed that no breakthrough would be found until a girl got up (she’d been my partner in the “What do you want?” exercise) and immediately broke down on the chair. “An orchid is strong and complex and beautiful...” As she began she burst into tears and one of the all-whites stood up. Everyone watched and as she continued to bawl more of the all-whites stood up. As they did, we all followed suit. “The Guru” – from a seated position – then addressed the girl in a soothing voice, “Yes, yes I know. I’m already standing...” He stood up and walked robotically to the girl on the chair (like a bride walking down the aisle). No one knew what the hell was going on. “You are all of those things” he murmured gently as he came to an arms-length distance from the girl. “Tell me five things about the orchid,” he tenderly beckoned and, through her sobs, she recounted five things about “the orchid”.

“Can I give you something?” “The Guru” ventured... and as the girl accepted he took her up in his arms and gave her a warm hug. The hug lasted for half a minute and it sickened me to see this monster playing saviour and protector to one of his most vulnerable victims. As he hugged her he continued to whisper encouragement in her ear and she drank it all in. Eyes locked, he took her by the hands and stepped backwards (she walked forwards) until she was standing a couple of feet in front of his chair. Loud, powerful music began to blast from the back as each of the all-whites and “THE GURU” stepped backwards onto their chairs. We all watched in confusion as they all moved into the crucifix stance – arms outstretched, eyes to the heavens – as the song moved into its crescendo and the girl followed suit. (This was apparently her gift from “THE GURU” – her metaphorical rebirth and the entire process took about five minutes.)



Most people quickly cottoned onto how the process worked – they needed to cry and speak about their word as if it was them (and to only say very positive things). Before the next person had a chance to try this out, however, “THE GURU” unleashed fury on us all for failing to join in on supporting the girl who’d gone first. Of course none of us knew what was appropriate or what was going on for that matter. We did know that on the next “rebirth” we would all climb onto our chairs and adopt the crucifix position when “THE GURU” did. Over the next few hours every person went through the process, most getting it straight away, some genuinely moved and others who’d perhaps worked things out. There were definitely some people taken in - grown men crying their eyes out and girls and women hypnotized in gratitude for this precious gift from their “saviour” (Field Notes, 631-691).

The process required participants to fully submit to the authority of the trainer, each person breaking down into tears before the trainer allowed them to “pass” through the ceremonial process. According to Lifton (1961) the prisoner was offered, on the condition of a new identity, cessation and consideration – a chance to escape from the horror of the previous weeks and months. This appeared to be exactly what took place during this graduation process. Once each person submitted to the identity given to him the trainer would stand, robotically approach him, whisper encouragement into his ear and then embrace him. This process allowed the aforementioned permeability between being an “asshole” and being accepted – it provided leniency and opportunity in a very clear and structured manner and set the precedent for the affirmation and joy which made up the final day of the training.

### ***(6) Compulsion to Confess***

Lifton (1961) explains that from the outset the message provided by the Chinese, and internalized by prisoners, is clear: “only those who confess can survive” (p. 74). Prisoners are described as feeling extreme guilt as they “came to believe in their own falsehoods” (p. 74). This process of confession in the 2010 LGAT took the form of participants telling the trainer (and the group) about problems they were having and the trainer making the person in question accept total responsibility for that problem. Once the participant had accepted responsibility, and the associated guilt, they could move on with the course. Whether or not participants internally agreed with the guilt-laden versions of events prescribed to them by

the trainer was unclear – what was clear was that, externally, they accepted his interpretation of what had happened and their role in the difficult situation.

“The “dissenter” was generally maneuvered into some form of compliance before being permitted to sit down and receive the applause” (Haaken & Adams, 1983).

The compulsion to confess, as described by Lifton (1961), took prisoners from an identity of the “repentant sinner”, a person who identified the evil in himself and tried to get rid of it, to an identity of the “receptive criminal”, a person who began to agree with the authority of the environment and was trying to change accordingly.

Sharing is something that was heavily encouraged throughout the course. The more personal and painful the sharing was, the happier the guru was. Many sessions became like confessionals with one person at a time standing up, sharing their story, and then having the guru interpret the story (Field Notes, 364-367).

One cannot be certain what thought processes participants were going through in the 2010 LGAT, but it appeared that they accepted the interpretations of events provided by the trainer – that is they externally took on the identity of the “repentant sinner” by acquiescing to his accusations and blame. They (like “receptive criminals”) began to agree with the authority of the environment and seemed eager to change accordingly.

### ***(7) Channeling of Guilt***

This stage, according to Lifton (1961), involves using the people’s perspective to condense unspecific guilt into a paranoid, pseudo-logical system. The prisoner, rather than feeling general guilt, starts to feel specific guilt for things he has done. During the 2010 LGAT the unspecific guilt is generated during the first three hours, guilt which is maintained throughout the course. This occurs through the convincing yet unspecific blame placed on participants. The second channeling of guilt is a great deal more specific – the trainer in this case chooses (or demands) a volunteer from the audience to speak through something that has been troubling him/her. The “therapy style” (a loose expression in this case) is to convince the person in question that the problem is entirely their fault:

The well-known LGATs claim that you have caused everything that ever happened to you, from choosing your parents to breaking your leg, from getting yourself jilted to having been molested by your stepfather as a child. Trainers use the terms accountable and responsible, but not with their ordinary meaning. Trainers mean that you will, if you “get it” start to make choices patterned after the way the organization advocates. They create guilt and fear in you that you have created all the bad things that have ever happened in your life. “Your life is not working!” the trainer or leader yells, while he implies his is. If you just “get it,” you’ll be able to “make your life work. (Singer, 2003, p. 194).

Haaken and Adams (1983) make this point from their analysis of a training in the early 1980’s. For many this was an empowering experience, as but for others it could be stressful and potentially dangerous. “... some observers have raised concerns about the authoritarian nature of certain trainings and the potential for manipulation and harm” (Langone, 1998; Pressman, 1993; Singer, 2003). The guilt experienced by most participants does not lead to recognisable pathology in most participants, but this does not mean that some are not significantly harmed.

Importantly, a certain number of participants will be seriously harmed as these stresses precipitate a handful of psychological conditions, such as brief psychotic episodes, posttraumatic stress disorder syndrome, a variety of dissociative disorders, relaxation-induced anxiety, and other miscellaneous reactions including phobias, cognitive difficulties, and stress-related illnesses (Singer, 2003, p. 208).

### ***(8) Re-education: Logical Dishonoring***

Lifton (1961) states that reeducation begins informally right at the start of the process, but that the real reeducation starts when group-study is emphasised. During the process prisoners are made to consider everything they have done prior to imprisonment and to find fault with every aspect of it. This process, while present in the 2010 LGAT, did not take place to the extent that is inferred by Lifton. The general assault on identity incorporates a great deal of abuse and blame for thinking patterns and behavior patterns of participants before entering the training, and exercises such as the match stick exercise, the red and black game, and even dancing exercises belittled and mocked the identities of participants.

Lifton explains that the aim of the process of re-education and logical dishonoring was to maximise the negative identity and minimise the positive identity, with the end goal being the greatest sense of worthlessness. Of course, a great deal of what has already been mentioned in the sections on “Abuse” and “Assault Upon Identity” have the effect of maximizing the negative identity. In addition to the group examples provided above, individuals were singled out and their “stories” were re-interpreted by the guru. In my own case the guru mocked depression. People who had experienced depression, according to him, had the added guilt that they were just attention seekers (and that they could just “snap out of it” if they really wanted to). Referring to prisoners during the Korean War, Lifton describes them as feeling a deep, internalized guilt and states that the very essence of their being was being threatened. There was, without question, an attempt by the LGAT trainer to achieve in participants a “deep, internalized guilt” and it appeared that he was largely successful in this endeavor. The trainer during the 2010 LGAT openly admitted that he wanted to destroy the positive self-image participants have of themselves, and attempted throughout the training to do exactly this.

### ***(9) Progress and Harmony***

To feel a sense of harmony the prisoner must adapt to the new environment to a greater or lesser degree. As the prisoner adapts he starts to receive better treatment. This was seen before the end of the first day in the 2010 LGAT. A number of participants initially challenged the trainer, but soon learned that this led to abuse. They also learned that providing the desired feedback, regardless of whether it made sense or not, was met with praise from the trainer and applause from the group.

“As mentioned in the rules any questions required your hand to be raised and if anyone shared anything then everyone had to applaud. The facilitator repeated this gravely: ‘Everyone is to applaud’” (Field Notes, 136-138).

A good example of his reasoning occurred when the trainer explained his definition of “trust”:

One of the earlier exercises involved all participants walking among each other, finding a person, looking directly at them and then saying: “I trust you”, “I don’t trust you”, or “I

don't want to say whether I trust you". Each person had to perform this exercise with each of the other participants (Field Notes, 182-185).

What followed was a new understanding of the word "trust". The trainer asked us when we should trust someone, so one of the participants replied "When you've known them for a while?" He explained condescendingly that this was wrong because you could never know just how long you'd have to know someone before they were trustworthy. I suggested that you trust someone when they'd demonstrated that they were trustworthy – that you should use your judgment. This, I was told, was equally wrong because – according to the facilitator- you would never trust someone based on this. You would always want them to jump through higher and higher "trust hoops" in order to satisfy you. I told him – quite correctly – that what he'd said made no sense, but he angrily cut me off, told me he didn't care what I thought and asked if there were any other questions. As you might be able to imagine, real questions became scarce. Questions that sought to understand what he wanted us to understand remained, however. He went on to explain that trust is something that comes from within – YOU make the decision to trust. I put up my hand – "Surely that trust has to be based on something..." He cut me off... (Field Notes, 185-198).

A similar exchange took place in the Lifespring training, as explained by Haaken and Adams (1983):

An example of this type of interaction occurred on the first evening after the "Trust" exercise. Instructions for this exercise were as follows: Participants were to mingle, and when eye contact was made with other participants, one of four comments was allowed: "I trust you ", "I don't trust you," "I don't know if I trust you," or "I don't care to say if I trust you." The participants were then to move on to the next person without further comment. After regrouping following the exercise, one participant challenged the implicit reasoning behind the exercise; as the exchange below indicates, his reaction was dismissed without legitimizing the rationality of the question that he raised.

JAMES: I'm not sure what this had to do with real trust. I mean, it's not an all or nothing thing-like "I trust you" or "I don't trust you." I would trust someone with my car before I would trust them with my child, depending on how well I knew the person.

TRAINER: Are you willing to consider the possibility that you don't know what trust really means?

JAMES: (Appearing confused and hesitating) Yes.

TRAINER: Thank you. You may sit down. (Audience applause).

The trainer used a variety of techniques to neutralize comments which challenged or qualified the point being made and maintained sufficient control over audience responses to assure that defiance and critical thinking were not publicly rewarded (Haaken & Adams, 1983).

This specific elevation of blind trust to a virtue is fundamental to the CCHOB. In fact, Step 2 of the CCHOB is "Elevate blind trust in the trainer to a virtue. Convince participants that unconditional trust in the context of the training environment, rather than being foolish/naive/gullible, is a positive human trait". In summary Haaken and Adams explain that participants must adapt to the "logic" of the environment to fit in and avoid harassment:

Participants who offered critical comments or who suggested a different way of conceptualizing a problem had their statements dismissed, were subjected to ridicule or were confused with paradoxical logic. The "dissenter" was generally maneuvered into some form of compliance before being permitted to sit down and receive the applause (Haaken & Adams, 1983).

#### **(10) *Final Confession: The Summing Up***

The final confession takes the form of a highly focused statement admitting specific guilt for "crimes" committed. It is the end result of a long process of embellished confession, shaped by interrogators, assisted by cellmates, and extracted by the captors over a period of months. This step did not appear to take place during the 2010 LGAT, unless one considers

the crying and repeating five things about your “word” on the Saturday night, confession. While not a confession in the strict sense of the word, it was a brief ceremonial submission to the authority of the trainer/environment. It was a statement which meant “I was an asshole for viewing the world the way that I did, but now I realise that I’m perfect just the way that I am”.

### **(11) *Rebirth***

During this stage the person in question emerges with a new identity, although parts of his previous identity are allowed to reappear. The person, in the case of Lifton’s (1961) prisoners, is no longer a sinner deserving of abuse, but a reformed convert. Lifton explains that it is important thought that in this new combination of identities “the imposed thought reform elements are strong enough to dominate the new combination” (p. 83). In the case of converts “he identifies with his captors and is happy in his faith” (p. 84).

The “word ceremony” on the Saturday night of the 2010 LGAT seemed to be a metaphorical rebirth for participants. After being called “assholes” for three days, participants were allowed to rediscover themselves as something beautiful and powerful. Participants were able to take on a new personal and social identity, as one of the enlightened group. This is a clear a symbolic rebirth:

Brewer (1975) describes a similar revelation during est:

They were - no! - they had been "assholes" only because they did not realize that whatever they were, warts and all, it was exactly what they wanted to be.

The light dawned slowly, with Ted chirping, "See? See?," and then one and another acknowledged eagerly that, yes, they got it, and gradually a swell of exultant revelation swept the place. It was amazing to behold. They were perfect exactly the way they were (Brewer, 1975).

It is difficult to ascertain the degree to which participants of the 2010 LGAT converted to the new merged identity, but the following was noted in the other twenty-three participants. Participants were dancing, smiling from ear to ear, and could not contain their bliss; hugging each other, many overcome with tears of joy. Every one of the twenty three other

participants waited in a line for the chance to embrace and thank the trainer, and every one of the other twenty-three participants signed up for the advanced course which was to begin two weeks later.

After the candle lighting process the course ended and, with “The Guru” positioned himself between where everyone was and the exit, every person who’d been on the course stood in line to give him a hug and thank him for what he’d done for them. Men and women were in tears (Field Notes, 915-918).

It was abundantly evident that, at least in the short-term, the impact of the course on almost all participants had been immense.

**(12) *Release: Transition and Limbo***

Being released into an environment that doesn’t constantly reinforce the doctrine fed to a prisoner for months causes a new identity crisis (Lifton, 1961). In the case of these prisoners, they often became caught between two worlds, suspicious of the non-Communist position, but - with access to new evidence – questioning of what they’d been indoctrinated with as well. There were three responses I found in people who took part in the 2010 LGAT (or to the same course participated in by others at different times). It must be emphasized that the initial euphoria of the training was unanimous – these were responses gathered informally in the weeks and months following the training:

*Apparent converts* (to use Lifton’s terminology): LGATs are staffed almost entirely by unpaid volunteers who are previous participants of the courses. There’s no doubt that many people draw value from these courses, in spite of the arguably abusive techniques used to achieve these results. Many of these people are zealots who remain loyal supporters of these trainings for years after participation.

Regarding “apparent converts”, Pressman (1993) noted the following of est graduates:

Around the country, a growing army of enthusiastic est volunteers (called “assistants” in est jargon) contributed free labor – sometimes up to forty hours per week – to the



organization, filling every conceivable task from handling the phones in rest centers around the country to cleaning out the toilets and scrubbing the pots and pans at Franklin House (p. 86).

It should be noted that all LGATs rely on unpaid former graduates to perform the majority of tasks needed by the business during the training. All of the “all-whites” are unpaid volunteers who feel they are “giving back” by helping others in their own LGAT experience. This suggests that, at least for some, the influencing of the course is highly effective.

*Pleased, but indifferent:* These people were not too disturbed about the conditions and/or found the training an exciting, albeit strange, experience – they saw the encounter as something interesting, but something that they would not choose to revisit. They mentioned feeling extremely happy/euphoric for a few days/weeks after the training but emphasized that the feeling had disappeared.

*Disillusioned:* One woman explained to me one month after the event that during the course she and three of her friends had all had a significant crush on the trainer, who spent four days screaming at and belittling them (and other people in the training). She explained that it was very strange, that none of them could understand why they had felt like this, but they no longer did. (This sounds a great deal like a form of Stockholm Syndrome<sup>12</sup>). She said that everyone in her company who had taken the course was hyped up for a week or two and then everything returned to normal.

Brewer (1975) explains that, while the majority of participants “got it”; there were some who - even immediately after the rest training - were unconvinced by the process:

There were those who didn't catch on, or who didn't think much of the revelation, or who were even hopping mad about being sold a bill of goods. But as usual about 200 people, roughly four fifths of the crowd, proclaimed their conversion, and the mood changed as if lepers had been cleansed (Brewer, 1975).

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<sup>12</sup> Stockholm Syndrome is a psychological phenomenon where victims of abuse identify with, and have positive feelings towards, their abusers (Namnyak, et al., 2008)



## THE LGAT “EXPERIENCE”

For the classical conditioning hypothesis of brainwashing to make sense it is necessary to demonstrate that LGATs generate a noteworthy euphoric experience. The earliest reference to euphoria in LGATs is made by Brewer (1975), describing how the “initial rushes” of conversion are something to behold:

“The initial rushes of the est conversion are, of course, hard for non-est people to swallow, since they appear absurdly simple or idiotic or both, and a lot of friendships and marriages have busted up soon after the training” (Brewer, 1975).

“Est Ecstasy. Afloat on the new surge of confidence and light-heartedness, the majority of trainees returned from dinner that night eager for the next and final stage of instruction” (Brewer, 1975)

“But as usual about 200 people, roughly four fifths of the crowd, proclaimed their conversion, and the mood changed as if lepers had been cleansed (Brewer, 1975).

Cult expert, Dr Margaret Singer, having personally witnessed numerous LGATs, and interviewed dozens of participants had this to say about the effects:

“Afterwards, participants have attested to feeling ‘awesome’ and experiencing an emotional high that lasted for days. Some say they had to use special ‘grounding’ procedures just to carry on with normal life after this ‘transcending’ experience” (Singer, 2003, p. 198).

Haaken and Adams (1983), as mentioned, also make reference to an elevated state:

“We argue that although participants often experience a heightened sense of well-being as a consequence of the training, the phenomenon is essentially pathological” (Haaken & Adams, 1983).

Jeffrey Watts, a graduate of est, had the following to say on YouTube:

“People come out of Landmark and these other trainings... they seem to exhibit levels of euphoria, which is an emotional state that is indicative that somebody has been under a lot of stress. They also seem to have a slightly elevated mood-state...” (Watts, 2010).

This observation of est graduates was also made by researchers from Stanford University:

“This discourse, coming after the previous training, awaited with high expectations, dramatically executed, and lasting 6 hours, appears to create in many of the trainees a euphoric sense of well-being and community” (Finkelstein, Wenegrat, & Yalom, 1982, p. 522).

On the Tuesday night following the 2010 LGAT (‘New Beginnings’)<sup>13</sup> there was a “guest evening” where all participants had agreed to bring as many guests as possible. The evening was an opportunity to recruit participants for the next New Beginnings training. Participants who had just graduated stood in front of the crowd and described their experiences – not what had happened, but what they were feeling. Before these participants spoke, however, the trainer took his opportunity to provide a sales pitch. He explained that there were certain things that formal education doesn’t cover – things like how to live a truly meaningful life. He explained that this was what the training was about and then made a comparison that reflects the euphoria of the trainings:

“People compare it only to the birth of their children” (Field Notes, 946).

New Beginnings is the first of three courses offered by “The Guru”. The second course is called “Reflections” and I was in contact with a journalist who attended the Tuesday night, post-course recruitment evening following “Reflections” in 2011. He noted the same euphoric behaviour in participants, and recorded certain testimonies. One of the testimonies, which perhaps best captures the impact of the trainings, was as follows:

After completing ‘New Beginnings’ I was in a whole new life... experiencing things for the first time... using my eyes for the first time... actually seeing the world. My experience on ‘Reflections’ was... the single most important event of my entire life. I literally am about two days old today... using my body for the first time, being aware of what is actually

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<sup>13</sup> New Beginnings and Reflections are not the real names of the courses.

around me... and knowing how to see the world around me and interact with that world around me... and my life is absolutely amazing... (Field Notes, 954-959).

Prior to the 2010 LGAT the group of future participants from our company met with the chairman, who stated with absolute certainty that at the end of the training we would feel better than we had ever felt before. This is an immensely misguided thing to promise if the results were anything less than spectacular:

“This may sound hard to believe...” he began “... but I guarantee that Sunday will be the best day of your lives” (Field Notes, 27-28).

To begin to understand how the emotional experience is generated it is useful to be specific about both the nature of the training (which has hopefully been accomplished) and the nature of the LGAT euphoria. Limiting discussion of the LGAT “experience” to a simple euphoria paints an incomplete, and unconvincing, picture of the impact. By recognising the array of symptoms, and identifying the fact that it resembles an already explored syndrome<sup>14</sup>, we move closer to understanding the phenomenon. While it may be difficult for many to associate a dangerous mental illness like bipolar disorder with feelings of love, joy, confidence, energy and forgiveness, this is precisely what hypomania/mania feels like to many bipolar sufferers:

“Most people find the thought that a destructive, often psychotic, and frequently lethal disease such as manic-depressive illness might convey certain advantages (such as heightened imaginative powers, intensified emotional responses, and increased energy) troubling...” (Jamison, *Touched With Fire: Manic Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*, 1993, p. 3).

Specifically, in the majority of participants, LGATs trigger symptoms which resemble hypomania, rather than mania. This is an important distinction to make because not only is hypomania exceedingly pleasurable, but it does not negatively impact functionality. Few LGAT graduates would have approached physicians because they were feeling really good

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<sup>14</sup> “Recall that a *diagnosis* is a label we attach to a set of symptoms that tend to occur together. This set of symptoms is called a **syndrome**” (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2011, p. 77).

(hypomania) – if (the more serious) mania was the predominant outcome then LGATs would long have been put out of business.

“Hypomania involves the same symptoms as mania. The major difference is that in hypomania these symptoms are not severe enough to interfere with daily functioning and do not involve hallucinations or delusions” (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2011, p. 187).

This is not to suggest that mania/depression does not occur as a result of participation. While hypomania seems to be the common and intended result of LGATs, there is evidence that affective states are sometimes impacted by LGATs in unwanted ways. Pressman (1993) notes that other academics had also picked up heightened affective states:

In March 1977 the psychiatric journal published the first of two articles by Glass and Kirsh (the second one appeared the following December) that described five patients who had developed psychotic symptoms, including paranoia, uncontrollable mood swings, and delusions in the wake of taking the est training (p. 192).

Timothy Conway noted euphoria in LGAT graduates:

“Many observers have noticed that the euphoria has a rather or very manic edge to it” (Conway, 2008).

While most participants appear to experience hypomanic symptoms, this is not to say that some participants are not pushed further along the bipolar spectrum. Typical of mania are “unrestrained buying sprees” (Jamison, 1995), noted by Singer (2003) during the LGAT “Insight”:

At some point, a “Gift of Giving” session was added to the five-day Insight seminar. During this session, it has been reported, some people were so euphoric they made out checks for \$10,000 to the group (p. 198).

Manic symptoms include excessive confidence which often leads to rash business and personal decisions:

Even after spending inordinate amounts of money or making foolish business decisions, these individuals, particularly if they are in the midst of a full manic episode, are so

wrapped up in their enthusiasm and expansiveness that their behavior seems perfectly reasonable to them (Barlow & Durand, 2002, p. 199).

Divorce, marriage and business failures are claimed consequences of LGATs. Steven Hassan (1988) notes this pattern in LGATs:

“Many of these groups have caused nervous breakdowns, broken marriages, and business failures, not to mention some well-documented suicides and deaths by reckless accidents” (p. 40).

Steven Pressman (1993) similarly notes the impulsive behaviour of many graduates:

“The irony was that the est culture was filled with the victims of busted marriages, both among Erhard’s staff and among plenty of est graduates as well. Divorce was not an uncommon result of the training for many couples” (p. 182).

During the 2010 LGAT we were specifically warned not to make any “big decisions” in our empowered state. I later found out that there had been numerous marriages and divorces immediately following the training:

“Lastly he warned us about making any big decisions, cracking a joke about telling our wives to “Fuck off!” He said that for the next week we shouldn’t make any rash decisions as we would be feeling unusually empowered” (Field Notes, 842-844).

Even Brewer (1975) noted the strange impact the LGAT impulsiveness had on marriages:

“... a lot of friendships and marriages have busted up soon after the training” (Brewer, 1975).

To a layperson this may seem inexplicable. If, however, LGAT participants are being pushed into a hypomanic state then these feelings and impulsive behaviour are understandable. While certain experts have commented on the mania-like symptoms of the trainings, some of the evidence comes from the participants themselves (taken from discussion threads at [www.culteducation.com](http://www.culteducation.com)):

“Speaking from personal experience of a Landmark Forum, the high I experienced was definitely physical rather than psychological. That became clear to me in the days and weeks after my attendance of the Forum. I felt strange (albeit a happy strange) and was aware that my feelings were not simply the warmth that comes from being surrounded by people who love you. I felt superhuman and yet I knew I wasn't. I felt supreme confidence & yet I knew it came from nowhere as my life was still in the same stuck place that led me to the Forum in the first place. My feelings of confidence did not come from a new self-belief in my talents gained from the Forum but from a physical sensation in my body” (GloriaG, 2011).

The picture of the experience of LGAT graduates, painted from over sixty-five personal testimonies is that there is a period of euphoria, significant enough to distinguish it from normal happiness, which tends to last from a few days to a few weeks:

“The problem was that, nice as the euphoria was, it wore off in a few days, or a few weeks at most. I didn't derive any lasting benefit from it. I notice that Landmark gives you that euphoria” (Baruch, 2003).

“To me this is a clear cause and effect relationship. Impact Trainings, whatever their apparent short term positive effects, have a long term negative effect when the euphoria of the training room wears off” (Soul, 2009).

“Yeah, I was in bad shape before, but I'm just in agony now. I managed to suffer through lift-off celebration. I felt a lot of pressure from my biological family to continue because they thought they saw improvement when I'd come home in a euphoria for a couple days after each training. It was always short lived. But they were just happy to see signs of life” (much, 2008).

The following is a testimony from an LGAT veteran on YouTube:

“So in a sense I had some value out of the Landmark Forum, but what happened afterwards was that I became very high. I was on an intense emotional high. This is what they call “the experience” or “getting it”. For three months I was in a hypomanic state – I thought I was feeling good, but I wasn't. I was very stressed... I did some really strange



things... It looked like I was happy but I was miserable because I was under constant stress, thinking “Now I can solve everything in the world... all of the problems in the world I can solve.” That’s what a lot of people think when they have done The Forum... “Oh I have to call up the prime minister... and tell him “I have the solution to all of mankind’s problems!” And this is actually what goes on” (Fehlberg, 2014).

The fact that they have a name for it - “the experience” or “getting it” - suggests the frequency with which this effect occurs. There was even a comment in the New York Times which described the effect of these trainings on participants:

During the program, I kept an eye out for anyone going over the rails. Landmark has been criticized for having unleashed some monsters: a reporter from The Independent, the British newspaper, spoke with a woman whose executive husband was taken to the Forum by a colleague. “Some women might like it if their husband suddenly started saying he loved them all the time, but I found it scary,” the woman said. “He was weirdly euphoric and animated. Then he became very depressed.” She added that he had panic attacks for a long time after (Alford, 2010).

An effect of hypomania that is often not clearly articulated is that it shifts life and people to more positive and beautiful versions of themselves. You may not be financially solvent but you’ll feel as if you have no money concerns, your problems at work will seem to disappear and you’ll feel like you can deal with anything (Jamison, 1995). While hypomania does not change ones circumstances it vastly changes the way one views those circumstances:

“There are interests found in uninteresting people. Sensuality is pervasive and the desire to seduce and be seduced irresistible. Feelings of ease, intensity, power, well-being, financial omnipotence, and euphoria pervade one's marrow” (Goodwin & Jamison, 1990, pp. 17-18, as cited in Nolen-Hoeksema, 2011, p. 186, in reference to hypomania/mania).

Consider this description of the effects of an LGAT in light of the effects of hypomania described above. Erhard promises that est will not change your circumstances, but rather that it will change the way you view those circumstances:

“The purpose of the est training,” Erhard and his followers chanted over and over again, “is to transform your ability to experience living so that the situations you have been trying to change or have been putting up with clear up just in the process of life itself” (Pressman, 1993, p. 70).

Given that hypomania leads to increased sociability, creativity, confidence, passion, decisiveness, joy, energy and productivity, it is interesting to listen to Nancy Zapolski (NZ) of the LGAT Landmark Education describing the results that participants can expect from their training (Zapolski, 2013):

NZ: “There are many benefits that people get out of the Landmark Forum and, while the benefits you get will be unique to you, there are five that virtually everyone reports:

Number one is an increased ability to relate effectively with others. You will feel profoundly connected and find the freedom to be yourself...”

This is extremely similar to hypomania, a symptom of which is expansiveness and sociability (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2011).

NZ: “Even when there is a problem everything can get worked out. What people experience is being at ease no matter where they are, who they are with or what the circumstances.”

The number one feature of hypomania/mania, as opposed to depression, is optimism. Aaron Beck refers to the negative cognitive triad – that depressed people have negative views of themselves, the world and the future (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2011); with hypomania the opposite is true – you have a positive view of yourself, the world and the future. Nothing externally has to change as you simply view the world through rose-tinted spectacles.

NZ: “Number two is increased personal productivity and effectiveness. It might be with your work, your finances, or whatever goals you are out to accomplish. You’ll have more time to do what matters to you and will come to see that many of the limits of effectiveness are self-imposed, and based on decisions from the past that have been hidden from your view. This will give you access to creating a whole new level of performance”.

Extreme energy, productivity, and goal-directed behaviour are core symptoms of hypomania:

“I raced about like a crazed weasel, bubbling with plans and enthusiasms, immersed in sports, and staying up all night, night after night, out with friends, reading everything that wasn’t nailed down, filling manuscript books with poems and fragments of plays, and making expansive, completely unrealistic plans for my future” (Jamison, 1995, pp. 35-38).

“Often, they will frenetically pursue grand plans and goals” (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2011, p. 187, in reference to people who are manic).

While manic people may end up “too productive” hypomanic people, like I believe are produced by LGATs, have more energy, but are not too frantic to use this energy wisely. They will be able to attain, as put by Zapolski, “a whole new level of performance”.

NZ: “Number three is confidence. We all have areas in our life where we experience some degree of confidence, but there are others where we doubt ourselves or hold back. Imagine yourself stepping into situations where you were once limited, but now have the confidence to act in the face of self-doubt and even fear”.

An increase in self-esteem, which in extreme cases results in delusions of grandeur, is closely associated with hypomania/mania:

“People with mania have unrealistically positive and grandiose (inflated) self-esteem” (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2011, p. 187).

“I felt great. Not just great, I felt *really* great. I felt I could do anything, that no task was too difficult” (Jamison, 1995, pp. 35-38).

Before Billy reached the ward you could hear him laughing and carrying on in a deep voice; it sounded like he was having wonderful time. As the nurse brought Billy down the hall to introduce him to the staff, he spied the Ping-Pong table. Loudly, he exclaimed, “Ping-Pong! I love Ping-Pong! I have only played twice but that is what I’m going to do while I am here. I’m going to become the world’s greatest Ping-Pong

player! And that table is gorgeous! I am going to make it the finest Ping-Pong table in the world” (Barlow & Durand, 2002, p. 198).

NZ: “Number four is making the right choices and pursuing what is important. You will come to relate to choice in a whole new way – one that allows for a newfound freedom to both create and pursue what’s important”.

What Zapolski is referring to here is decision-making, or decisiveness. When you are hypomanic you feel empowered and you do not doubt yourself; the result is that decision-making becomes a great deal easier. Of course making decisions with less caution may result in great gains, but equally in great losses (as has been noted previously with divorces and failed businesses). While decisiveness is not listed specifically as a DSM<sup>15</sup> symptom of mania the eighth symptom of depression, as per the DSM-IV-TR is:

“Diminished ability to think, concentrate, or *indecisiveness*” (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2011, p. 182).

If depression is seen as the opposite pole of mania then it stands to reason that if indecisiveness is a symptom of depression, then decisiveness is a likely symptom of hypomania/mania.

NZ: “The last aspect is ‘living life fully’. You can go after what you want, bring true passion to your commitments, live without regrets and express yourself fully.”

Here Zapolski is referring to a general enjoyment of life, which is synonymous with hypomania. The number one symptom of mania, as listed in the DSM-IV-TR, is:

“A distinct period of abnormally and persistently elevated, expansive, or irritable mood, lasting at least 1 week” (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2011, p. 187).

There is ample evidence that a hypomania-like euphoria is elicited in participants who complete LGATs. This is the experience which, through classical conditioning, LGAT participants associate with the principles of the training and which is vital to the CCHOB.

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<sup>15</sup> The DSM is the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. It is used by mental health professionals to assist with the diagnosis of mental conditions.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Dissertation summary**

1. The classical conditioning hypothesis of brainwashing (CCHOB) was put forward as an explanation for the effectiveness of LGATs:
  - a. LGATs, through intimidation, information overload, and impressive sounding philosophy, attempt to convince participants not to trust their own reasoning, but to trust the trainer, and their own emotional experience.
  - b. By getting participants to not think, and simultaneously triggering feelings of love, joy, power, confidence, energy and euphoria, it was hypothesised that LGATs get participants to associate the objectively brutal and philosophically dubious training with something positive.
  - c. This association, because it is formed without reason, is difficult to question (or undo) using reason (Taylor, 2004).
2. It was discovered that the “Steps” necessary for the CCHOB to occur do take place in LGATs.
3. LGATs put participants through a process of “death” and “rebirth” which includes extraordinary intimidation, stress and sleep deprivation. It was argued that this negatively impacts self-esteem and the ability to reason. These LGAT processes were analysed through an autoethnographic account, supplemented by two other sources and were found to closely approximate Lifton’s (1961) process of death and rebirth.

### **Limitations**

There were certain limitations to this thesis:

1. The autoethnographic account relied chiefly on memory, which is fallible.
2. The CCHOB is a theory, supported by logic and knowledge of behavioural psychology, but due to “impermissible experiments” (Singer, 2003, p. 79) there are limits to how it might be verified.
3. The assertion that the LGAT “experience” resembled hypomania has limitations. While LGAT symptoms identified may be identical to hypomanic/manic symptoms,

clinical diagnosis is a collaborative endeavor. Diagnosis of LGAT participants by clinical psychologists would greatly aid this assertion.

4. The evidence on the LGAT “experience” was partially informal (YouTube, online discussion forums etc.).

### **Tentative explanation of the LGAT “experience”**

An LGAT “experience”, crucial to the CCHOB, has been suggested; however no theory as to how it is triggered has been offered. An in depth enquiry into this phenomenon falls beyond the scope of this dissertation, but the following observations are worth noting:

- (1) The LGAT “experience” resembles hypomania/mania.
- (2) Stress and sleep deprivation are the core components of the LGAT process.
- (3) The neurotransmitter dopamine has been implicated in hypomania/mania (Berk, et al., 2007; Miklowitz, 2011).
  - a. Stress produces excessive dopamine (Abercrombie, Keefe, DiFrischia, & Zigmond, 1989; Cabib & Puglisi-Allegra, 2012; Imperato, Puglisi-Allegra, Casolini, & Angelucci, 1991; Orsini, Ventura, Lucchese, Puglisi-Allegra, & Cabib, 2002; Rasheed & Alghasham, 2012).
  - b. Sleep deprivation produces excessive dopamine (Gujar, Yoo, Hu, & Walker, 2011; Volkow, et al., 2008).

It is plausible that the LGAT “experience” has something to do with a structured application of stress and sleep deprivation (and so the detailed description of the stressful nature of the training is crucial to explain the mechanism by which the conditioning possibly occurs). It is hypothesised that the structure of the training is directly responsible for the post-training euphoria; however a study which measures pre and post-LGAT dopamine levels using modern brain scanning technology is necessary to confirm/disconfirm this “dopamine hypothesis for LGATs”. As explained by Singer (2003), there are restrictions in studying certain processes and it is unlikely that a professional ethics committee would allow participants to endure LGAT conditions.

### **Optimal duration/structure of abuse**

It has been theorised that physical abuse in first generation brainwashing environments, and a lack of physical abuse in second generation environments (Anthony, 1999; Lifton, 1961; Richardson, 2003; Schein, 1971) explains, to some degree, the relative effectiveness of second generation techniques (if they are more effective). The differences between first and second generation brainwashing in terms of their duration, structure, and potential impact on emotional “experience” should also be investigated with regards to the efficacy of generating an “experience”.

With reference to the dopamine hypothesis for brainwashing it is plausible that LGATs have perfected the abuse/sleep deprivation time frame to generate an emotional “experience”. If four days is optimal, then the months of torture endured by the subjects of Lifton (1961) and Schein’s (1971) studies might explain why a lack of emotional association was created in prisoners ‘brainwashed’ with the Communist doctrine. Understanding this component may go some way to explicating the ineffectiveness of Communist brainwashing and pave the way for new theories to be seriously considered by critics.

### **Extinction/spontaneous recovery**

It has been suggested by Lifton (1961), Schein (1971), and Singer (2003) that exposure to conflicting information serves the purpose of weakening indoctrination (“Milieu Control”, or “information control” is described by them as vital to maintaining indoctrinated beliefs or, as Schein (1971) put it, to the “refreezing” process). Since the CCHOB relies not on information, but on an emotional “experience” to create conversion, one must question the degree to which beliefs created in this manner are immune to discordant “noise”. According to Taylor (2004) these sorts of beliefs are all but impervious to rational argument, so the factors which erode brainwashing through classical conditioning must be considered. The way in which classical conditioning typically loses its control is through extinction:

“In extinction, a stimulus (a conditioned stimulus [CS]) that signals a biologically significant event (an unconditioned stimulus [US]) loses its ability to evoke responding when it is repeatedly presented alone” (Bouton, 1994).

The vulnerability of learning achieved through classical conditioning relative to learning through rational processes should be investigated. An understanding of spontaneous recovery, the mechanism by which an unconditioned stimulus regains its conditioning, will also provide insight into the retention of cult/NRM members. If the factors which impact the permanency of classical conditioning are articulated it will be easier to assess whether potential brainwashing environments use these factors to retain members.

### **Application to other “cult-like” organisations**

It is futile to label LGATs cults (it is a loaded word which might be debated forever); however LGATs are frequently discussed in the same breath as cults by “experts”. Dr Margaret Singer (2003) devotes a chapter to LGATs in her book “Cults in Our Midst”, Steven Hassan (1988) mentions LGATs in his book “Combatting Cult Mind Control”, and Dr Michael Langone, the head of ICSA (The International Cultic Studies Association), also comments on them. This thesis does hypothesise, however, that LGATs use brainwashing techniques and brainwashing is often associated with cult recruitment.

Without embarking on an extensive study of the recruitment processes used by all organisations labelled cults, it is useful to review a prominent “cult” – and its recruitment process – to discern if brainwashing through classical conditioning might be applicable to organisations other than LGATs. The Unification Church (“The Moonies”) is appropriate for evaluation, not only because it is perhaps the best-known “cult” in history, but also because Hassan (1988) provides a detailed published account of the recruitment process he underwent. In description of the Unification Church Singer (2003, pp. 345-346) states:

“Many Americans have been painfully aware of the followers of the Korean charismatic cult leader the Reverend Sun Myung Moon. For many years, Moon’s followers, often known as “Moonies,” could be found running small businesses and cozy little restaurants, developing real estate, and occupying group homes, often in university towns where college students could be easily recruited with promises of personal salvation through service to Moon’s self-proclaimed identity as the new Messiah, sent by God to complete the failed mission by Jesus Christ”.



Hassan (1988), a former senior member of the Unification Church, similarly says:

“While the story of the Unification Church is too involved to detail here, the most important feature of it is the church’s position that Sun Myung Moon is the new Messiah and that it is his mission to establish a new ‘kingdom’ on Earth” (Hassan, 1988, pp. 8-9).

There are numerous similarities between the recruitment experience described by Hassan (1988) and the description of LGAT processes, but in term of classical conditioning the following is most pertinent:

Hassan was physically and emotionally exhausted and slept very little. The first night is described below:

“That night we were escorted to bunk beds above a converted garage, and the men and women were put in separate rooms. As it turned out, getting a good night’s sleep was nearly impossible... The other newcomers and I spent a wakeful night” (Hassan, 1988, p. 15).

The second night, as described by Hassan (1988), was also not conducive to sleep:

“I had another restless night but was so exhausted emotionally and physically that I did manage to get a few hours’ sleep” (p. 16).

Not only was there minimal sleep, but the environment was described as being “intense”:

“Day two, Sunday, began in exactly the same way. But now we had all been in this crazy, intense environment for 36 hours, which felt more like a week” (p. 16).

Much like an LGAT their appeared to be a heavy inculcation of guilt during his weekend:

“On and on he went, praying that all of mankind would stop living such selfish materialistic lives and return to Him” (p. 17).

During this weekend Hassan (1988) appeared to repeatedly try to question what was going on, but was – like during an LGAT – made to feel that he was relying too much on reason:

“Whenever I started to object, however, I was told to save my questions until after the lecture” (Hassan, 1988, p. 16).

Eventually, like many LGAT participants, Hassan is convinced that he is questioning too much and should be more trusting:

“Although the workshop was almost identical in content to the one I had taken the previous week, I felt that I needed to listen this time with an open mind and take notes. ‘Last weekend I was too cynical,’ I thought” (Hassan, 1988, p. 19).

There also appeared to be an overload of evidence, something used by LGATs to exhaust participants and get them to trust “the experience”:

“As he lectured for hour after hour, I became very uncomfortable” (Hassan, 1988, p. 15).

““Meanwhile, I was listening to an enormous amount of material about mankind, history, the purpose of creation, the spiritual world versus the physical world, and so forth, much of which presumed an acceptance of what had been said earlier” (Hassan, 1988, p. 15).

Crucially Hassan (1988) describes a triggered euphoria in the group on the third day:

“On the third day, we were lifted to an unprecedented emotional high” (Hassan, 1988, p. 16).

Finally Hassan (1988, p. 19) acknowledges that the process transformed him:

“By the end of those three days the Steve Hassan who had walked into the first workshop was gone, replaced by a new ‘Steve Hassan.’ I was elated at the thought that I was ‘chosen’ by God and that my life’s path was now on the only ‘true track’”.

So Hassan endured a highly structured weekend that involved sleep deprivation, stress, guilt, an overload of information, the squashing of reason (and elevation of trust) and the triggering of a euphoric state. This resembles the processes employed by LGATs.

## **Application to Evangelical Christianity (“Evangelicalism”)**

It is also reasonable to consider the possible use of classical conditioning in mainstream religion, like Christianity. Evangelical Christianity, which is on the rise in South Africa and Africa (Egan, 2015), appears to utilise similar, although milder, stress-inducing processes, and a similar structure, to LGATs and it also places a great deal of value on a “born-again experience” (Hackett & Lindsay, 2008, p. 501). An evangelical might be defined as a Christian who holds a particular regard for the Bible, embraces a personal relationship with God through a “conversion” to Jesus Christ, and seeks to lead others on a similar spiritual journey through a sharing of the gospel (Hackett & Lindsay, 2008; wheaton.edu, 2016).

“The term ‘Evangelicalism’ is a wide-reaching definitional ‘canopy’ that covers a diverse number of Protestant traditions, denominations, organizations, and churches. It originates in the Greek word euangelion, meaning ‘the good news,’ or, more commonly, the ‘gospel’” (wheaton.edu, 2016).

The gospel, or “good news”, central to conversion in Evangelicalism, does not have a universally accepted definition; however this website illustrates a plausible interpretation of the concept:

The word *gospel* means ‘good news,’ so the gospel of Christ is the good news of His coming to provide forgiveness of sins for all who will believe (Colossians 1:14; Romans 10:9). Since the beginning of time when the first man sinned, mankind has been under the condemnation of God (Romans 5:12). Because everyone breaks God’s perfect law by committing sin (Romans 3:23), everyone is guilty (Romans 5:18). The punishment for the crime of sin is physical death (Romans 6:23) and then an eternity spent in a place of eternal punishment (Revelation 20:15; Matthew 25:46). This eternal separation from God is also called the ‘second death’ (Revelation 20:14–15) (gotquestions.org, 2016).

While there is not complete consensus about how Evangelicalism should be defined, Gallop Polls show that in 2007 41% of Americans identified themselves as Evangelicals (Hackett & Lindsay, 2008, p. 502). This translates to approximately 120 million people in the US, or over 50% of all American Christians. It should also be clarified that, if classical conditioning does occur in Evangelical Christianity – and if the LGAT euphoria is related to the structured

application and sudden removal of stress - it would not occur to the same degree as it occurs in LGATs. Evangelical services<sup>16</sup> are not as overtly abusive as LGATs, and Evangelical Christians rarely have four-day-long processes involving tens of hours of lectures and exercises. This does not mean, however, that Evangelicalism does not employ classical conditioning processes to some degree. These practices might simply exist as church procedures – the way that non-believers are converted - and they may not have been maliciously designed but rather, through a process of natural selection, have evolved over time. It is worth considering whether sermons which deliver “the good news” or “the gospel” use similar processes to LGATs to create an emotional association between the doctrine of Christianity and feelings of love, joy, and forgiveness. Specifically it might be argued that Evangelical Christianity, like LGATs:

1. Devalues reason
2. Promotes blind trust
3. Creates guilt and fear
4. Offers a solution to that guilt and fear
5. Generates a “born-again experience”

Neuroscientist, and religious critic, Sam Harris (2006) suggests that many Christians not only believe without evidence, but that they take pride in this form of belief. A core component of the classical conditioning hypothesis of brainwashing is that individuals are convinced that using reason is a bad way to make decisions and that an experience/emotion should be trusted instead. This model of brainwashing - circumnavigating reason - appears plausible in the conversion of many to Christianity. The observation – that many Evangelical Christians believe without seriously considering the evidence – is in keeping with a straightforward interpretation of scripture. The bible values faith (belief without evidence) enormously, and many passages suggest that people should not question God:

“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see” (Heb 11 vs. 1).

“We live by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor 5 vs. 7).

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<sup>16</sup> Evangelicalism is not homogenous but, because of the reliance on sharing the gospel, there will be common processes used during their conversion services.

The bible also makes it clear that God is far more intelligent than people are and that it is arrogant/foolish to question him. This is similar to the devaluing of reason seen in LGATs:

“This is because God considers the wisdom of this world to be foolish” (1 Cor 3 vs. 19).

“...so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power” (1 Cor 2 vs. 5).

“As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55 vs. 9).

The message is “*your thinking is inferior*” and “*belief without evidence is a virtue*”, the two changes in mind-set which set up a belief based upon a strong emotion (or “God’s power”).

Many Christian sermons, or ones which preach “the good news”, elicit guilt and fear - two crucial components of LGATs. The central premise of Christianity is that you are a sinner – born a sinner – and that nothing that you can do on your own can save you from this.

Evangelical Christianity, like LGATs, taps into a sense of guilt, ensuring that congregants know that they are blameworthy and deserving of punishment:

“There is no one righteous, not even one;” (Rom 3 vs. 10).

“...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3 vs. 23).

“All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags...” (Isaiah 64 vs. 6).

Confession, a key part of the methods highlighted by Lifton (1961), is a blatant element of the Evangelical Christian process:

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1 vs. 9).

“Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed” (James 5 vs. 16).

“I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,’ and you forgave the iniquity of my sin” (Psalm 32 vs. 5).

Confession, as billed by Evangelical Christianity, is the path to redemption. The insidious impact of confession is that it focuses the “sinner” on all of his/her sins, an exercise in major guilt-inculcation. Guilt is not the only device used in the Christian process and the concept of burning for eternity in hell might also be considered a stress-inducing mechanism:

“The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Mat 13 vs. 49-50).

“Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Mat 10 vs. 28).

“If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go to hell, where the fire never goes out” (Mark 9 vs. 43).

The structure of Christian sermons preaching “the good news” is frequently a period of thirty to forty minutes highlighting guilt-inducing passages, and the frightening consequences for non-believers, followed by a solution to this dilemma. Consider this in light of the described structure of LGATs:

“After several days of being dragged down into the pits the final day of exercises is usually designed to pump you up” (Singer, as cited by Mathison, 1993).

“Day four is one in which much group sharing occurs, and the leader begins to change from the stern, domineering taskmaster into a seductive, charming, loving daddy or mommy who wants you to buy the next courses” (Singer, 2003, p. 195).

“At the end of the day, a surprise is staged, with friends and family unexpectedly appearing to congratulate ‘the graduate’” (Singer, 2003, p. 195).

On a far shorter time-scale than occurs in an LGAT (an hour, as opposed to four days), potential Christians are subjected to guilt and fear, followed by a sudden reversal to redemption and love. This affirmation takes the form of “accept Jesus and you will go to heaven”:

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3 vs. 16).

From “you are a sinner deserving of eternal damnation” the sudden switch is made to “you are perfect”:

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Cor 5 vs. 17).

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, described being born again as “that great change which God works in the soul when he brings it into life, when he raises it from the death of sin to the life of righteousness” (Belton, 2007). Evangelical Christians are said to be “born again” (Hackett & Lindsay, 2008). If this experience involves a sense of euphoria then an argument for classical conditioning in Evangelicalism might be seriously considered.

### **Implications of thesis**

A major contribution of this thesis is that it demonstrates that the very symptoms bipolar sufferers are marginalised and stigmatised for can be elicited in “normal” people. This narrows the gap between “crazy people” and “normal people” which is invaluable in itself. The chief contribution, however, is that it proposes a new mechanism for brainwashing – one which addresses the crucial question of how individuals take on illogical beliefs, and which urges critics to reconsider their positions. If the CCHOB can be validated through further research, and organisations can be shown to use its processes, then individuals and families of cult/NRM members may have recourse for intervention and organisations may be held accountable for employing unethical tactics to recruit and influence individuals.

## **Conclusion**

The classical conditioning hypothesis for brainwashing (CCHOB) suggests a novel mechanism, based upon established behavioural psychology, for the achievement of undue influence. Analysis of the processes, and conditions of LGATs, through autoethnography supplemented by other sources, has established that the steps of the CCHOB are indeed present in LGATs and it is theorised that a process of “death and rebirth” – observed in this analysis of LGATs, and similar to that observed by Lifton (1961) - is somehow related to the observed post-course emotional “experience”. The degree to which this hypothesis can explain influence is, like all models on brainwashing, hypothetical and requires further investigation to establish its validity. Neuropsychological studies, measuring baseline and post-course dopamine levels will add substance to the hypothesis but, given the implications of brainwashing on individuals and their families, it is encouraging that a new theory may facilitate fresh discussion on this vital subject.



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## APPENDIX 1 - ETHICAL CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE



29 September 2015

Mr John Hunter (213569345)  
School of Applied Human Sciences – Psychology  
Pietermaritzburg Campus

Dear Mr Hunter,

Protocol reference number: HSS/0624/015M  
Project title: "Brainwashing" in a Large Group Awareness Training?

**Full Approval – Expedited Application**

In response to your application received on 01 June 2015, the Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee has considered the abovementioned application and the protocol have been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number.

PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

The ethical clearance certificate is only valid for a period of 3 years from the date of issue. Thereafter Recertification must be applied for on an annual basis.

I take this opportunity of wishing you everything of the best with your study.

Yours faithfully

.....  
Dr Shenuka Singh (Chair)

/ms

Cc Supervisor: Professor Kevin Durrheim  
Cc Academic Leader Research: Dr Jéan Steyn  
Cc School Administrator: Ms Nondumiso Khanyile

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Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

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