

“People Trapped Inside Shincheonji”: Broadcasting the Darker Side of Deprogramming

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ABSTRACT: This article is an in-depth critical examination of the first two episodes of the TV show “People Trapped into Shincheonji” from a psychological perspective. The show was produced by the Christian Korean TV network CBS, which broadcast it in 2017. We see in the show the deprogramming procedure, captured with a hidden camera in Christian counseling centers, conducted with the aim of “rescuing” young women affiliated with Shincheonji, a Christian new religious movement experiencing a sustained growth in South Korea. The episodes are analyzed with reference to the vast literature on deprogramming, and the personal experience of the author, who interviewed a young woman deprogrammed in Italy in the late 1980s.

KEYWORDS: Mental Manipulation, Mind Control, Brainwashing, Anti-cult Movements, Margaret Singer, Deprogramming, Shincheonji, Forced Conversion.

“People Trapped Inside Shincheonji”

The episodes examined in this article are the first two of a series of eight, produced by the Christian Korean TV network CBS and aired in 2017. The aim of the CBS show was to document and, above all, to promote the deprogramming of members of the Church of Shincheonji, as if it were a “good practice.” The “counseling” shown in the episodes, and recorded through hidden cameras, presents all the characteristics of the deprogramming techniques, which were widespread in the United States in the 1970s and 80s (Anthony 1980; Galanter 1993; Hood, Hill and Spilka 2009), during the emerging phase of the anti-cult movement. They were subsequently also exported to some European countries. The practice of deprogramming was a violent and illegal reaction to the large

number of affiliations of young adults to minority religious and spiritual groups, which sometimes resulted in them abandoning their careers and families (Shupe and Darnell 2006).

Deprogramming, considered illegal everywhere, has unfortunately still been practiced in our century in Japan (Human Rights Without Frontiers 2012), and, as in the case under discussion, is still being practiced today in South Korea. The theoretical and practical roots of this type of “counseling,” which we will subsequently refer to as “deprogramming,” since it manifests itself in the same way and is based on the same assumptions of its American and European counterparts, can be found in the brainwashing theory, an explanation of religious conversion now abandoned by the vast majority of scholars (Hood, Hill and Spilka 2009; Anthony and Robbins 2004, Rambo and Farhadian 2014). Based on this theory (Singer and Lalich 1995), the reason for a young person’s religious conversion to a “destructive cult” is found in brainwashing, or mental manipulation, a technique supposedly practiced by the leader and the group. Changes in thinking and behavior are always interpreted as the result of mental manipulation, and not as a free choice: therefore, they must be “reversed.” Deprogramming is the procedure that should return members to the condition prior to their affiliation.

The history of deprogramming records many cases of failures, and often the “successes” were limited to a few cases taking place at the beginning of the affiliation process. In these cases, affiliation to a “cult” was considered a “disease,” and when the “symptoms” had first appeared, the new members, promptly discouraged and frightened by deprogrammers, had left the group before the conversion efforts and the decision to engage in the movement had been consolidated.

“People Trapped Inside Shincheonji: Revelation (Part 1)”

This is the case with the first girl, Hyo-eun, who had been affiliated with Shincheonji for only six months. During the episode (CBS 2017a), the young girl’s parents accuse Shincheonji of brainwashing their daughter by taking her away from the family. The same point is argued by all the family members who had approached the Sangrok Church Counseling Center and are interviewed in the episode. Their children and relatives changed since attending Shincheonji. They

blatantly proclaim their faith in Shincheonji’s leader Lee Man Hee, and are even displaying his image in their homes. The Sangrok Church counselors promise these alarmed family members to bring their loved ones out of the “cult.”

What happens in the Sangrok Church Counseling Center is perfectly in line with what happened around the world in other similar centers, established within majority denominations (as in this case), or within anti-cult movements without confessional links. The relatives of the believers go on to describe their loved ones’ changes in behavior and way of thinking, and claim they are creating problems in the family. The relatives express uncertainty and concern because they do not understand the causes of the change. The mistake that is made in this situation is to adapt the “case” to a pre-determined frame of reference, according to which the explanation of these changes is both simple and dramatic: the devastating influence of the “cult,” presented as a criminal group abusing and deceiving defenseless people. This is the stereotype dominating these episodes, perfectly summarized in the title of the series, “People Trapped Inside Shincheonji.”

Of further interest is the reconstruction of the moment when Hyo-eun’s mother learns about her daughter’s affiliation to Shincheonji. The woman says she had no fear or concern, until she received a phone call while she was at work, which alerted her and her whole family. This detail may appear to be secondary, but it is not, for it is also found in other similar cases that have occurred in other contexts. I personally interviewed a woman, subsequently referred to as A., who, at age 24, survived an attempt at deprogramming (Di Marzio 2016, 491–505). In her case, too, her parents had no problem or concern about her affiliation to a minority religious group, until they heard negative reports, calling it a “cult,” during a television broadcast. That alarming information set the subsequent events in motion, which led A.’s parents to make the same choice as the parents of Hyo-eun, to approach an anti-cult group and request the intervention of professional deprogrammers.

After learning that his daughter was a member of Shincheonji, the father said he felt “betrayed” by her, as if her choice was a form of contempt for everything he had done for her in the previous 25 years. In retaliation, he decided to take away her cell phone to prevent further contacts with the group. These punitive parental behaviors are often found in cases of conflicts due to unwelcome affiliations. Even in A.’s case, she was prevented from calling any friends in the

group by phone, because it was believed that blocking the flow of information from the “cult” was essential for the deprogramming to be successful. In fact, these actions arouse anger and frustration in the victims, with unpredictable outcomes, and do not always favor the success of the deprogramming, as it happened, for example, in the case of A. As far as Hyo-eun is concerned, her broken and violent (especially self-harm) reactions are interpreted by her parents as the actions of a deranged person, of a person who “is no longer the same.” Out of protest, she suddenly started “banging her head against the wall” and was constantly shouting the prayers she recited in Shincheonji.

One of the moments when the CBS episode shows abundant details of textbook deprogramming, is the transfer of the young woman to the counseling center with her parents. The reconstruction perfectly parallels the stories of many other young people kidnapped by deception, and sometimes violence, by their parents to be deprogrammed. Just to give an example, in the case of A., the young girl remembers being deceived by her parents, who took her to an isolated place. Realizing what was about to happen, she tried to escape, but was held against her will for days, suffering a fractured foot as a result of a fight with one of the deprogrammers (Di Marzio 2016, 491–92). The episode shows a very similar scenario in the case of Hyo-eun when, faced with the tenacious resistance of his daughter trying to leave the room shouting that she wants to return to Shincheonji, her father gets up, grabs her with force, and forces her to sit down again (CBS 2017a, min. 33.20 to 33.27).

As mentioned before, anti-cult organizations that practice deprogramming may have different characteristics. In this case, we are dealing with a “counseling center” promoted by a Christian church. For this reason, the whole process of “recovery” is based on religious assumptions. The deprogrammers try to refute the teachings the young woman learned in Shincheonji, that is, the interpretation that the leader of the movement gives to the Biblical texts. This setting of the show is evident from the very first images, when the narrator reads *Genesis* 11, on the construction of the Tower of Babel and its destruction by God. It is thus suggested that the deprogramming the audience is about to witness is a religious “crusade,” a defense of the true faith against the false belief professed by Hyo-eun as a member of Shincheonji. This false belief is taught by Lee Man Hee, presented as a proud, mendacious leader who, as it happened to those who built the Tower of Babel, will be severely punished by God.

Hyo-eun had only belonged to Shincheonji for six months. Her attitude at the beginning of the counseling is eloquent: she begins the meeting by kneeling and praying for her family, that they may understand they are in error (CBS 2017a, 16.28 et seq.). The counselor’s strategy is to convince the young woman that what she believes is false, and that she has been deliberately deceived. Hyo-eun’s reaction, which in turn accuses the counselor of misinterpreting the Bible, is interpreted by the commentator as “obstructionism.” Since the assumption is that the young woman is incapable of thinking clearly, and the only possible choice for her is to meekly submit to the truths that the counselor and her parents intend to convey to her during the sessions, her resistance is neither meaningful nor valuable, and should therefore be ignored.

This approach considers the victim subjected to deprogramming as a person without capacity for discernment, with a mind clouded by the manipulative techniques to which she has supposedly been subjected, incapable of choosing for herself. As a consequence, the deprivation of personal freedom and violation of human rights is regarded as justified by the situation, and even in the best interest of the “cult” member, as determined by her parents and the organization responsible for conducting the deprogramming. As in all cases of deprogramming, the violation of the most intimate and personal beliefs and the coercion of the inclinations and feelings cause intense suffering, which remains in the memories and nightmares of the victims throughout their lives.

In the interview I carried out with A., she described the attitude of the deprogrammers in this way,

the proceedings were basically a continuous denial of my personality because they considered me a subject who could be influenced outside of her will ... a fool who was brainwashed in some way and, after all, [they believed] this deprogramming would easily fool me again. As a result, they were claiming that I was a person who could be deprogrammed, which was particularly humiliating for me... (Di Marzio 2016, 493).

When asked to express her emotions during the deprogramming, she said that, after the first moments of astonishment for what was happening to her, she felt “terrified,” “humiliated,” “betrayed,” and “abandoned” by her parents. She believes that the greatest suffering for her was experiencing her parents’ attitude, from the first moments of the kidnapping until the end of the deprogramming, which, in her case, failed.

Returning to Hyo-eun's case, after a series of clashes with the counselor about the interpretation of some biblical passages, the procedure is abruptly interrupted because the young woman stops looking at the counselor, and starts to address first her father, and then her mother, showing them her suffering through continuous requests for help, interrupted by crying. Her non-verbal behavior speaks more than the words. Initially, she sits looking at the counsellor, then she moves her whole body first in the direction of her father, and then of her mother, sitting to her right and left. After asking for help without getting it, she folds back on herself, leaning on the table and continuing to cry, as if she could no longer find somebody to turn to. Abandonment, loneliness and fear take over, while, in a climate of growing coercion and violence, the young woman is subjected to a verbal bombardment by her parents and the counselor, with which they aim to convince her that the leader of Shincheonji is a liar, because what he teaches is in contrast with the Bible.

The young woman does not seem to be convinced and, in the end, tired and under great emotional stress, she begins to laugh. The counselor does not understand that the young woman's laughter is not a sign of derision, but a manifestation of great suffering and exasperation, and takes the opportunity to reproach her further. The irrational reaction of the young woman, being frustrated for the umpteenth time, is an extreme and desperate defense of herself: she says she only wants to return to Shincheonji, even if everything they taught her was a lie. The harsh opposition, the one-sided accusations, and the absolute lack of empathy lead to the emergence of an extreme defense of the girl's self and therefore of her faith, which, literally, cannot be reasoned with.

The counselor's attempt to lead the young woman to rationally accept her interpretation of the Bible, because it is "true," clashes with this wall of unilateral defense, not only of her own faith, but above all of her own identity and individuality (CBS 2017a, 22.08), since religious conversion is a fundamental and unifying aspect of the person. For Hyo-eun, Shincheonji is paradise, salvation, giving her certainty of escaping death. These convictions are expressed with strength and determination, despite the aggressive attitude and verbal violence of the counselor who stands before the young woman, leaning over the table above her, as if wanting to strike her, while the young woman remains seated and folded back on herself (CBS 2017a, 15.12).

The broadcast continues with images from the third, fourth, and fifth day of counseling. At a certain point, after listening for a long time to the refutation of Lee Man Hee’s teachings and the doctrine of Shincheonji, Hyo-eun begins to show some signs of uncertainty and claims to have some doubts. She expresses the desire to ask her leader for explanations, because she cannot convince herself that he is a liar without listening to his point of view (CBS 2017a, 27.03). Despite her fatigue, which is evident in her non-verbal attitude, her ability to concentrate remains strong. She understands that she has been presented with alleged discrepancies between her beliefs and the biblical text, and shows a desire to hear the other side, i.e. the explanation of the person who is being accused, by the counselor, of being a “liar.” Of course, her request is not taken seriously, and the deprogramming proceeds.

As the days go by, the young girl becomes more and more tired, weeping and often folding over the book; she appears weak and distressed (CBS 2017a, 27.56). These reactions are the desired outcome of deprogramming, since it is important to wear the victims out, through long and traumatizing sessions, accusations, and verbal violence, and, in some cases, even deprivation of sleep and food.

In such a frustrating and punitive context of isolation, the person reaches a critical point, and only wishes to somehow put an end to the painful situation. To do so, the victims can use different strategies, as is also shown by the experiences of other deprogrammed young people. In the case of A., whom I interviewed, the young woman used the technique of pretending that she had been deprogrammed successfully, which eventually allowed her to escape from the place where she was being held and to put an end to the deprogramming (Di Marzio 2016, 495–96). Hyo-eun, on the other hand, at a certain point seems tired and resigned, and changes her attitude towards the counselor and her parents. She no longer responds to explanations given to her about the alleged misinterpretation of the Bible, which would attest that Shincheonji’s teachings are false. Rather, she leans back in her chair, as if she could finally relieve some tension, and begins to communicate in a different way, shifting the focus from her beliefs to her emotions (CBS 2017a, 29.47).

She declares that her desire to return to the group will not change in the face of any theological consideration or reason, even if it were the threat of going to hell, formulated by her counselor, or her parents’ heartfelt calls to leave the movement.

Hyo-eun eloquently verbalizes her condition and emotions, looking at her parents and saying in a clear voice, with great conviction: “I was more happy when I lived there than in the 25 years I have lived with you” (CBS 2017a, 30.26, 30.30).

This is indeed a particularly important moment, as Hyo-eun finally reveals the most important reason why she has so enthusiastically embraced Shincheonji. It is not the resurrection doctrine that promises her eternal life, or the charisma of the leader, but rather the happiness she experiences when she is in the community. She probably feels understood and loved by all, committed to sharing a great mission that succeeds in giving meaning to her life, in a community where friendly people share the same faith. The persistent work of indoctrination carried out by the counselors, who do not care for the young woman’s emotional needs, have proved practically ineffective thus far. This psychological element is confirmed by an extensive range of scientific literature, discussing the factors influencing the decision to affiliate with a religious group. The most important factor is not the persuasiveness of the new beliefs, but rather the greater strength of the emotional ties developed with members already affiliated, compared to those already existing with people outside the group (Rambo 1993; Galanter, Rabkin, Rabkin and Deutsch 1979).

“People trapped inside Shincheonji: Youth (Part 2)”

In the second episode, Hyo-eun’s surrender is openly manifested on the seventh day of deprogramming, when she admits in tears that Shincheonji’s teachings are really wrong. Considering the level of stress, and the distressing emotional climate of the previous days, the young woman’s resistance and the strenuous defense of the group appear as almost “heroic,” and show how deeply rooted these beliefs were in a girl who had been a Shincheonji member for only six months. Hyo-eun’s surrender immediately provokes a change in the behavior of the counselor, who gets up to embrace her, and her mother. Both abandon the aggressive and punitive attitude taken in the previous days and show great joy and affection. This is a form of psychological “reinforcement,” a reward and encouragement to continue and consolidate the process of “recovery.”

The episode continues with an interview with Hyo-eun, one month after the deprogramming. The impression is of a different person: the young woman says exactly the opposite of what she had argued in the first few days of the

deprogramming. Now, she regards Shincheonji as hell, accuses the group of having brainwashed her, says she has been deceived and trained to lie. Parents’ interviews and expert comments confirm this version. In particular, the mother emphatically expresses her satisfaction to see that, thanks to the counseling, her daughter was back to her old self, smiling and happy.

The consequences that deprogramming had on Hyo-eun are like those resulting from a number of researches on other deprogrammed young people who left the movement they were affiliated with. Some of them have become bitter enemies of the group they left behind. In general, among ex-members, the differences in the way they perceived the abandoned group largely depends on how the disaffiliation occurred. Those who were forced to do so, following deprogramming, have a much more negative opinion of the movement than those who voluntarily disaffiliated or were expelled (Galanter 1989; Shupe and Darnell 2006; Bromley 2004).

In the final part of the second episode, we meet another young girl, Yoo Da-hye, who is dragged by her parents into the Heresy Counseling Center at Ansan Sang-rok Church. Yoo Da-hye’s reaction is even more resolute than in the case of Hyo-eun. The young girl wants to leave and accuses her parents, in front of the counselor, of having taken her to the Center by force. The counselor’s response to this accusation is eloquent: “Even if they dragged you here, they are still your parents” (CBS 2017b, 25.20).

This is a recurrent reasoning in cases of deprogramming. It is claimed that the illegal actions of the parents and the anti-cult organizations to which they turn are justified as “lesser evils,” simply because they are decided and implemented by those who have authority over the victims, the “children,” even if the latter are of legal age. In this context, it is as if human rights could be temporarily suspended in order to allow parents to carry out illegal actions and serious violations of the psycho-physical integrity of their “children,” in order to achieve an end that they regard as “good.”

As in the previous cases of Hyo-eun and A., Yoo Da-hye’s belief that she was betrayed by her parents is a cause of great suffering and bewilderment. For these young people, parents suddenly cease to be points of reference, capable of satisfying the need for protection inherent in the child-parent relationship. Yoo Da-hye, a young member of Shincheonji, clearly expresses this emotional state. During the counseling, she first openly disowns her parents, then stops talking,

completely turns her gaze away from her mother, refusing to look at her, and starts calling her “Mrs.” as if she didn’t know her. The counselor’s attempt to instill a sense of guilt in her for her attitude towards her parents, accusing the group of having caused this contempt for family ties, fails. The young woman declares that, since she is being held prisoner, she intends to call the police. And she manages to do it.

The video shows the arrival of the police at the counseling center and the start of the investigation, based on accusations of “confinement, assault, and forced counseling.” In Yoo Da-hye’s case, deprogramming has not even begun, but has led to two unforeseen outcomes for the parents and the counseling center: a judicial investigation, and the loss of contact with the young woman, who never returned home.

Deprogramming and Brainwashing

As already mentioned, deprogramming is a practice closely related to brainwashing theories. Cowan stresses that theories of brainwashing, used as the single explanation of conversion to the new religious movements (NMR), are essential to support the activities of the three main components of the anti-cult movement: friends and relatives of affiliated members, former members, and anti-cult groups. The brainwashing theory, in fact, for each of these subjects, functions as a “comfort,” “consolation,” and “measure of control”:

- comfort: the parents and friends of the young converts find a single explanation for a phenomenon that is mysterious to them, namely that a relative joined a new religious movement;
- consolation: the ex-members, in conflict with themselves in the face of the choices made when they were affiliated as if they were senseless, can resolve the conflict by attributing their choices to manipulative techniques, of which they were more or less unaware;
- measure of control: the anti-cult activists use the theory to justify their requests to increase social control over new religious movements, thus avoiding considering the enormous complexity of conversion processes, which can take very different directions and have very different outcomes, both at the individual and social level (Cowan 2014, 693).

Organizations that are part of the anti-cult movement present themselves to relatives concerned about their loved ones’ affiliation to a new religious movement as “educational or information services” (Wright 2014, 708). As such, the anti-cult activists provide alarming news about the NRMs the relatives of the people they serve have become affiliated with: for example, the fact that in NRMs people are supposedly being brainwashed, sexually abused, etc. It occasionally occurs that the relatives and friends of members still affiliated, in the wake of these worrying reports, decide to join themselves the network of organized opponents, committed to demand and obtain more control and repressive action against NRMs from the authorities. In these cases, the anti-cult social network, composed of social workers, psychologists, counselors, journalists and, sometimes, police or child protection agencies, join forces with the relatives. In this way, an investigation can begin, starting from the testimonies, spread by the media, of abuses perpetrated within an NMR, and can raise awareness of the “problem” among some representatives of the political world and law enforcement agencies, who may feel compelled to do “something” to prevent and combat the phenomenon.

The scholarly literature on the anti-cult movement helps to understand the meaning and purpose of the show produced by CBS, whose aim is to publicize and promote the deprogramming of young Shincheonji members. In kidnapping and deprogramming young people, the organizations that conduct the process and promote it through the media, paradoxically use the same techniques that they attribute to Shincheonji. They “trap” young people through deception, emotional blackmail, threats, violence, and massive “indoctrination” to wear out the believers and obtain their surrender. I believe that the most deplorable aspect of these broadcasts is their own publicity. They present themselves as “ethical” procedures, aimed at saving young people from the “trap” of Shincheonji under the umbrella of a Christian church which, in so doing, is not only acting against the law, but also in violation of all the evangelical values it professes.

These broadcasts represent a serious form of incitement to hatred and to the commission of crimes such as kidnapping and violence. Despite what the TV show wants us to believe, crimes remain crimes, even if committed by parents who are concerned about their children. At the end of the episodes, moreover, I believe that a question arises spontaneously: have the problems of the deprogrammed young people and those interviewed been resolved by the

deprogramming, even in the case of those who left Shincheonji? Have the reasons for their conflicts with their parents really been identified, or was Shincheonji just a scapegoat to hide previous and still existing problems in their families?

Based on my experience and studies, I can say that deprogramming does not solve relationship problems in families, and often aggravates them. One witness to these painful outcomes is A., the deprogrammed young woman I interviewed, who has had no contact with her family members or other relatives since the late 1980s. In her opinion, the interruption of family relations is primarily due to the parents' sense of guilt, for their betrayal, which, in her case, did not have the desired effect because the deprogramming failed. As for her brothers and sisters and other relatives, A. says: "I am astonished, I would not have thought such inhumanity was possible in my family, I tell you the truth."

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