

Cultures Shaped by Elements of Ideological Totalism – Experiences of Misuse of Power in Some Pentecostal Christian Fellowships

Abstract:

This article presents a qualitative study about perceived demanding and hurtful experiences communicated by 16 informants from some Pentecostal fellowships in Norway. The inclusion criterion was that they had experienced what they thought could relate to the misuse of spiritual power. The study analyzes the informants' perceptions of their interaction with the leaders in some Pentecostal fellowships. Two empirical patterns emerged in the material: 1) the dynamics of destabilization and 2) the dynamics of programming. The dynamics of destabilization created insecurity, and the informants expressed a) fear of the leaders, b) experiences of double-layered behavior, and c) difficult experiences with the leaders' communication of "messages from God." The dynamics of programming refers to experiences of legitimated logic in the fellowship, such as a) a dichotomy between evil and good and b) submission to the mission and loyalty to the leaders. We discuss the findings with the help of the theoretical concept of "ideological totalism", power theory, perspectives on Pentecostal leadership and theological perspectives from the field of diaconia. We found that the two dynamics provided a base for exploitive power and the weakening of an empowered agency. A diaconal focus suggests the need for an intervening power against this perceived misuse.

Keywords:

spiritual abuse | power misuse | totalism | diaconia | Christian fellowships

1. Introduction

Christian fellowships are generally expected to be wholesome and safe places. However, this is not always the case (Nygaard, 2015; Torkelsen, 2003). This article concerns experiences of perceived misuse of power in Pentecostal Christian Fellowships. The study focuses on the accounts of those who described having been exposed to the misuse of power.

We discuss the findings in light of the concept of "ideological totalism" and "quasitotalitarianism" (Lifton, 1989; Tangen, 2017), power theory (Mott, 1993), and

leadership studies from a Pentecostal context (Klaus & Heuser, 1998; Åkerlund & Tangen, 2018). These analytical, theoretical perspectives are related to approaches in diaconia theology that highlight the need to give the voiceless a voice (Nordstokke, 2011). Accordingly, Kleiven (2022) presented the mandate of diaconia as giving the oppressed the power to stand up by being confirmed in their dignity. This involves holding accountable those who misuse their position of power to invade and violate the dignity of other human beings (Kleiven, 2022).

Even though the empirical study focuses on Pentecostal churches and organizations, spiritual misuse should not be understood as a phenomenon isolated to Pentecostalism but as a phenomenon in all Christian and religious settings (Lifton, 1989). Nevertheless, this subject has recently raised concerns associated with Pentecostal environments in Norway. One reason is the TV documentary series “Frelst” (Saved) about a radical Christian youth movement, which was produced by the largest newspaper in Norway, *Verdens Gang* (VG), in 2016 and sparked a debate in Norwegian media.

Misuse of power can happen in any context where people gather, including diaconal contexts. Empirical research on experiences perceived and characterized as misuse of power is relevant for developing the field of diaconal research into new areas. We believe that the field of diaconal studies needs to be complemented with the area of spiritual misuse to achieve its aim of attaining new and systematic knowledge as a basis for finding the best possible action and decision in the practice field of diaconia (Stifoss-Hanssen, 2014).

The phenomenon researched in this article is related to the concept of spiritual abuse, which Lisa Ruth Oakley¹ et al. (2018) define in the following way:

Spiritual abuse is coercion and control of one individual by another in a spiritual context. The target experiences spiritual abuse as a deeply emotional personal attack. This abuse may include: manipulation and exploitation, enforced accountability, censorship of decision making, requirements for secrecy and silence, pressure to conform, misuse of scripture or the pulpit to control behavior, requirement of obedience to the abuser, the suggestion that the abuser has a “divine” position, isolation from others, especially those external to the abusive context (Oakley et al., 2018, 146).

This definition suggests how spiritual abuse can result in dependence, marginalization, and voicelessness.

This study draws on 16 interviews with informants from Christian fellowships in Pentecostal settings in Norway. Some informants reported experiences from the

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same congregation; other informants were the only ones representing such experiences from their fellowship. The material represents experiences from churches and organizations that are considered both classical Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal fellowships. The latter are either organized as part of the Pentecostal movement in Norway or outside it.

Pentecostalism is a diverse movement that has not only spread rapidly across the world since its origin but also changed while doing so (Wilkinson, 2012). Thus, it is problematic to generalize and clearly define Pentecostalism (Miller & Yamamori, 2007). Pentecostalism includes charismatic experiences and focus on the Holy Spirit, along with highlighting perceived gifts of the Spirit (Anderson, 2004). According to Anderson (2004), the terms “Pentecostal” and “Pentecostalism” refer to a wide variety of movements scattered around the world, described as having family resemblance (Anderson, 2004).

The Norwegian Pentecostal movement counts more than 300 congregations and has approximately 40,000 members (Akerlund, 2018). Today’s growing and profiled segments of Norwegian Pentecostalism incorporate newer church planting networks within the Pentecostal movement that have contemporary expressions, such as the Salt Network in Bergen and Puls Norway (formerly known as Intro and Hillsong Norway). These newer establishments exist next to older churches, such as the Filadelfia church, Norway’s oldest and largest Pentecostal Church (Eriksen & Tangen, 2019).

The research question this article wants to answer is this: *What characterizes the informants’ experience of spiritual misuse of power in some Pentecostal Christian fellowships in Norway?*

Here, “misuse of power” relates to spiritual abuse “as coercion and control of one individual by another in a spiritual context” (Oakley, 2018, 146). This understanding also uses theory of power (Mott, 1993). We use the synonymous term “misuse” and not “abuse” in this article to avoid associations with sexual abuse (Demasure, 2022) when the focus is on misuse of power in a Christian religious context.

2. Earlier Research

Empirical research on the misuse of power in the Christian context has been conducted in different Christian denominations.² The following overview includes

² This research overview is based on a database research, in which the following search words were used in English, Norwegian, and Swedish in combination with the search word “empirical”: spiritual abuse, spiritual misuse, spiritual harm, spiritual violation, spiritual misconduct, åndelig maktmisbruk, andligt maktmisbruk. The search was conducted in the following databases: SocINDEX with full

studies with persons who have reported hurtful experiences in Christian fellowships related to the leadership and culture of such groups. The studies took place in Christian fellowships across a variety of denominations worldwide (Orlowski, 2010), both in the mainstream (Oakley, 2009) and more cultlike churches (Ward, 2011). Oakley was unaware of the term spiritual abuse until 2001 and discovered it as she sought to make sense of her own experiences (Oakley & Kinmond, 2013). In her doctoral thesis, Oakley qualitatively studied spiritual abuse in the UK Christian churches. She investigated the existence of spiritual abuse to understand its processes and effects. Based on her empirical material, she tried to build a definition of the phenomenon from the stories of survivors (Oakley, 2009). In her research, she argues that one should recognize spiritual abuse as a distinct form of abuse that happens across different churches, with some clustering in charismatic churches, and that needs further research. After completing her thesis, she continued to study spiritual abuse with Kathryn Kinmond by utilizing and developing the concept in empirical research toward an acknowledged definition (Oakley & Kinmond, 2013). Oakley's work can thus provide a knowledge base for recognizing spiritual abuse as a form of abuse in its own right rather than associated with sexual abuse or other forms of abuse (Oakley & Humphreys, 2019; Oakley & Kinmond, 2014; Oakley & Kinmond, 2013; Oakley, 2009; Oakley et al., 2018).

Other researchers have also used "spiritual abuse" (Ward, 2011; Demasure, 2022). Ward (2011) conducted a qualitative study focusing on people who had left different groups with a "loosely Christian orientation" (Ward, 2011, 902). Pik (2016) explored individuals' experiences with clergy leaders and their power strategies in a Pentecostal Asian context. In the US, the Christian Reformed Church ordered a study conducted by the Calvin College Social Research Center that aimed to determine how prevalent abuse is in the church. The participants reported on physical, sexual, and emotional abuse among adult members, and the findings indicated that "28% of respondents admitted to having been abused in some way" (Annis & Rice, 2001, 38). Orlowski (2010) explored "spiritual abuse recovery" by canvassing informants from different denominations worldwide.

In Scandinavia, empirical studies have been conducted in different church contexts, with the potential of experiencing abuse in various forms, although this potential differs in various contexts. The common experienced religious authority and its shadow side in a Christian religious context are relevant to this article. For example, in her doctoral thesis, Nilsson (2019) focused on young people's experiences while growing up in the Knutby congregation in Sweden.³ Nilsson's (2019) aim was

text, Academic Search Elite, Atla Religion, eBook Academic Collection, eBook Collection, eBook Religion Collection, and Google Scholar.

3 The congregation was founded as a Pentecostal Church in 1921 but developed to a cultlike congregation and was eventually dissolved.

to find out how young people performed in the congregation before and after the dissolution of the congregation. She discusses the development of totalistic features developing under strong authority which laid claim to a particular sensitivity to the voice of God and had direct access to God's secrets (Lundgren, 2008).⁴ Nilsson's findings suggest that the young informants' understanding of a strong charismatic authority and the consequences such an authority had was individual. Torkelsen (2003, 1) studied employees involved in health-threatening staff conflicts in the Lutheran Church of Norway. The main finding was that employees involved in symmetrical and asymmetrical conflicts experienced these conflicts hazardous to their health, which reduced their quality of life. In another empirical study of Christian leadership in Norway, Kleiven (2018) focused on employees of the Youth With A Mission (YWAM) missionary organization and the tensions experienced with visionary leadership. He found that, to enable a healthy and visionary leadership in YWAM, the organization's visions should include safeguarding the dignity and welfare of its members. The leadership should be aware of their own limitations and thus establish an interdependency between leadership and members. This interdependency involves a settlement with the notion that the leadership only possesses the power of God to express God's will on behalf of the whole organization in a given context.

To our knowledge, there have been no empirical investigations of experiences of misuse of power in Pentecostal fellowships in Norway. Thus, the present study provides information on experiences of misuse of power in Pentecostal environments in Norway, where, as mentioned, concerns have been raised.

3. Theoretical Approach

This section presents the theoretical framework as follows: 3.1 Central concepts of use and misuse of power in Christian fellowships, 3.2 The theology of diaconia serving as an additional discussion partner, and 3.3 Concepts of ideological totalism and quasitotalism.

3.1 Central Concepts of Use and Misuse of Power in Christian Fellowships

Charles Stephen Mott (1993) presents three theoretical and theological definitions of power in a theological framework that can be related to the use and misuse in Christian settings. He distinguishes a "defensive power" as a power of good from

4 Lundgren analyzed the congregation and interviewed the former pastor, who was convicted and imprisoned for killing his wife.

God. This power is necessary for a mutual defense of a just fellowship and for keeping integrity. “Exploitive power” is the opposite of “defensive power”, in the sense that this kind of power is not empowering; it is coercive and creates inequality and imbalance. The third type of power is called “intervening power,” which works with the “defensive power” for good and tries to restore “defensive power” (from God) and to combat “exploitive power” (Mott, 1993).

3.2 The Theology of Diaconia – Making the Voice of the Voiceless Heard

To understand power dynamics in a Christian context, we also consult the normative theology of diaconia corresponding with the third type of power, “intervening power”.

Kjell Nordstokke (2011, 2012, 2021) presents diaconia as a social action and a ministry of care and healing. Diaconia has its role model in the service of Jesus, who always took sides with the poor, oppressed, and suffering. Diaconia of the Church is called to and should in various ways seek to empower (Nordstokke, 2012) the powerless in any given context – making their voices heard (Nordstokke, 2011). Nordstokke calls for a theology of diaconia to not ignore challenges concerning suffering and injustice but to show the same sensitivity “to human need and suffering” (Nordstokke, 2011, 16) as Jesus emphasized in his diaconal ministry “bestowed upon him by his heavenly father” (ibid.).

One of the tasks of the theology of diaconia is to spot experienced misuse of power because of the suffering it causes and to empower the affected. Nordstokke (2011) presents a branch of diaconia, the “prophetic diaconia,” in which the biblical prophets are “strong defenders of justice” (Nordstokke, 2011, 52). The prophets reacted when the perceived good will of God was broken (Nordstokke, 2011). Prophetic diaconal action should defend justice by unmasking power and thus promote justice.

The service of Jesus implied the exercise of diaconal authority/power (Nordstokke, 2011), and the theology of diaconia includes this authority when dealing with the misuse of power. Jesus’ diaconal authority always implies a critique thus unmasking misuse of power from below, meaning that diaconal power does not rule over or put people down by silencing or in various ways hurting them. It is power “along with” and a power “near” and empowering (Nordstokke, 2021). Diaconal power is always concerned with raising people up and empowering the powerless (Nordstokke, 2011; 2012; 2021).

3.3 Concepts of Ideological Totalism and Quasitotalism

Robert J. Lifton’s (1989) concept of “ideological totalism” provides an expanded understanding of “exploitive power” as a heading for “a complex set of psychological

themes” (Lifton, 1989, 419). In his research, conducted in the 1950s in Hong Kong, i. e., in the context of Communist China, he interviewed two groups: “Western civilians reformed in prisons, and Chinese intellectuals who had undergone their reform in universities or in revolutionary colleges” (Lifton, 1993, 8). Lifton discovered several criteria of “ideological totalitarianism” or criteria that have a totalistic quality. Four of these are particularly relevant for this study. Below, we shortly present Lifton’s (1989) four criteria or concepts: “milieu control”, “mystical manipulation”, “demand for purity”, and “doctrine over person.”

In addition to the four criteria from “ideological totalitarianism”, we refer to the two expressions of “ideological totalists”, meaning the communist leaders who represent “ideological totalitarianism” and “ultimate truth”, an unquestionable truth that only “ideological totalists” possess (Lifton, 1989). “Ideological totalitarianism” in our context refers to the informants’ experience that Pentecostal leaders resembled ultimate judges of good and evil within the fellowship (Lifton, 1989).

The first criterion, “milieu control”, regulates human communication within an environment. The system seeks dominance over communication, involving the internal communication of how people think and express their experiences. The second criterion or concept, “mystical manipulation” or “planned spontaneity”, is used to communicate the “ultimate truth”. It is an approach of extensive personal manipulation that “seeks to promote specific patterns of behavior and emotion in such a way that it appears to have arisen spontaneously from within the environment” (Lifton, 1989, 422). The third criterion, “demand for purity”, is based on a dichotomy between pure and impure or absolute good versus absolute evil. When leaders define and manipulate what is considered pure and impure, they create a narrow world of guilt and shame with an unreachable standard. The “demand of purity” makes it difficult to develop a balanced sensitivity toward the complexity of morality, guilt, and shame and is synonymous with black-and-white thinking. The fourth criterion, “doctrine over person”, occurs when there is a conflict between an individual’s experience and what a doctrine/ideology says the individual should be experiencing. The doctrine is then always more valid than the human experience.

When referring to some of Lifton’s criteria, noticed that “no milieu ever achieves complete totalitarianism, and many relatively moderate environments show some signs of it” (Lifton, 1989, 435). Lifton presents “ideological totalitarianism” “as the coming together of immoderate ideology with equally immoderate individual character traits – an extremist meeting ground between people and ideas” (ibid.). He also describes his research as “a study of the ‘closed’ versus the ‘open’ approaches to human change” (Lifton, 1989, Preface).

Even though Lifton developed his conceptual understanding based on the context of Communist China, which is vastly different from Christian Pentecostal fellowships in Norway, there are still some similarities in how the execution of centralized authority is experienced, thus resembling Lifton’s “ideological totalitarianism.”

These similarities may also be referred to as quasitotalitarianism, which refers to elements of the ideology of totalism, namely, not being entirely totalistic but having components from the ideology. Tangen (2017) points out the danger of how both charismatic organization and leadership get a grandiose self-identity and become idolized, involving the danger of forming a totalitarian organization culture. He is concerned that Christian leadership can turn into embedding ultimate hope, loyalty, and devotion as a repressive form of totalitarianism. This perspective of leadership as idolatry and quasitotalitarianism supports seeing Pentecostal settings as an expression of totalism (Tangen, 2017).

From Pentecostalism in Norway, Åkerlund and Tangen (2018) agreed with Klaus and Heuser (1998) that autocratic charismatic leadership has a shadow side that needs confession, suggesting it is still a problem. Klaus and Heuser (1998) wrote about the shadow side of charismatic leadership and tried to understand what happens “when leaders’ power goes uncontrolled” (1998, 166). They claim that it is a danger that Pentecostalism, in association with its leadership model and doctrines, is prone to facilitate misuse of power.

Åkerlund and Tangen (2018) propose what they call a “structure/agency” approach, analyzing charismatic leadership as being aware of the personal agency and responsibility in the relationship between the leader and the followers. Lifton’s notion of “ideological totalism” provides key terms for reflections on the findings in our study. Further, although not referring to Lifton, Tangen’s notion of “quasitotalitarianism” provides a moderated and adapted use of Lifton’s concept to the Pentecostal movement in Norway. In addition, we look closer at possibilities for personal agency and exertion of power (Åkerlund & Tangen, 2018) concerning informants’ experience of misuse of power.

4. Methods

To answer the research question about what characterizes the informants’ experience of misuse of spiritual power in some Pentecostal Christian fellowships in Norway, we conducted a qualitative study based on interviews. We used a semistructured interview guide to conduct the qualitative interviews (Kvåle et al., 2009). The informants were Norwegian Pentecostals who agreed that they had experienced what may be interpreted as spiritual misuse of power; we asked them to give as many details as possible of the alleged misuse. We conducted 16 interviews. The informants’ reports are only a small extract and might represent others with similar experiences relating to spiritual misuse of power. There is no reason to believe that there are not experiences of spiritual misuse to the same extent in other church contexts.

The analysis was inductive. The inductive approach enabled us to produce an analysis closer to the empirical data. We did a thematic bottom-up analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Each author reviewed the material independently by identifying tentative themes and categories. We discussed the themes and categories until we reached an agreement. After the inductive analysis, the categories we found resonated with four of Lifton's (1989) "ideological totalitarianism" criteria.

The first author was close to the research field and knew some of the informants. For this reason, the first author wrote the article together with two co-authors to maintain a balanced view. Given this proximity to the empirical material, having a team comprising three researchers conducting the analysis and writing this article strengthens the study's validity. The authors different backgrounds and perspectives challenge any potential bias. The project received ethical approval from SIKT⁵.

We chose Pentecostalism because misuse of spiritual power has been a topic regarding Pentecostal environment in Norway, and because of the first author's familiarity with it and access to informants. The interviewees stem from the first author's extended network through snowballing and from Source of Help (Hjelpeskilden), a Norwegian organization offering peer support for people who leave faith-based fellowships.

In terms of selection criteria, the interviewees (a) had experienced what they thought could relate to misuse of spiritual power in Pentecostal (including neo-Pentecostal) fellowships in Norway, (b) were 15 years or older when they experienced misuse⁶, and (c) the experienced misuse lay at least 2 years before the time of the interview. Four men and five women were still a part of a Christian fellowship at the time of the interview, whereas four women and three men did not have such a connection.

Table 1 Presentation of the informants

Anonymized name	Age during the period of the reported misuse of power	Age when interviewed	Role in the fellowship	Place	Still part of the fellowship or left the fellowship?	Those who left: Did they belong to other Christian communities at the time of the interview?
Arne	15–21	34	Volunteer, middle leader	Congregation	Left the fellowship	No

⁵ Formerly known as Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD).

⁶ 15 is the age of religious majority in Norway.

Åshild	20–31	46	Volunteer, middle leader	Organization, Congregation	Left the fellowship	No
Ellen	15–40	42	Volunteer	Congregation, Organization	Still part of the fellowship	
Erlend	19–30	40	Volunteer, middle leader	Organization, Congregation	Left the fellowship	Yes
Gry	21–23	48	Volunteer, middle leader	Organization, Congregation	Left the fellowship	Yes
Heidi	25–37	42	Volunteer, middle leader	Congregation	Left the fellowship	Yes
Henrik	25–27	29	Paid staff, leader	Organization	Still part of the fellowship	
Kamilla	15–26	29	Volunteer, middle leader	Congregation	Still part of the fellowship	
Kjell	17–30	45	Volunteer and paid staff, middle leader	Congregation	Left the fellowship	yes
Lisa	15–28	42	Volunteer, middle leader	Congregation, Organization	Left the fellowship	Yes
Mari	17–40	54	Volunteer	Congregation	Left the fellowship	No
Oddgeir	25–38	56	Volunteer	Congregation	Left the fellowship	No
Per	21–37	43	Volunteer, middle leader	Organization, congregation	Still part of the fellowship	
Pia	18–20	38	Volunteer	Congregation, Organization	Left the fellowship	No
Roar	15–20	37	Volunteer	Congregation	Left the fellowship	No

Trine	18–22	38	Volunteer, middle leader	Congregation, Organization	Left the fellowship	No
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5. Results

The interviews contained descriptions of perceived misuse experiences with the leaders in some Pentecostal Christian fellowships. Two main empirical categories of dynamics emerged in the analysis: the dynamics of destabilization and the dynamics of programming. The dynamics of destabilization created a sense of insecurity and a loss of predictability in the fellowship; the dynamics of programming shaped experiences of legitimated knowledge and logic inside the fellowship.

5.1 The Dynamics of Destabilization

Many informants recalled having a respectful relationship with their fellowship leaders at the beginning of their period in their community which changed over time. The three main elements that destabilized the positive experiences of such relationships emerged as 1) fear of the leaders, 2) double-layered behavior of leaders, and 3) the informants' experiences of the leaders' "messages from God."

5.1.1 Fear of Leaders

Many participants used "fear" to describe their experiences in Christian fellowships, sometimes explicitly in the interaction with their leader. As exemplified by Erlend: "Communication with this leader was extremely demanding [...], and I experienced much fear, very much fear, that made me unable to always say what I meant." Erlend also recalled that there was no room for him to speak out about his relationship with his leader because of confrontations. Over time, the communication with the leader made him fearful – his body would shiver as he approached the leader and trust vanished.

Pia gave another example, saying: "I feared him very much." She had observed how others were reprimanded by the leader when they tried to make a joke or have fun. She feared being exposed by the leader and scolded for not having the right attitude and not "having the spirit" if he heard her singing. Other informants reported being scolded when they said something their leaders considered wrong, insufficient, or inappropriate.

Per used the word "fear" to describe the church culture the leaders had instilled. They demanded comprehensive and total control over every detail. The prevailing attitude was that it was the pastor's church, and that the members had to obey even

if they differed in opinion. It seemed necessary for the pastor to get rid of those who failed to toe the line.

Roar explained that he feared the leaders of youth meetings would single him out. He recalled having a panic attack at a meeting and running out. The preacher followed him, shouting: “My child, why are you running away from God?” This created fear that he possibly had gone against the leader and God.

Fear shaped various situations, such as when an informant thought differently than the leader, experienced confrontations, or sensed that their leaders were critically checking whether they had “the spirit.” Some informants experienced control or were told that running away from a meeting was akin to running away from God. One could interpret the leader’s sphere as equivalent to that of God. The fear expressed by the informants resonates with Lifton’s (1998) concept of “milieu control.” They feared being exposed by the leaders for how they expressed their experiences, fearing they were not reaching the perceived standards set by the leaders.

5.1.2 Double-Layered Behavior

Many informants reported a surprising behavior of their leaders that often expressed itself in layers of double rhetoric. According to the informants, this double rhetoric consisted of a kind element visible to the outside and another, more unexpected element that was sometimes hidden.

According to some informants, the situation could seem outwardly friendly, but for those who were the addressee of the communication, it could be experienced as false and include unexpected elements. Henrik recounted one example that occurred when he had an ongoing conflict with a pastor. The pastor asked him unexpectedly if he could pray for him on the stage at a conference. Henrik was unprepared to be prayed for publicly, deeply taken aback, and experienced the situation as unpleasant. The positively formulated prayer contrasted with all the negative things the pastor had told him before. He described it as a nice prayer that externally would not be perceived as being problematic. Later the same evening, the pastor wrote Henrik an email, communicating that he did not wish to have any contact with him. The stark difference between the email and the prayer confirmed the falseness of the latter.

Kamilla was an openly lesbian member of her youth group and had been a worship leader at the meetings. After a period away from her worship team, she was invited to dinner by the youth leaders to discuss how she was. She was at the start of a relationship at the time. The leaders asked for her thoughts about returning to worship, to which she said that she wanted to return. She felt this was not the answer the leaders wanted to hear, and they had hoped she would not return. They

told her she could not join while in the relationship. She got angry because they knew already that she was at the start of a new relationship.

Trine recounted another example of perceived double-layered communication. She was told she could spend time at the leader's house studying grace. However, she found out that the real reason for the invitation was that she should babysit.

Perceived hidden and unexpected behavior was confusing and created a sense of insecurity and unpredictability among the participants. Unexpected behavior could be viewed as mystical manipulation (Lifton, 1989) because the communication with leaders appeared to be spontaneous, assuming the leaders arranged it so they could achieve their goals.

5.1.3 Leaders Receiving Messages from God

According to the informants, some leaders claimed being in direct contact with God. Many informants described how they felt powerless because this gave the impression that the leaders knew better than others about what was necessary to do.

Henrik stated that the pastor he had conflict with said he had heard from God and thus was right about a particular issue. According to Henrik, this shut off the dialog and thus maintained the conflict. Per also referred to experiences with a high-ranking leader who, according to Per, claimed he had heard from God. Per said: "It left us with a feeling of powerlessness" when the leader said that God had told him that the correct solution differed from the consensus a group of church leaders had reached. The feeling of powerlessness and the inconsideration of the group's experiences were challenging for them.

Kjell expressed his powerlessness concerning his church leaders differently, describing the feeling of being less spiritual than the other church leaders. Thus, he never knew the correct answers – the ones that they knew – and felt he had lost control of his life.

Roar recounted how a pastor had said he had got a message from God that a young person at the meeting was feeling suicidal:

After the meeting, I talked to him and said it might be me. He asked if there was a red wall where I lived, and I told him, "No." He answered: "Then it's probably not you. I will talk to today, but good luck." I get nauseous just thinking about it – when a teenager says he is suicidal.

When the participant responded to the pastor's message, the pastor refused to take the suicidal church member seriously because there was no red wall at his home,

and he thus not meet the pastor's criteria. As a result, the informant was left without help and felt rejected in a vulnerable situation between life and death.

The experiences of leaders saying they received messages from God left the informants with a sense of being powerless in a vulnerable position. In some cases, the informants' stories of how the leaders acted could be described as "milieu control" (Lifton, 1989). The informants perceived that these leaders communicated knowing the correct answers, which enabled them to control the criteria for truth. By claiming to have heard from God, they could define reality.

The interactions with their leader left the informants with many questions, making them withdraw from the dialog. They felt wrong and found themselves on the outside of the milieu they belonged to. The dynamics of destabilization distorted communication and created insecurity and loss of predictability in the fellowship. The informants perceived that some of their leaders aimed to represent the "ultimate truth," and that their role was to convey this rather than to seek a shared understanding.

5.2 The Dynamics of Programming

Simultaneously with the dynamics of destabilization creating ambivalence, the informants experienced the dynamics of programming. This comprises two dimensions: (a) a dichotomy of good and evil and (b) programming submission to the mission and loyalty to the leaders.

5.2.1 Programming a Dichotomy of Good and Evil

Several informants perceived an idealization of positive feelings being from God and difficult ones being from the evil side. Mari described how she and the milieu she was a part of were told not to rely on feelings. Still, positive feelings were presented as the ideal to be expressed, but not negative ones. Positive confessions were ideal; negative feelings were from Satan. This was not said directly, but evil was often talked about. Trine found that there was no room for the wholeness of life and the expression of troublesome emotions, but only for positivity. In her case, this led to an inability to express her feelings, including an absence of anger. Her psychologist tried to provoke anger from her but failed to do so.

The informants' withholding of feelings and thoughts had consequences. Lisa, who had suppressed her feelings throughout her life and discovered that she needed to work on these feelings to relate to others well, described it as follows:

I had no idea what I wanted. I did not know what I felt because I had been brought up to always rejoice in the Lord. So if I had feelings other than joy, I was trained to believe

that they were coming from the Devil, to be resolved by prayer and tongues – and not by talking to someone about it or trying to understand it. If you have dark thoughts, they are from the Devil.

Some informants presented a dichotomy between positive feelings from God and negative ones from the Devil. Only joy and positive feelings were allowed. The solution for negative feelings was not portrayed as openness and understanding but as prayer and speaking in tongues. According to the informants, difficult and hurtful feelings were not to be “touched” upon or named.

From the informants’ recollections, it seems that showing vulnerability, being critical, or even often voicing their own understanding of things were considered threats to the primary mission, which was getting people saved effectively. According to Arne, sharing the Gospel was always more important than sharing experiences, thoughts, and feelings.

Several informants described the positivity ideal as a dichotomy with positive feelings from God and negative feelings from the Devil. Negative feelings were seen as a sign that they were heading in the wrong direction. The solution they described was not going to a psychologist or receiving professional help but, for instance, focusing on praying.

The opposition the participants experienced toward negative feelings, thoughts, and concerns might be interpreted as wanting to protect God and His mission from the Devil. The participants perceived it as serving either one or the other side. The concept of “the demand for purity” contains a suitable description of the dichotomy between absolute good and absolute evil (Lifton, 1989).

5.2.2 The Programming of Submission to the Mission and Loyalty to the Leaders

The findings showed that submission to the communicated mission and loyalty to the leaders were expected of the informants. Submission concerned the plans and projects initiated by the leaders and gave the impression that it was an expression of the will of God. Being subject to submission, the informants said they had to set aside their own needs for the more significant cause.

When volunteering in their church, for example, Gry explained that she and her fiancé were recommended to take one day off per week for themselves as a couple. On these days off, they were so tired they fell asleep, so they did not get time together as a couple. They did not seem able to respond critically to the leaders and set good boundaries for themselves.

Per told a similar story about the high expectations he had for his role as a volunteer, to the point that he felt his efforts for the church were never enough:

I was sort of taken on my attitude. You could not have such an attitude in that church, and I felt that to be very unjust. By that time, I had already put in thousands of hours volunteering [...], and I ended up feeling depleted over time because my attitude and commitment were constantly being challenged: You never felt that what you were doing was enough. I have expended a lot of energy, but [...] they still wanted more. I felt that they lacked basic respect for people.

Per found it unjust that he was not being heard and respected by the leadership in a congregation when he was constructively voicing his opinions. This, in combination with continual volunteering in his church, which he described as being for thousands of hours, made it not being heard worse. He found that more was needed no matter how much time and energy he gave. He said his engagement resulted in long-term side effects, such as frustration, unrest, restless thoughts, and occasional insomnia.

Lisa described how she experienced trying to live up to an ideal. She gave everything to reach out with the Gospel, to the point that she was not caring for herself. Lisa recalled neglecting her own matters to give everything to God from an early age. By her teens, she felt it was her responsibility to save fellow pupils at school, a task handed down from adults through preaching and teaching. Arne also recalled feeling responsible for sharing the Gospel from a young age. "You have to be active both in the family and at school. Here is the folder with everything; that's how you do it [...], so it was a lot of emotional manipulation." He described this as a massive responsibility that many of the other informants also felt toward evangelizing, being given a manual and sent off to save people. Arne himself considered this expectation manipulative. He said there was no room for objections based on personal needs. This kind of submission may be interpreted as a setting where a "doctrine" was put "over a person" (Lifton, 1989). In a totalist environment, the doctrine goes before experience and personal feelings. The exercise of asymmetrical power perceived by the informants can be exploitative (Mott, 1993) because of its lack of care and respect for boundaries.

The informants felt that their needs were being suppressed vis-à-vis those of the leaders. Some said that suppressing their own needs was understood as showing loyalty to them. Many informants reported experiencing demands for loyalty to their leaders.

Ellen said: "If you are critical, you can just forget becoming a leader." This statement supports the impression held by other informants that being critical had consequences for opportunities in their communities. Per stated the following:

It was vital to stick with the pastor, that the pastor saw in you someone they could count on. The pastor had a lot of power in terms of easily handing people positions.

Being loyal and not critical of the pastor was necessary to avoid missing opportunities. Åshild said that if the leaders felt that someone was critical of them, the followers were made to “repent on our knees and ask God for forgiveness for being critical.” Oddgeir recalled how he did not want to go against the leaders, “being men of God” and thus being able to understand God’s will. He did not do what he thought was right because he wanted to be part of God’s plan and on board with the leaders. Kjell observed that the ones that he noticed were critical were silently banished.

Many of the informants’ narratives gave the impression that the leadership was not supposed to be criticized. Some informants felt that simply asking a question, voicing an opinion, or wanting a dialog were experienced as criticism and resisted. This way of dealing with opinions and criticism can be interpreted as attempts at programming to convey an ultimate truth in the fellowship. The dynamics of programming shaped experiences of the legitimated knowledge and logic inside the fellowship. Programming is achieved through “demand for purity” and “doctrine over person” (Lifton, 1989).

5.3 Between Destabilization and Programming

The dynamics of destabilization and programming that were carved out in the analysis overlapped and emerged as an interplay (cf. figure 1). Also, an interplay between these dynamics appeared as back-and-forth experiences of fear and insecurity, unpredictable relationships, perceived resistance to critical thinking, limited legitimated knowledge, and logic. The dynamics appeared both independently of each other and in an interplay between them.

The informants experienced the ambivalence of belonging to a fellowship as a wearisome tension between destabilization and programming. This tension devalued their own judgments. One can describe the interplay between destabilization and programming as an ongoing process. The ambivalence of being inside or outside occurred along with confusion, unpredictability, uncertainty, and fear.

6. Discussion

This article asks what characterizes the informants’ experience of the misuse of spiritual power in some Pentecostal Christian fellowships in Norway. The fellowships made members feel vulnerable through destabilization, programming, and their interplay. The informants expressed ambivalence toward belonging to a context described by Lifton’s concept of an “ideological totalitarianism” and Mott’s concept of “exploitive power.” In this section, we discuss our findings using the theoretical

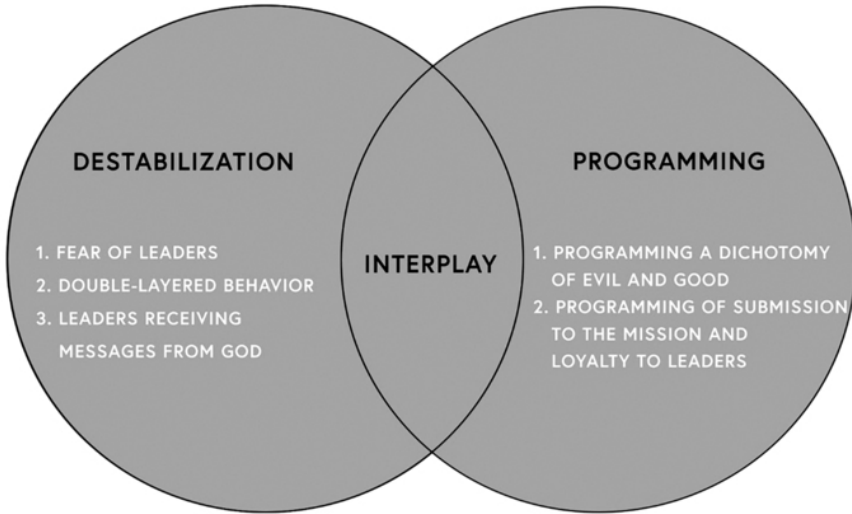


Figure 1 Findings of the perceived dynamics of relationships with the leaders of the communities.

concepts of Lifton and Mott, supported by other literature references introduced in Sections 2 and 3.

6.1 Misuse of Power by Protecting and Promoting the Ultimate Truth

Many informants described their fear of their leaders as a characteristic of misuse of power. This destabilizing sensation of fear and confusion occurred along with the feeling that they had not managed to live up to what they perceived as the standard for being a Christian in the milieu. Ambivalence ensued, resulting in tension between themselves, their needs, and their belonging to their fellowship's culture.

The informants thought they served their leaders through hard work to participate in God's project to belong fully. The informants felt that this loyalty to serve the system made them borderless. It created a stretch that stopped them from acting through integrity and thus not having individual agency (Åkerlund & Tangen, 2018). These experiences can be interpreted as submission to the mission and may be an expression of the term "doctrine over person," which states that what one

should experience is always more important than a person's actual feelings (Lifton, 1989).

In the findings relating to the informants' reports about misuse, elements of "ideological totalitarianism" emerged and can be summed up as having the task of protecting and promoting "ultimate truth," contributing to "exploitive power" (Mott, 1993).

Experiences of misuse of power emerged as the dynamics of destabilization and programming. The interplay of these two contributes to perceived exploitive power over the informants. These dynamics caught the informants in a perceived ongoing misuse, causing them to disregard their own judgment.

Lifton (1989) argued that "ideological totalitarianism" offers security, especially for young people, because it simplifies the world and provides all the answers for life. However, there is an ambivalence toward this security. There is also a fear of reactions that might cause trouble for fellowship members if they do not behave according to "ideological totalitarianism." Although the reactions feared by our informants differed from those expected in Chinese communism, the fear of reactions was clear among the informants. Resembling "ultimate truth," some of the informants perceived that the Christian life was presented without room for doubt and thus gave them a sense of security as long as they remained committed to living according to the God-given standard.

Lifton's notion of "ideological totalitarianism" (1989) is similar to what the informants experienced when every answer and every solution to the informants' needs in life was placed inside the fellowship. A useful life was not accessible outside it. For the informants in this study, protecting and promoting the "ultimate truth" created a dichotomy of either being inside the truth and meeting the perceived standards for purity by belonging wholly to the fellowship or being outside the truth and outside the fellowship.

6.2 A Mystical Way to Communicate the Ultimate Truth

"Mystical manipulation" could be related to ways of communicating "ultimate truth." The "ideological totalist" communication of this "ultimate truth" is what Lifton (1989) called an assumption of omniscience. This can be compared to how the informants experienced their leaders. The informants perceived that the leaders knew everything and what was best for the people in the fellowship. In some Pentecostal settings, it seemed as if the informants experienced that the leaders had an exclusive possession of knowing what was right and wrong (Lifton, 1989). This way of relating to the ultimate truth and conveying it created vulnerability to "exploitive power" to our informants (Mott, 1993).

The informants' experience of the need to be loyal to the God-given messages of some Pentecostal leaders might be seen in the light of Lifton's theory. According to Lifton, in Communist China, the leaders were experienced as manipulative and

surrounded by a mystical aura. This was also the case for the informants in our study in parts of Norwegian Pentecostalism. The informants in our study found it hard to relate to double-layered communication.

As well as perceived misuse of power that seemed to be used to protect and promote the “ultimate truth,” messages from some leaders appeared to come spontaneously from God, although, according to the informants, the leaders had arranged them to fit their narrative. Even if the leaders did not say, “Thus says the Lord,” they often displayed a mystical aura to the informants. Examples include when the leaders prayed, made prophecies, or gave the impression that they had received a message from God to certain people when they were ministering in front of a crowd, to a few people, or one on one.

The informants described some of their leaders – like the leaders described in Lifton’s study – as having an answer for everything since they appeared to be operators on behalf of God’s “ultimate truth.”

The informants sensed that they were often not being given understandable reasoning and arguments by their leaders. Since leaders gave the impression of hearing and sensing the ultimate truth directly from God, their opinions could not be disputed. According to some informants, questioning the leaders would mean questioning God. This would leave many of the informants with a sense of powerlessness. The leaders appeared to know the will of God in a manner that the informants were unable to and never would. How the leaders behaved in some Pentecostal contexts had a mystical aura and gave the impression that they were closer to God in all their enterprises.

The informants described themselves as having little room to criticize or even ask questions to understand and relate to ideas presented by many of their leaders. They might have questioned their leaders’ behavior but did not feel they would receive suitable answers. This lack of answers has a mysticity to it. As we understand it, the informants were stretched, became confused, and entered the “in-between” dynamics and experienced splitting, as communication was experienced as unclear, or the leader’s behavior seemed odd and unexpected. The informants characterized this splitting communication as a lack of openness and understanding and a fear of being exposed.

This one-way communication by the leaders experienced by the informants created an asymmetrical power dynamics between them and their leaders and thus created a sense of powerlessness among many of them since they were without access to the truth that the ideological totalists showed they had, thus making them vulnerable to “exploitive power” (Mott, 1993). This kind of vulnerability could be understood as a continuing stretch between the dynamics of destabilization and programming. According to Lifton, it is entirely impossible to live up to the standard set by “ideological totalism” (Lifton, 1989).

6.3 Are All Actors Responsible?

To understand how the power dynamics affected the relationship between the informants and their leaders, we need to address the concept of agency. The dichotomy of inside-outside challenges the idea of followership and personal agency (Åkerlund & Tangen, 2018).

Klaus and Heuser (2018) studied the shadow side of charismatic leadership and tried to understand what happens “when leaders’ power goes uncontrolled” (1998, 166). They claim that a danger of Pentecostalism, in association with its leadership model and doctrines, is that it is prone to facilitate misuse of power. Regarding Pentecostalism in Norway, Åkerlund and Tangen (2018) agreed with Klaus and Heuser (1998) that autocratic charismatic leadership has a shadow side that needs confession, suggesting it is still a problem.

Åkerlund and Tangen (2018) propose a structure/agency approach for analyzing charismatic leadership, which criticized Klaus and Heuser (1998) because of the exclusive focus on leaders. To improve charismatic leadership and to avoid misuse, they suggested it is insufficient to focus only on the leaders; instead, other elements are relevant as well, and the focus should be on the personal agency of the followers (Åkerlund & Tangen, 2018).

They suggest that everyone – both leaders and followers in a given environment – must take responsibility for what is going on when power is misused and for taking action against it. “All partners in the leadership relation [leaders and followers] bear responsibility for avoiding destructive charismatic cultures” (Åkerlund & Tangen, 2018, 109). However, the question is what such responsibility implies.

Considering the empirical findings in this study, we put Åkerlund and Tangen’s (2018) assumptions of follower responsibility in another light. We ask whether the requested agency of followers is utopic for the informants of this study, although the dynamics of leaders and followers ideally is a two-way exercise. Our research indicates that, as followers, the informants felt stripped of the opportunity to influence situations as long as they remained in the environment.

6.4 The Theology of Diaconia and Unmasking Spiritual Misuse of Power

Diaconia may provide an unmasking of the spiritual misuse of power to empower those subjected to it. Many informants had blind faith and loyalty to what their leaders communicated, which is an example of exploiting the power. Such a situation needs the intervention of empowerment to understand the power interaction going on and thus unmask its injustice (Nordstokke 2011). The concern of the theology of diaconia, specifically the prophetic diaconia, is to unmask the power that made our informants experience misuse of spiritual power and the suffering it caused them. According to Nordstokke, “... empowerment always implies a shift of power, which

means that imbalances of power must be dealt with critically [...] with reference to diaconal praxis and how power is established and executed in the life of the Church. Too often the question of power is silenced in the Church [...]" (Nordstokke 2011, 60)

"Intervening power" (Mott, 1993) has associations with the life of Jesus and with his authority: Jesus intervened against exploitive power. As Mott (1993) described, "intervening power" has contributed to unmasking power in both church and society by conveying openness to what power is being executed. It exposes the use of power that suppresses and debases, for example when Jesus rebuked the Pharisees after they had criticized him for healing on the Sabbath (Nordstokke 2021).

This leads us to the question of how the theology of diaconia can be understood as an "intervening power" against "exploitive power" (Mott, 1993) in the interplay between destabilization and programming, which is part of this discussion. It is a diaconal matter to ensure that the weaker part's perspective is the focus of attention and taken care of (Nordstokke 2011). Diaconia, seen as a counterpower, opposes the exploiting power, conveys openness, and unmasks and reveals the power to empower participants (Nordstokke, 2012). Diaconia, as an "intervening power" that "stands in the gap between oppressor and oppressed" (Mott, 1993, 21), may provide the unmasking and empowerment needed to take responsibility for informants subjected to the misuse of power (Nordstokke, 2011). In this way, a diaconal approach includes an authoritative role of a go-between (Nordstokke 2011) against injustice and dehumanizing structures and ideas. It could be an intervention of love (Nordstokke, 2011, 11).

According to Mott (1993), the misuse of power is destructive and not from God; it is a coercive force that takes and does not give. It creates inequality and imbalance and is therefore evil. In contrast, Mott's idea of "defensive power" can be described as taking part in the power/authority of God (Nordstokke, 2011). The role of diaconia in dealing with cases of spiritual misuse might be to act as "intervening power" along with "defensive power", empowering the informants to unmask spiritual misuse of power. "Intervening power" works together with "defensive power" for the good to restore justice.

7. Conclusion

The research question we wanted to answer was this: *What characterizes the informants' experience of spiritual misuse of power in some Pentecostal Christian fellowships in Norway?*

This article analyzes the experiences of 16 informants with spiritual misuse of power in some Pentecostal fellowships in Norway. Our analysis identified two main

patterns in these dynamics: the dynamics of destabilization and the dynamics of programming. The dynamics of destabilization included a) the informants' fear of the leader in some Pentecostal fellowships, b) the double-layered behavior of the leaders, and c) the informants' experiences of the leaders' approach to their "messages from God." The dynamics of destabilization created a sense of insecurity and a loss of predictability in the fellowship. The programming dynamics included a) programming of a dichotomy between evil and good and b) submission to the mission and loyalty to the leaders. The latter dynamics shaped experiences of legitimated knowledge and logic inside the fellowship. Also, an interplay between these dynamics appeared as back-and-forth experiences of fear and insecurity, along with unpredictable relationships and limited legitimated knowledge and logic. The back-and-forth processes created long-lasting feelings of distress.

These dynamics and the interplay between them emerged in the material as a basis for "exploitive power" and weakening in empowered agency. Loyalty to the leaders and the mission seemed to be the driving force. Finally, the potential of the theology of diaconia as an "intervening power" is discussed.

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