

STATEMENT OF OPINIONS AND FACTS/DATA TO SUPPORT THESE OPINIONS

RE: Sweidy v. SRA et al.

Abstract

Large group awareness trainings (LGATs) employ a sophisticated process of persuasion, which minimizes critical thinking among participants and then – when participants are more likely to rely on intuition – takes advantage of established intuitive biases. This document starts with a brief overview of LGATs – what they are, their history and which groups/organizations influenced them, the results of participation, and how they have replicated and spread across the globe – and then moves onto an explanation of the furtive persuasion processes used by LGATs. It concludes with a discussion of the risks of participation.

John Hunter, PhD

Specified Requirements

(i) a complete statement of all opinions the witness will express and the basis and reasons for them; (ii) the facts or data considered by the witness in forming them;

- Both (i) and (ii) are covered in this document

(iii) any exhibits that will be used to summarize or support them;

- All items incorporated are referenced in this document

(iv) qualifications, including a list of all publications authored in the previous 10 years;

Name

John Alexander Hunter, PhD

Background

In 2010, I was required to take part in a “personal development” seminar as part of an induction process at a company in South Africa. The seminar ran over two (long) evenings and two full days, and I was deeply disturbed by the manipulation and abuse that I witnessed over those four days. However, I was fascinated by how a process involving *significant psychological stress and sleep disruption, followed by stress-removal and social reward* led to the powerful emotional state that I witnessed in most participants. I was also fascinated by the fact that – despite the abusive conditions – most participants believed (at least transiently) that the seminar had changed their lives. Having been diagnosed with bipolar disorder in 2003, I recognized psychological stress, sleep disruption, and social reward to be established triggers of (hypo)mania. When I looked at the emotional state elicited in seminar participants, I recognized that it looked similar, if not identical, to bipolar (hypo)mania. After completing the seminar, I spoke with the chairman of our company, expressing my concerns about harm coming to participants and, when my concerns were dismissed, I resigned. In the years that followed, I spent thousands of hours researching these *large group awareness trainings* (LGATs). I discovered that there are hundreds of them around the world and that most can be traced back to Lifespring and est (or Mind Dynamics). They all use similar (if not identical) processes, although they tend to claim that they developed these processes themselves. The complaints levelled against these organizations (of manipulation, exploitation, and harm) also tend to be similar, regardless of where the LGAT is being offered and which organization is offering it.

Based on my understanding of the psychology and neurobiology of bipolar disorder (which I had studied informally at that point) and established triggers of (hypo)mania, I theorized a mechanism by which LGATs generate their powerful emotional experiences. This mechanism explains not only this “transformational” experience, but also many of the commonly reported adverse effects of participation, such as grandiosity, psychosis, impulsive behavior, and mood instability. In 2013, I returned to university to study psychology formally and my primary goal was to gain an understanding of the LGAT process and its relationship with triggers and symptoms of bipolar disorder. I completed a *non-degree purposes* qualification in psychology in 2014 (*summa cum laude* equivalent), my honors in psychology in 2015 (*summa cum laude*), my master’s in research psychology in 2016 (*cum laude*), and my PhD in psychology in 2018 (recipient of the 2017 University of KwaZulu-Natal Doctoral Research Scholarship for the College of Humanities). My PhD dissertation, *Stress-induced Hypomania in Healthy Participants: The Allostatic Manic-Defense Hypothesis*, provides the most comprehensive review of literature on LGATs to date, offers a neurobiological explanation for the LGAT “experience,” and uses established findings from neuroscience, cognitive psychology, social psychology, and behavioral economics to explain how LGATs influence participants.

Education

University of KwaZulu-Natal

2018	Doctor of Philosophy (Psychology)
2016	Master of Social Science (Research Psychology) – <i>cum laude</i>
2015	Bachelor of Social Science Honors (Psychology) – <i>summa cum laude</i>
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2001	Bachelor of Business Science (Finance Honors)
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(v) a list of all other cases in which, during the previous 4 years, the witness testified as an expert at trial or by deposition; and

- Not applicable

(vi) a statement of the compensation to be paid for the study and testimony in the case.

- I am not being paid for this work

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Introduction

This document provides an overview of Large Group Awareness Training (LGAT), based on the PhD dissertation, *Stress-induced Hypomania in Healthy Participants: The Allostatic Manic-defense Hypothesis* (Hunter, 2018) and additional research on LGATs since that time. It begins with an overview of LGATs, explaining briefly what they are, some of the major organizations and movements which influenced them, the promised (and reported) impact of participation, and how the easily replicable processes incorporated have allowed “new” LGATs to emerge after the older ones have shut down (or, as is not infrequently the case, after the older ones have *been shut down*). In discussing the “new” LGATs which have emerged, it will be acknowledged that modern LGATs have removed certain conspicuously abusive elements (like screaming and extreme sleep deprivation); however, it will be argued that the fundamental LGAT process of *significant psychological stress followed by social reward* is required to generate the transient “transformational” experiences central to these seminars. Consequently, modern LGATs generate significant stress, but do so in a (slightly) more clandestine manner.

Following this background information, an explanation of LGAT influence/persuasion will be offered. Stated simply, LGATs employ processes which minimize participants’ *motivation* and *ability* to think critically. While critical thinking is minimized, participants are primed to trust “intuition,” “natural knowing,” or some equivalent, and then processes which have been shown to distort intuition (or “take advantage of cognitive biases”) are employed by those running the LGAT. While numerous such factors will be discussed, the primary lever used by LGATs to manipulate intuition is the powerful emotional (“transformational”) experience, elicited at the end of the seminar. A neurobiological explanation for how this “transformational” experience is generated will be provided, which allows insights into both: (i) the specific effects/symptoms of LGAT “transformation”; and (ii) some of the more frequently reported psychological casualties of participation. This hypothesized neurobiological mechanism requires *significant psychological stress* to be effective, so while modern LGATs may claim to have removed some of the more blatantly offensive elements, these *experiential* seminars could not generate their *experiences* without this psychological stress. The seminars which preceded, and influenced, LGATs of the 1970s were more overtly abusive than those which followed. LGATs offered in the 1970s and 1980s removed certain conspicuously abusive elements to appease the market of that time, and it will be argued that modern LGATs are no different. There may be cosmetic differences between early and modern LGATs, but they are only that – cosmetic.

This document concludes with a discussion of the risks of participation. Since their inception, LGATs have been accused of causing psychological harm, including but not limited to extreme mood swings and psychosis. When concerns were raised about these psychological injuries in the 1970s and 1980s, research that could link LGAT processes to these casualties did not yet exist; however, the proposed mechanism by which LGATs achieve “transformation” explains why participants experience these negative reactions. The screening processes used by modern LGATs (which target healthy adults) will then be specified and the risks of using LGAT processes on a *highly vulnerable group of adolescents* will be considered. It will be argued that, based on the screening criteria used by a prominent modern LGAT, no SRA students would be permitted to participate. Peer-reviewed research has found that LGATs offer no long-term benefits for adults, there is no peer-reviewed research on the impact of LGATs on adolescents, and there are good reasons to believe that participation may be harmful to some. Given the remarkable work done to advance mental health treatments, and the scientific standards required to demonstrate the efficacy of these interventions, there is no reason to gamble with the mental health of young women using unproven and potentially harmful processes.

A Brief Overview of LGATs

What are LGATs?

Large group awareness training (LGAT) is the generic term for a type of “personal development” seminar that was popularized in San Francisco in the 1970s and which have subsequently been conducted in at least 26 countries on six continents (Finkelstein et al., 1982; J. D. Fisher et al., 1989; Hunter, 2018; Klar et al., 1990; Landmark, 2021c; Lieberman, 1987; Singer, 2003). LGATs typically involve an introductory evening, three to five days of core “training,” and a celebratory evening a few days after the core training ends. Sessions are conducted by a head trainer, supported by several assistants (often unpaid former graduates of the LGAT), and there may be a few dozen to a few hundred participants. LGATs involve restrictive ground rules, long hours, extreme philosophical perspectives, and emotionally charged/confrontational (psychologically stressful) exercises and interactions between the trainer and participants (Finkelstein et al., 1982; Haaken & Adams, 1983; Lieberman, 1987; Singer, 2003). The most prominent LGATs of the 1970s and 1980s were the Lifespring Basic Training (“Lifespring”) and the est Training (“est”). Establishing the prominence of Lifespring and est, and their similarities with one another, is important as they have influenced many/most LGATs operating today. While they no longer exist (in their original forms), excerpts from several peer-reviewed journal articles reveal the importance of these two early seminars:

In the past decade, hundreds of thousands of people have participated in intensive large group awareness trainings. “Lifespring,” “Actualizations,” and “est” (Erhard Seminars Training) are the best known of these enterprises. (Finkelstein et al., 1982, p. 515)

These widely marketed programs, designed and organized to effect significant and positive changes in the lives of participants were first successfully initiated by Werner Erhard with est, and are now dominated by est and Lifespring. (Haaken & Adams, 1983, p. 270)

Organizations like *est* and Lifespring are two well-known examples of the for-profit expression of this motif in our society. (Lieberman, 1987, p. 460)

The term *Large Group Awareness Training* (LGAT) has been applied to a number of different “enhancement-based” interventions (e.g., *est*, Lifespring)... (J. D. Fisher et al., 1989, p. 747)

Large group awareness training programs (LGATs; e.g., *est*, Lifespring, and the Forum) were first offered to the American public in the early 1970s at the same time the encounter group movement was declining (Back, 1978). (Klar et al., 1990, p. 99)

Major Influences on LGATs

According to Lieberman (1987, p. 460), “Lifespring and est share many similarities...,” which is unsurprising considering their common influences. The confrontational natures of the organizations which influenced Lifespring and est also provide insight into the psychologically stressful approaches used by both early and modern LGATs. Lieberman (1987) explains that LGATs were influenced by encounter groups, which were prominent in the 1960s, while others detail the influence of the *Leadership Dynamics* and *Mind Dynamics*¹ organizations (M. Fisher, 1987; Pressman, 1993; Rhinehart, 1976/2010). Marc Fisher of the *Washington Post* reveals that Lifespring’s primary founder, John Hanley, was a participant in Leadership Dynamics:

While working for Holiday Magic, Hanley attended Patrick’s Leadership Dynamics Institute, a brutal training program in which salesmen were whipped, beaten, tied to crosses and forced to eat garbage and feces. Hanley made a name for himself at the institute when he reacted to being locked in a coffin for 14 hours by falling asleep. (M. Fisher, 1987)

¹ This organization was formed by Alexander Everett, mentioned by both Brandon Courtney and Jean Courtney in deposition testimony (BC, 2022; JC, 2022).

Journalist Steven Pressman reveals that the founder of est, Werner Erhard, also took part in the Leadership Dynamics workshop:

By the time Erhard gathered his staff together for the session with Emery, the Leadership Dynamics course had become the target of lawsuits brought up by participants who had signed up only to find themselves the unwitting victims of cruel physical and emotional abuse during the sessions. In some cases instructors ordered participants into closed coffins. Others were hung onto large wooden crosses for hours at a time. Still others were forced to take off all their clothes while fellow participants taunted them with cruel insults. In one session, a man was forced to perform fellatio on an artificial penis while women attending a separate Leadership Dynamics class were brought in to watch. (Pressman, 1993, p. 41)

Both John Hanley and Werner Erhard were also trainers at a forerunner to LGATs called Mind Dynamics² (M. Fisher, 1987; Hanley, 2018; Pressman, 1993; Rhinehart, 1976/2010) and, according to Pressman (1993, p. 80), “Like est, Lifespring was aggressively marketed and copied many of the mental exercises at the core of Mind Dynamics.” Marc Fisher explains that John Hanley was instrumental in making the Mind Dynamics seminars more confrontational:

Damaske³ and others say Hanley was one of the trainers who pushed to give Mind Dynamics more flash, more physical contact, more emotional confrontation. The idea was to bare your soul, tear down your personality and build a new person. (Fisher M., 1987)

Like LGATs today, Leadership Dynamics used a process involving *significant psychological stress followed by stress-removal and social reward* to elicit a powerful emotional state (“transformation”) in participants. This manipulation of mood/emotion is central to the influence process used by LGATs (Hunter, 2018). Describing the impact of stress-removal following the psychological stress of the Leadership Dynamics process – a euphoric state that appears to be the goal of “experiential” seminars like LGATs – Pressman (1993, p. 42) states:

The dark moment of violence ended almost as abruptly as it had begun, and by the end of the marathon session, on Sunday morning, everyone in the room seemed to be in giddy and jovial spirits.

² Some might argue that Leadership Dynamics and/or Mind Dynamics were, in fact, the first LGATs.

³ A former Mind Dynamics instructor (M. Fisher, 1987).

Leadership Dynamics and Mind Dynamics are widely accepted as major influences on the LGATs which followed; however, this is not to say that the founders of Lifespring, est, and other LGATs were not influenced by other groups and organizations. There is evidence that LGATs took processes and philosophies from the Esalen Institute, Zen Buddhism, gestalt therapy, Scientology, and humanistic psychology, although the originators of these processes did not always appreciate the way that their thinking and processes were being applied (Bartley, 1978; Hanley, 2018; Pressman, 1993; Rhinehart, 1976/2010; Self, 1992). Pressman (1993, p. 15) relates the comments of one of humanistic psychology's founders, Carl Rogers, on est:

"I've never been through est, and I don't think I want to," Rogers told a pair of interviewers in the mid-1970s. "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."

For the purposes of document, it is sufficient to note that early LGATs Lifespring and est shared common ancestors and that the processes incorporated by these ancestors were stress-inducing. Leadership Dynamics was plagued by lawsuits (Langone, 1989; Pressman, 1993) while Mind Dynamics was charged with fraud and practicing medicine without a licence (Michaels et al., 1991). Both were forced to shut down in the early 1970s; however, many Mind Dynamics trainers took the (easily replicable) processes they had learned and formed their own LGAT organizations.⁴ In addition to learning how to replicate these processes, they possibly also learned that it would be wise to remove some of the more conspicuously abusive elements that had resulted in lawsuits for Leadership Dynamics.

The (Promised and Reported) Impact of LGAT Participation

LGATs are, by their own description, "experiential" (Brewer, 1975; Lieberman, 1987; Steller, 2009) and claim that they offer "transformational learning," as opposed to "informational learning where you're basically adding more information and trying to remember things" (Hunter, 2018). They promise participants a shift in reality – as one might expect from ingesting a psychoactive substance – and the stated focus of these seminars is *experiencing*, as opposed

⁴ John Hanley explains that he was one of Lifespring's five original founders, all of whom had been trainers at Mind Dynamics (Hanley, 2018). The others were Charlene Afremow, who went on to work for est (Pressman, 1993); Larry Jensen who later formed a company called ASSET and was described on his website as a "consultant to Werner Erhard and est" (larryjensen.com, n.d.); Robert White who later founded a company which ran *Life Dynamics* courses (LGATs) in Japan and other countries (mindbodynetwork.com, n.d.); and Randal Revell who later formed a company called *Context International* (contextinternational.com, n.d.) offering LGATs. *PSI Seminars*, which offers LGATs (Singer, 2003), was founded by Thomas Willhite, who was also a Mind Dynamics trainer (York, 2009), and Stewart Emery, who was a trainer at Mind Dynamics and the first CEO of est, founded *Actualizations*, which also offered LGATs (Finkelstein et al., 1982; Pressman, 1993).

to retaining and understanding information (Brewer, 1975; Finkelstein et al., 1982; Hanley, 2018; Klar et al., 1990; Landmark, 2016a, 2019; Rhinehart, 1976/2010). Appreciating the short-term impact of LGAT participation is vital because one may wonder why anyone would put themselves through the psychological stress that occurs in these seminars and because the mechanism behind their “experiential” results is what makes them potentially harmful.

The powerful emotional experience generated by LGATs is also central to their process of persuasion. LGATs promise to “transform” participants (Braid, 2003; Citizen Skeptic, 2014; Hill, 2003; Lemonnier, 2005; Mahoney, 1998; McClure, 2009; Pressman, 1993; Scioscia, 2000; Woodhouse & Vandenberg, 2000), dramatically shifting their perspectives (Brewer, 1975; Finkelstein et al., 1982; Hanley, 2018; Howard, 2001; Klar et al., 1990; Landmark, 2013), increasing confidence, improving communication, enhancing creativity, eliciting energy and productivity, and making them more decisive (Landmark, 2016a). Participants are urged to anticipate “a miracle” (Hukill, 1998; Rhinehart, 1976/2010), and are told that, through participation, “anything is possible” (Hukill, 1998; McClure, 2009; O’Brien, 2012; Sagan, 2016; Sanjukta, 2007). Likening the results of est participation to the effects of drugs, Rhinehart (1976/2010, p. xiv) claims, “One can read about the training, just as one can read about LSD, but one shouldn’t then expect to have a dramatic awakening.” These are bold claims; however, considering these seminars have operated for five decades, it can be assumed that impressive (short-term, subjective) results are often attained. While internally funded research predictably finds that a high proportion of participants experience “transformation” (Haaken & Adams, 1983; Landmark, 2016b, 2021a; Lieberman, 1992), those otherwise critical of these seminars indicate that most graduates report this profound emotional experience. Providing an indication of the percentage of est participants who appeared to transiently “transform,” Brewer (1975) states, “But as usual about 200 hundred people, roughly four fifths off the crowd, proclaimed their conversion, and the mood changed as if lepers had been cleansed.” Hill (2003), Grigoriadis (2001), and O’Brien (2012) similarly indicate that between 70% and 80% of Landmark⁵ participants appear to experience “transformation.”

⁵ Landmark is the most widespread LGAT organization operating today (Hunter, 2018); on their website it is stated: “Landmark’s programs are based on intellectual material and methodology created and developed by Werner Erhard...” (Landmark, 2021b, para. 4).

Beyond Lifespring and est: The Spread of LGAT “Technology”

Lifespring and est no longer exist (at least not under their original names), but because LGAT trainers follow a “detailed written plan” (Lieberman, 1987, p. 460) and because “most of these programs are made up of highly scripted, standardized procedures” (Singer, 2003, p. 192), it is relatively easy for “new” LGATs to replicate the processes. These organizations use similar, if not identical, processes to those used by Lifespring, est, and other early LGATs, and this can be seen in the reports of journalists who have attended various seminars, through other news reports, and through tens of thousands of online posts by participants who are trying to make sense of what they went through (Hunter, 2018; Singer, 2003). To provide a practical example of the degree to which LGAT processes are replicable, consider that I personally participated in an LGAT in Durban, South Africa, in July 2010 called *Gateway*. Gateway was not officially associated with Lifespring or est but used many identical processes:⁶

1. In Lifespring the *Red and Black Game* is used (Haaken & Adams, 1983; M. Fisher, 1987) and this exact game was used in Gateway (Hunter, 2010, 2018).⁷
2. In Lifespring the *Lifeboat Exercise* is used (M. Fisher, 1987) and this exercise was also used in the follow-up to Gateway, called *Genesis* (Hunter, 2018).⁸
3. Lifespring made use of specific jargon such as “grungies” (sp.) and this exact jargon was used in Gateway (Hunter, 2010, 251-252⁹).¹⁰
4. In Lifespring a loud piece of music (*Also Sprach Zarathustra*) was played signalling that participants should rush to their chairs (Haaken & Adams, 1983; M. Fisher, 1987). The same song was played, in the same context, in Gateway (Hunter, 2010, 2018).¹¹

⁶ Jean Courtney claims to have worked part-time for Lifespring as a recruiter for their family seminars, stating, “I actually went through a workshop with Lifespring and then became a family enrollment person in the Lifespring organization in January of 1979 (JC, 2022, 05:52). Later she says, “I worked for them part-time” (08:14), then later, “I was an enrollment person... for family workshops” (08:20), and then later, “I worked in that capacity for about a year or so...” (09:00). When asked about similarities between Lifespring and the SRA workshops Jean Courtney states, “They are very different workshops and trainings that have changed... that I changed, actually” (14:59). Brandon Courtney states that Jean Courtney met David Gilcrease at Lifespring, where both of them worked (BC, 2022, 08:49), saying of Jean Courtney, “I know she was a trainer” (10:15) and later, “She said she was a trainer. She said she would work with people to work around discovering their beliefs” (11:53). He later explains that Jean Courtney was training large groups of people (14:06).

⁷ Brandon and Jean Courtney confirm that this game is used in SRA workshops (BC, 2022; JC, 2022).

⁸ @exposterchild (02:17) confirms that this exercise is used in the SRA workshops, as does Rearden (2022).

⁹ These were the field notes that I made based on memory, a few days after completing Gateway in July 2010.

¹⁰ Jean Courtney mentions the use of the term “grungies” in the SRA workshops (JC, 2022, 28:00).

¹¹ Kimberly Sweidy states that this exact song was used, in the same context, in the Parent Challenge, Teen Challenge, and Action workshops at SRA.

5. In Lifespring there was a banner hanging across the front of the room with the words, “*What Are You Pretending Not to Know?*” written on it (Haaken & Adams, 1983; M. Fisher, 1987). An identical banner was used in Gateway (Hunter, 2010, 2018).
6. Lifespring made use of various trust lectures and exercises (Haaken & Adams, 1983) and identical exercises were used in Gateway (Hunter, 2018). To provide some detail:

Haaken and Adams (1983, p. 274) describe one such exercise used in Lifespring 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.

Describing this exercise as it occurred in Gateway, I wrote, “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’.” (Hunter, 2010, 181-183)¹²

7. In both Lifespring and est there was a significant focus on ground rules (Haaken & Adams, 1983; Rhinehart, 1976/2010). This focus on ground rules was also a part of Gateway (Hunter, 2010, 2018).¹³
8. Lifespring and est made use of visualization exercises (Haaken & Adams, 1983; Rhinehart, 1976/2010). These exercises were used in Gateway (Hunter, 2010, 2018).¹⁴
9. Lifespring and est made use of strategic (emotional) music (Haaken & Adams, 1983; Rhinehart, 1976/2010). Gateway made similar use of music (Hunter, 2010, 2018).¹⁵
10. Lifespring and est insisted on applause at strategic points in the seminars (Haaken & Adams, 1983; Rhinehart, 1976/2010). Gateway similarly required participants to applaud at strategic times (Hunter, 2010, 2018).
11. The danger process was used in the est training (Brewer, 1975; Pressman, 1993), and a very similar exercise was used in the Gateway training (Hunter, 2010, 2018).

¹² Brandon Describes an experiential trust exercise used in the SRA workshops as follows: “Yeah, we have them... err... we give them four choices to say... ‘I trust you’, ‘I don’t trust you’, ‘I’m not sure if I trust you’, or ‘I don’t care to say if I trust you’...” (BC, 2022, 34:50).

¹³ Brandon and Jean Courtney both discuss the focus on ground rules in the SRA workshops (BC, 2022; JC, 2022).

¹⁴ Brandon Courtney acknowledges that visualization exercises are used in SRA workshops (BC, 2022, 14:49).

¹⁵ Brandon Courtney acknowledges that emotional music is used during the SRA workshops (BC, 2022, 31:35).

Singer (2003) notes that some LGAT processes appear to be designed with the express purpose of humiliating participants. In the field notes of my 2010 Gateway training, having not yet heard of est, Lifespring, or LGATs, I described one of our exercises as follows:

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 women. 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!” (Hunter, 2010, 622-627)

Consider this description of an est exercise, written by Rhinehart (1976/2010) in 1976:

“Okay, men, your turn...,” and twenty-five men are soon on the platform reciting in high-pitched voices how they have “Ten little fingers, ten little toes, long wavy hair and a turned-up nose, big brown eyes and a cute little figure. Stay away boys, till I get bigger!” In the second lineup of twenty five men, a young man named Terry, who looks as though he might be a linebacker for the Pittsburgh Steelers, has trouble wiggling his hips when he talks about his “cute little figure,” and Michael singles him out for assistance...” (p. 127)¹⁶

Thirty-four years after Rhinehart (1976/2010) described this (very specific) song being sung in an est training in the US, the exact words were being used in an (officially unrelated) LGAT in Durban, South Africa. These similarities illustrate how the “highly scripted, standardized procedures” described by Singer (2003, p. 192) allow for the spread of LGAT processes by reinvented organizations. Modern LGATs frequently claim that they either: (i) invented the “technology” themselves; or that they (ii) adjusted it, often to “remove harmful elements” (Hunter, 2018). Charlotte Faltermayer (2001) of *Time Magazine* says of Landmark trainers:

... they are less in your face, nearly devoid of the shouting and door monitoring imposed by est’s stern instructors. Says a former estie who attended a 1997 Forum: “est was much more militant. You had to have a doctor’s note just to go to the bathroom. People humiliated themselves for it. est tried to break you. Landmark doesn’t do that.”

¹⁶ Kimberly Sweidy states that in one exercise at the Parent Challenge workshop participants were asked to dance across the room, coming up with something new each time. (This exercise was also required at *Gateway*). Many participants find this uncomfortable/embarrassing. Participants at SRA’s Parent Challenge were also required to act out “the impossible dream” on last day. They had to come up with a theme and then perform it in front of the other parents and staff members in attendance. Many people are uncomfortable with this sort of exercise.

This perception is echoed by journalists Rachel Jones of *Noseweek Magazine* and James O'Brien of *GQ Magazine*:

Landmark seminars are indistinguishable in basic techniques, differing from est mainly in their being less harsh and aggressive. (Jones, 2003).

The Landmark Forum is the streamlined, slightly gentler offspring of that pinnacle of the '70s encounter movement, est. (O'Brien, 2012)

It is, however, worth paying careful attention to the multiple independent descriptions of Landmark conditions, exercises, and interactions with trainers offered in this document and – in greater detail – in Hunter (2018). Landmark may be “less harsh and aggressive” and “slightly gentler” than est, but this does not mean that their seminars do not generate significant stress:

While it is conceded that screaming and other forms of overt abuse have been reduced since est days, it will be argued that subtler, but similarly potent, forms of stress-induction remain a core feature of Landmark's trainings. It is not in the interests of modern LGATs to utilise processes that appear – to a layperson, academics, or the media – to be abusive; however, processes which are framed as: (1) assisting participants to reconnect with family; (2) showing participants the subjectivity of experience; or (3) empowering participants to “take responsibility” may be highly stressful. It will be argued that contemporary LGATs can generate as much, if not greater, humiliation, shame, trepidation, and general stress and, while more easily defended, their processes may be similarly traumatic for participants. Shouting may elicit a defence in another person, but the content of what is being said (and believed) determines the degree to which a person's self-worth is undermined, and their sense of guilt and humiliation is accentuated. While Landmark does not employ overtly stressful tactics to the same extent as est, it should not be assumed that they lack the tools to cause significant distress. (Hunter, 2018, p. 34)

Jean Courtney suggests that the SRA workshops bear little resemblance to Lifespring and other seminars she was involved with – that she removed the harsh elements (JC, 2022). Comments by former SRA student, “Maggie” (2021, 01:36:25) are worth noting in this context:

... I was always told, and she [Jean Courtney] always said... made it seem like she had just like dreamed them up and made them completely unique to her... and then like it wasn't until recently that I realized like how many people went through very very very similar seminars... with like really similar exercises and stuff involved too.

Understanding LGAT Persuasion

There are various lenses through which LGAT influence processes might be assessed. Chapter 22 of psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton's (1989) seminal 1961 publication *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of 'Brainwashing' in China* offers eight themes by which to assess a thought reform ("brainwashing") environment, and a compelling argument can be made that LGATs incorporate all eight of these themes in their processes (see Hunter, 2018, pp. 200-287). Psychologist Edgar Schein's (1961) book *Coercive Persuasion* (also a synonym for "brainwashing" and also based on a study of prisoners of war held by the Chinese during the Korean War) offers similar, but less distinct, criteria by which to assess a "brainwashing" environment, while psychologist Margaret Singer (2003) provides six conditions present in a process of unethical influence. There are others who have developed models and theories to explain the indoctrination believed to occur in cults/new religious movements and other controversial groups and, while I do not necessarily disagree with pre-existing models, I will offer an explanation of LGAT persuasion that is grounded in widely accepted, and more recent, cognitive psychology, social psychology, behavioral economics, and affective neuroscience. At a high level, I will argue that LGAT processes minimize critical thinking (System 2), maximize intuitive thinking (System 1), and take advantage of the vulnerabilities ("cognitive biases") in intuitive thinking (System 1).

System 1 vs. System 2 Thinking

"... most of the mental processes that allow us to make sense of the world operate automatically and without our awareness" (Gilovich & Ross, 2016, p. 30).¹⁷

Psychologist and Nobel Laureate Daniel Kahneman's (2011) book *Thinking, Fast and Slow* brought an understanding of the difference between "passive" (fast) and "active" (slow) thinking to a mainstream audience. He explains that sometimes our thinking is passive, automatic, and effortless (System 1), while at other times we think actively and deliberately, taking the time and effort to carefully consider the evidence (System 2). [Table 1 (p. 15) provides a summary of the differences between System 1 and System 2]. Importantly for the purposes of this discussion, Kahneman (2011) explains that System 1 (which requires less effort) is vulnerable to certain errors, and that while most people believe that their decision-

¹⁷ David Gilovich is the Irene Blecker Rosenfeld Professor of Psychology at Cornell University; Lee Ross was the Stanford Federal Credit Union Professor of Humanities and Social Sciences at Stanford University. Both specialize(d) in cognitive biases, behavioral economics, and shortcomings in judgment and decision-making.

making is generally rational, considered, and deliberate (System 2), the truth is that System 1 often plays the silent, but dominant, role:

In the picture that emerges from recent research, the intuitive System 1 is more influential than your experience tells you, and it is the secret author of many of the choices and judgements you make. (Kahneman, 2011, p. 13)

Because it is being argued that LGATs minimize System 2 (rational thinking), it is important to emphasize that System 2 requires more effort than System 1:

The defining feature of System 2, in this story, is that its operations are effortful, and one of its main characteristics is laziness, a reluctance to invest more effort than is strictly necessary. (Kahneman, 2011, p. 31)

That System 2 requires more effort is significant, as if a person lacks: (i) the *motivation*, and/or (ii) the *ability*, to engage System 2, they will default to the (less reliable and more vulnerable to manipulation) System 1 (Kahneman, 2011; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

Table 1

The differences between thinking fast (System 1) and thinking slow (System 2)

Thinking Fast (System 1)	Thinking Slow (System 2)
Quick and easy (low cognitive load)	Slow and difficult (high cognitive load)
Less conscious	More conscious
Passive	Active
Intuitive	Critical
Automatic	Deliberate
Makes use of shortcuts (“heuristics”)	Makes use of evidence
Associated with peripheral route processing (see Elaboration Likelihood Model, p. 17)	Associated with central route processing (see Elaboration Likelihood Model, p. 17)
Associated with outsourced thinking	Associated with independent thinking
<u>MORE</u> vulnerable to manipulation	<u>LESS</u> vulnerable to manipulation

Over a period of days, LGATs physically, emotionally, and cognitively exhaust participants, overloading them with obscure information and exercises, preventing them from taking notes, allowing little to no time for reflection, asserting that they should just trust the process, and convincing them that critical thinking is, in fact, a barrier to “transformation” (Hunter, 2018). In doing so, LGATs minimize both the *motivation* and the *ability* of participants to engage System 2, making it more likely that they will make use of (uncritical/intuitive) System 1. As recent¹⁸ findings in cognitive psychology, social psychology, and behavioral economics have shown, if another person (a “compliance professional”) understands how to take advantage of the vulnerabilities of System 1, then individuals in this state may be particularly vulnerable to manipulation (Cialdini, 2007; Gilovich & Ross, 2016; Kahneman, 2011).

Robert Cialdini is the Regents’ Professor Emeritus of Psychology and Marketing at Arizona State University and a member of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS, 2019). Cialdini’s (2007) book, *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion* has sold more than 3 million copies and his insights on how *certain people* are able to influence (manipulate) others are taught in social psychology classrooms around the world (e.g., Branscombe & Baron, 2014). Cialdini (2007) concurs with Kahneman (2011) – that many of our decisions are automatic and that most people are unaware of the factors which impact these automatic decisions – but adds that “compliance professionals” (p. xiii)¹⁹ are able to take advantage of System 1 thinking:

It is odd that despite their current widespread use and looming future importance, most of us know very little about our automatic behavior patterns. Perhaps that is so precisely because of the mechanistic, unthinking manner in which they occur. Whatever the reason, it is vital that we clearly recognize one of their properties: They make us terribly vulnerable to anyone who knows how they work. (Cialdini, 2007, p. 8)

Much of Daniel Kahneman and his colleague, Amos Tversky’s, work focuses on understanding the problems (“cognitive biases”) associated with System 1 and the alarmingly common reluctance of most people to acknowledge their vulnerability to these biases. Describing the academic consensus on System 1, Kahneman (2011) states, “... the idea that our minds are susceptible to systematic errors is now widely accepted” (p. 10), yet when referring to the

¹⁸ Few studies on LGATs and “brainwashing” have been published since the early 1990s, so Kahneman’s (2011) research, as with other research used in this document, was not available at the time of these earlier publications.

¹⁹ It is worth noting, since John Hanley’s background was in sales (M. Fisher, 1987), and as Werner Erhard was a car and encyclopaedia salesman in the 1960s (Pressman, 1993), that Cialdini (2007, p. 98 and p. xiii) considers the more skilled individuals in these occupations to be “compliance professionals.”

public's belief in their own intuition (System 1 thinking), he describes "... a puzzling limitation of our mind: our excessive confidence in what we believe we know, and our apparent inability to acknowledge the full extent of our ignorance and the uncertainty of the world we live in" (pp. 13-14). By understanding how LGATs minimize System 2 and maximize System 1, it is possible to grasp how LGAT participants are made particularly vulnerable to influence.

Petty and Cacioppo's Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion

"The likelihood of elaboration will be determined by the person's motivation and ability to evaluate the communication presented" (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986, p. 129).

Petty and Cacioppo's (1986) elaboration likelihood model (ELM) of persuasion provides a framework for understanding the circumstances under which assertions are likely to be scrutinized before being accepted. Using the terminology introduced in this document, the ELM provides a framework for understanding how likely it is that a person will employ System 2 (referred to by Petty and Cacioppo as "the central route"), as opposed to using System 1 (referred to by Petty and Cacioppo as "the peripheral route") when assessing the validity of an argument or an assertion. They explain that "elaboration" (thinking carefully about something) occurs on a continuum, and that on one end of the elaboration continuum is the acceptance of ideas which "likely resulted from a person's careful and thoughtful consideration of the true merits of the information presented in support of advocacy (central route)" (p. 125), while on the other end is acceptance that "more likely occurred as a result of some simple cue in the persuasion context (e.g. an attractive source) that induced change without necessitating scrutiny of the true merits of the information presented (peripheral route)" (p. 125). The ELM asserts that the degree to which individuals engage in controlled, deep, systematic, and/or effortful analyses of stimuli (System 2) is "... determined by the person's motivation and ability to evaluate the communication presented" (p. 129). The ELM, therefore, suggests that it is possible to create environments in which arguments are more likely to be accepted based on factors other than evidence for the validity of those arguments. If, for example, individuals can be convinced that critical thinking is unnecessary, or counterproductive, their *motivation* to think would be minimized; and if they are physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausted, then their *ability* to think would be compromised. This would establish a low elaboration likelihood (a low likelihood of engaging System 2), and these individuals would be more likely to employ automatic, shallow, heuristic, and/or mindless thinking (System 1) to assess arguments under these conditions (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). This is what occurs in LGATs.

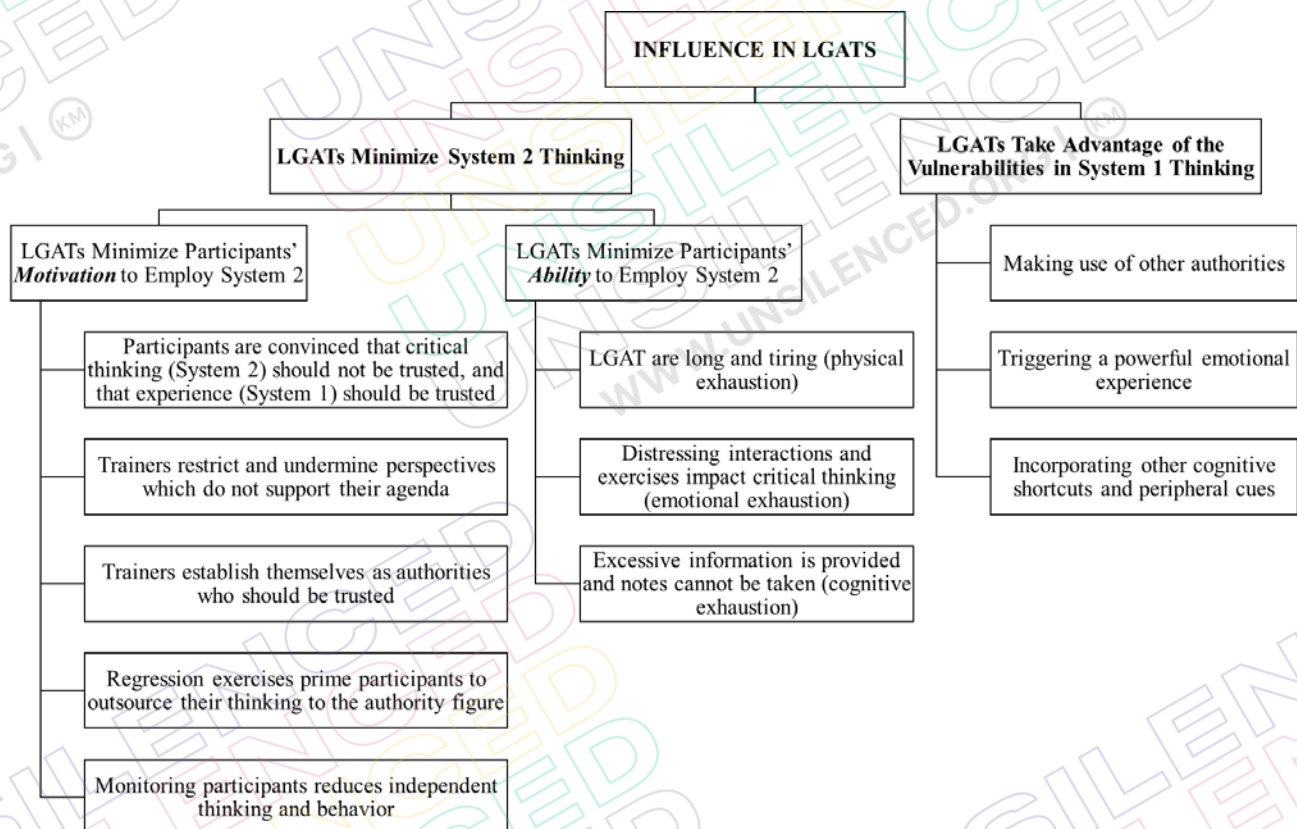
Peripheral cues and their impact on System 1 thinking

Peripheral cues are factors that are likely to influence a person when they are not thinking carefully and deliberately (i.e., not engaging System 2). As such System 1 is associated with *peripheral route processing* (See Table 1, p. 15). According to Petty and Cacioppo (1986), certain peripheral cues – e.g., an affective/emotional experience – are likely to serve as substitutes for conventional evidence when elaboration (System 2 thinking) is low:

In sum, we have proposed that when either motivation or ability to process issue-relevant arguments is low, attitudes may be changed by associating an issue position with various affective cues... (p. 130)

Figure 1

Overview of the LGAT influence process



As outlined in Figure 1, LGATs achieve manipulation through two basic processes. Firstly, they reduce System 2 thinking, which makes participants more vulnerable to decision-making based on cognitive shortcuts. Secondly, they incorporate activities, processes, and experiences which impact these cognitive shortcuts. The following sections explain how LGATs minimize System 2 thinking (by reducing the *motivation* and *abilities* of participants to think critically), and then how they trigger a powerful emotional experience and incorporate other peripheral cues, which are likely to serve as a substitute for critical thinking under conditions of low elaboration.

Referring to just one major peripheral cue used in LGATs (intensification of emotions), Haaken and Adams (1983, p. 271) state, “In discussing the relationship between ego functions and group behavior, Freud noted that ‘intensification of the affects [emotions] and the inhibition of the intellect’ characterized ‘primitive groups’.” LGATs inhibit critical thinking (“the intellect”) while intensifying emotions (“affects”) among participants (Hunter, 2018). An emotional experience (e.g., the “transformation” elicited at the end of LGATs) is, however, just one example of a peripheral cue that might serve as a substitute for evidence under conditions of low elaboration. Kahneman (2011), Gilovich and Ross (2016), Cialdini (2007), and others reveal numerous additional examples of peripheral cues that are particularly likely to impact individuals under conditions of low elaboration.

LGATs Minimize System 2 Thinking

In line with Petty and Cacioppo’s (1986) framework, LGATs minimize System 2 by diminishing the degree to which participants are (i) *motivated* and (ii) *able* to think critically about the information presented. The following sections provide evidence to support this claim.

LGATs Minimize Participants’ Motivation to Employ System 2

Motivation to employ System 2 is minimized in LGATs in five primary ways: (i) Participants are convinced that critical thinking should not be trusted, and that experience (System 1) should be trusted; (ii) Trainers restrict and undermine perspectives which do not support their agenda; (iii) Trainers establish themselves as authorities who should be trusted; (iv) Regression exercises prime participants to outsource their thinking to the authority figure; and (v) Monitoring participants reduces independent thinking and behavior.

Participants are convinced that critical thinking (System 2) should not be trusted, and that experience (System 1) should be trusted

Finkelstein et al. (1982, p. 517) state, “Large Group Awareness Trainings rest upon vitalistic or antipositivistic assumptions: a central place is accorded to subjective experience...” In simpler terms what this means is that LGATs discourage considering traditional evidence (engaging System 2) and emphasize trusting subjective experience (relying on System 1). With a range of positive-sounding phrases, LGAT participants are told not to question and to rather just “participate.” They are urged to come from their hearts, not their heads (Haaken & Adams, 1983); to be open-minded, or “open to the possibilities” (M. Fisher, 1987); to be “coachable” (Hill, 2003; Mahoney, 1998; Prasad, 2012; Scioscia, 2000); and are told that “understanding is the booby prize” (Brewer, 1975; Finkelstein et al., 1982; Rhinehart, 1976/2010). Lifespring

trainers asserted that breakthroughs “... will not come through understanding or psychological insight, but through ‘action’” (M. Fisher, 1987).²⁰ Lifespring trainers instructed participants to not analyze, directing them to “do, not understand” (M. Fisher, 1987). Haaken and Adams (1983) explain that in Lifespring “participants’ questions, doubts and concerns were labelled as obstacles to personal growth” (p. 274) and that “experiencing and observing” led to “natural knowing” (p. 276). *Natural knowing* is, of course, a synonym for System 1 thinking.

Est trainers similarly undermined rational thought, and elevated experience as the sovereign way of knowing. Finkelstein et al. (1982, p. 520) explain, “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.” Journalist Mark Brewer (1975) confirms this, saying of est, “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.” Keeping in mind that System 1 thinking is more vulnerable to errors (and manipulation), Pressman (1993, p. 71) reveals the manner in which critical thinking (System 2) was suppressed in est:

For the first several hours of the training, Erhard and his other trainers kept up a non-stop barrage of verbal insults, taunting the participants in the straight-backed chairs, insisting they were all useless human beings who clung to beliefs about themselves and their own lives that were rooted in ridiculous notions about reason, logic, and understanding.

Luke Rhinehart (1976/2010) likewise reveals an est trainer’s attitude to System 2 thinking stating, “I don’t want you to understand it. Understanding gets the booby prize” (p. 42). He further explains how participants who attempted to understand or question the process were treated by trainers: “If you assholes think you understand what’s going on, you’re living your assholiness to its fullest” (p. 13). In addition to denigrating System 2, one can also see the way that LGAT trainers instruct/encourage participants to rely on their intuitive/natural/automatic thinking (System 1). Relating another statement from an est trainer to participants, Rhinehart writes, “Look, when you *really* know something, with complete certainty and reliability, then beliefs about it, or thinking about it, or feelings about it, are all irrelevant...” (p. 30). Using *the same terminology* as Lifespring, he reveals the est emphasis on System 1: “When we reach the highest level of certainty we’re at something we call ‘natural knowing’” (p. 31).

²⁰ Jean Courtney reveals the focus on experience rather than critical thinking in the SRA workshops, stating, “The exercises... and van der Kolk talks about this in his book... how we begin to undo things is by experience... not just talking about it and not just reading about it, but actually doing something...” (JC, 2022, 30:34).

Landmark is the most widespread LGAT organization operating today (Hunter, 2018) and, according to their website, “Landmark’s programs are based on intellectual material and methodology created and developed by Werner Erhard...” (Landmark, 2021b, para. 4). Like Lifespring and est trainers, Landmark trainers discourage critical thinking, suggest that it stands in the way of “transformation,” and label those who question “resisting” or “uncoachable” (Citizen Skeptic, 2014; Drew, 2010; Fazeli, 2012; Howard, 2001; Hukill, 1998; Mahoney, 1998; Martin, 1998; Prasad, 2012; Sagan, 2016).²¹ Jana Martin (1998) of *Swing Generation Magazine* says of her trainer, “He tells us that we analyze too much, and that ‘it kills the growth process.’ We should stop trying to find reasons for everything, he says.” Blogger, Jim Drew (2010) similarly says of his Landmark trainer, “Early on, she basically told people who wanted to figure out what they were going to get from the Forum, how it worked, etc. (like me!), to just stop it... if you try to analyze it, you’ll hamper your success” (Drew, 2010). LGATs systematically attempt to restrict critical thinking (System 2) while pushing the idea that experience/natural knowing (System 1) should be trusted instead. This likely diminishes the *motivation* of participants to engage System 2.

Trainers restrict and undermine perspectives which do not support their agenda

“We often fail to allow for the possibility that evidence that should be critical to our judgement is missing – what we see is all there is” (Kahneman, 2012, p. 87).

Thinking critically (engaging System 2) requires access to the relevant information. The effects of information control can be seen in authoritarian states where freedom of the press is restricted, but it can also be seen in countries when citizens find (or place) themselves in “echo chambers,” repeatedly hearing one side of an argument while never considering another perspective.²² In much the same way that authoritarian leaders prevent their citizens from hearing information critical of them, LGAT trainers (strongly) limit the ability of participants to question the concepts presented during the seminars. This restricts both participants’ *motivation* and *ability* to think critically about these concepts. Haaken and Adams (1983) describe how, in Lifespring, “The trainer could not be questioned nor the content of the training challenged” (p. 279), Finkelstein et al. (1982, p. 532) explain that an LGAT participant “comes face to face in the training with a punitive, authoritarian, invulnerable trainer who ridicules,

²¹ Kimberly Sweidy explains that participants at SRA workshops who question or disagree with what they are being told may be accused of “not accepting feedback.” Rearden (2022) makes a similar assertion.

²² Consider how differently people may view events if they were only exposed to either Fox News or CNN.

abuses, and shouts at him in front of 250 people, demolishing his feeble counterattacks and reducing him to a state of apparent foolishness...”; while Singer (2003, p. 193) asserts, “Anyone who challenges the trainer will be humiliated and verbally mashed.” Of the way that only certain information is allowed, Haaken and Adams (1983, p. 274) say:

The trainer acknowledged as valid only those audience responses which confirmed or illustrated a point being made [...] What was rewarded by the trainer was compliance or pseudocompliance. 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.

Finkelstein et al. (1982) similarly describe how est participants who challenged the trainer were mocked and harassed, explaining how trainers will “repeatedly refer to them as ‘assholes,’” and “devalue their accomplishments with the repeated assertion that their lives ‘do not work’” (p. 519). Rhinehart (1976/2010) likewise explains that the trainer “badgers and insults the beliefs of the trainees...” (p. xiii), while positioning him/herself as the ultimate authority:

“It ought to be perfectly clear to everyone that you’re all assholes and I’m God. Only an asshole would argue with God.” (p. 39)

Landmark trainers similarly undermine participants who challenge them (Hunter, 2018). E.g.,

Chris mocked me, “Oh, you have questions? You’re questioning me? How long have you been leading the Forum? Do you think I know a thing or two more than you about it?” I could literally hear cackles from various parts of the audience. It was fucking Animal Farm in there. (Fazeli, 2012)

Over the course of an LGAT, participants become progressively more exhausted, they have been overloaded with esoteric concepts, their self-esteems have been undermined, they have been convinced that they should trust indiscriminately and that the seminars work, and they have been persuaded, in this uncertain environment, that the trainer knows what he/she is doing. It is also common for LGAT trainers to state, “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*” (Hunter, 2018). LGATs claim to teach participants things that they “don’t know that they don’t know.” One cannot question a process or what is being taught if *by definition* one has no idea what the process is or what it is that is being taught. This further undermines participants who must defer to the authority in the room – the trainer.

Trainers establish themselves as authorities who should be trusted

“It’s a proprietary strategy. I can’t go into it in great detail” – Bernie Madoff

Deferring to an authority (“outsourcing” one’s thinking) is something that everyone must do at certain times in their lives. We do not have the time, energy, capabilities, and interests to gain an in-depth understanding of everything that we need to know to survive, and by necessity we must rely on others who we *believe* know more about these topics than we do. Describing this tendency to trust authority figures, Cialdini (2007, p. 216) says:

... we are trained from birth that obedience to proper authority is right and disobedience is wrong. The essential message fills the parental lessons, the school house rhymes, stories, and songs of our childhood and is carried forward in the legal, military, and political systems we encounter as adults.

Outsourcing one’s thinking to an authority figure is not necessarily a problem; however, if that authority is: (i) not competent in that field; and/or (ii) has nefarious intentions, then ceding one’s thinking to that person (or group of people) can be problematic. LGAT trainers spend a considerable amount of time convincing participants that they (the participants) will never be able to understand the LGAT process, and that they (the trainers) are authorities on it (Hunter, 2018). LGAT trainers urge participants to trust them entirely (to outsource their thinking), as was noted by Haaken and Adams (1983, p. 277) in the Lifespring training:

However, what we found particularly troublesome in the various trust exercises presented in Lifespring was the implied indiscriminate nature of trust [...] It appeared to matter little whether or not the object of desire was trustworthy.²³

The same was true in the Gateway training, and this emphasis on uncritical trust contributes to the influence processes used in LGATs. Psychologist Margaret Singer (2003, p. 193), having participated in six LGATs, interviewed numerous participants and trainers, and having studied the videos used to train trainers, says the following of the first day of LGATs, during which the trainer’s authority is established:

²³ Brandon Courtney states that trust is discussed in SRA workshops and that – with trust in mind – students are asked, “What is the one thing in our relationships that is vital?” (BC, 2022, 32:23). He explains that the trust exercise is 45 minutes to an hour long, and that after this exercise there are discussions about trust (BC, 2022, 51:00). He explains that the point of the discussions is to get students to “look at their definitions of trust” (BC, 2022, 52:00) and that one possible outcome is that a student might say, “... you know I can see kind of how maybe my definition of trust makes it really hard for me to allow it... to trust other people” (BC, 2022, 54:00).

Day one is usually devoted to demonstrating the leader's absolute authority. The leader, often called a facilitator or trainer, immediately takes control of the setting with a demeanor that suggests he is a powerful, in-charge person and no one is to challenge what he says. "This program works," the trainer proclaims. "It's all up to you to obey and get the maximum benefits." He remains totally in charge, acts knowledgeable, and is practiced in verbal skills, so that he never loses an encounter. Anyone who challenges the trainer will be humiliated and verbally mashed.

Haaken and Adams (1983, p. 273) describe their Lifespring trainer as projecting an "image of success," Finkelstein et al. (1982, p. 519) explain that the best trainer is "... distinguished from his assistants only by an air of absolute authority," while Clancy (1992) explains that his Landmark trainer "strutted up and down like a peacock." In the field notes of my own LGAT experience, I similarly wrote:

Everyone sat in silence as a man, who hadn't been seen up until this point, strode briskly to the front. He was smartly dressed, in his mid-forties, short hair, fit and confident. I would describe him as the epitome of intense and intimidating. (Hunter, 2010, 77-79)

When System 2 thinking is minimized, then outsourcing one's thinking to an authority figure becomes more likely and, as noted by Haaken and Adams (1983, p. 275) in Lifespring, "As the training progressed, participants became increasingly reliant upon the trainer to interpret reality." Outsourcing one's thinking is not necessarily a problem, but if your *motivation* to think independently is systematically undermined while information is restricted, and the authority of a leader is systematically elevated, then you must be certain that the motives of this leader are pure, and that the process he/she is engaging you in is scientifically sound.

Regression exercises prime participants to outsource their thinking to the authority figure

"You cannot know this from conscious experience, of course, but you must accept the alien idea that your actions and emotions can be primed by events of which you are not even aware" (Kahneman, 2011, p. 53).

In addition to the processes, exercises, and conditions common to LGATs discussed earlier, Lieberman (1987, p. 461) notes that regressive exercises are typically (always) used:

Some authors have pointed to specific processes that are presumed to be characteristic of large group awareness training. These processes range from an emphasis on regressive characteristics of the setting to an overidentification with the aggressor, the group leader.

Haaken and Adams (1983, p. 275) describe some of these exercises in Lifespring:²⁴

A number of dyadic exercises which reenacted 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.

Kahneman (2011) explains that this sort of regressive exercise will *prime* participants to think and behave more like children, even if they are unaware that their thinking and behavior has been impacted. Just one of many examples of priming is the *Florida Effect*, illustrated by psychologist John Bargh at New York University. In one experiment two groups of students were asked to reassemble sentences; one of the group's scrambled sentences contained words like "Florida," "bald," "gray," and "forgetful" (words relating to being older), while the other group's sentences contained no words associated with being older. The two groups were then sent to another office down the hall and the time taken for each person to walk to the next office was discreetly measured. It was found that the "elderly theme" group walked significantly more slowly than the control group. This is noteworthy as the "elderly theme" group was not aware that they had been exposed to these trigger words.²⁵

All this happens without any awareness. When they were questioned afterward, none of the students reported noticing that the words had a common theme, and they all insisted that nothing they did after the first experiment could have been influenced by the words they had encountered. The idea of old age had not come to their conscious awareness, but their actions had changed nevertheless. (Kahneman, 2011, p. 52)

While Lifespring and other LGATs may offer noble explanations for these regressive exercises, they are likely to induce regression, and prime thinking and behavior associated with being a

²⁴ Brandon and Jean Courtney discuss the use of regressive exercises in SRA workshops (BC, 2022; JC, 2022).

²⁵ In this experiment participants are primed to think and behave more like elderly individuals, but the concept applies equally to priming individuals to think and behave like children.

child. This is important from a persuasion perspective as Petty and Cacioppo (1986, pp. 130-131) explain that children are far less likely to think independently:

Specifically, the very young child probably has very little motivation to think about the true merits of people, objects, and issues, and even less ability to do so. Thus, attitudes may be affected primarily by what feels good or bad. As children mature, they become more motivated to express correct opinions on certain issues, but their ability to scrutinize issue-relevant arguments may still be poor due to lack of knowledge. Therefore, they may be particularly reliant on certain cognitive rules based on personal experience such as, ‘My mother knows what is right,’ or ‘If I play with it, I must like it.’ Consistent with this reasoning, children have been shown to be more susceptible to appeals based on behavioral cues and self-perceptions than issue-relevant argumentation.

Because LGATs employ various processes that are likely to induce regression to childhood and create an environment where participants are treated like obedient/disobedient children by an authority figure, this potentially puts them into a state that makes them more likely to employ System 1 and thus more vulnerable to weak, emotional arguments. Petty and Cacioppo (1986) conclude by stating that when it is difficult or seems unnecessary to think critically, people often make decisions based upon other (often less reliable) indicators.

Monitoring participants reduces independent thinking and behavior

“In an eerily Orwellian way we were also made to feel that our every movement was being observed and judged” (Hunter, 2010, 236-237).

Kahneman (2011) explains how various seemingly inconsequential factors can *prime* specific thinking and behavior. Another example, revealing how sensing that one is being monitored can impact behavior, is illustrated with an experiment that took place at “an office kitchen at a British university” (p. 57). The kitchen employed an honesty box, which asked that people who used tea, coffee, and milk contribute to this box. In the first condition of the experiment, a picture of flowers was placed near to the box, and in the second condition, a picture of a person’s eyes was placed there. No one commented on or appeared to notice these pictures (which rotated weekly for several weeks); however, the average contribution to the honesty box was, on average, three times higher in the weeks in which the eyes picture was used. The sense of being watched impacts behavior, and while the above example demonstrates how priming can induce conformity for noble purposes, Kahneman (2011, p. 56) comments on how it can be used to restrict independent thinking and behavior for less noble purposes:

Can there be any doubt that the ubiquitous portraits of the national leader in dictatorial societies not only convey the feeling that “Big Brother Is Watching” but also lead to an actual reduction in spontaneous thought and independent action?²⁶

LGATs involve a trainer, positioned as an all-knowing, all-seeing authority figure, as well as numerous assistants who constantly monitor the behavior of participants (Hunter, 2018). Haaken and Adams (1983, p. 275) reflect on the impact of this monitoring during Lifespring:

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.

This is common practice at LGATs. There may be volunteers walking around the room, sitting at the back taking notes, and numerous people make similar comments about Landmark (Hunter, 2018). For example:

I also found it unsettling to have quite a number of Landmark volunteers – participants often remain in training as volunteers – at the back of the room scrutinising proceedings. (Vandenberg, 2000)²⁷

Based on research described by Kahneman (2011), this sense of being monitored is likely to reduce independent thinking and behavior. In addition to convincing participants that critical thinking should not be trusted (and that experience should be trusted), LGAT trainers establish themselves as authorities, they undermine participants and shut down perspectives that are not aligned with their agenda, they incorporate regressive exercises, and they create a sense that participants are being constantly monitored. Evidence indicates that these measures are likely to significantly reduce the *motivation* of participants to think critically and independently.²⁸

²⁶ “Maggie” (2021, 01:31:59) says of SRA, “So there’s immediately... there’s like a Big Brother vibe and that you can’t like talk to anybody... you have to be very careful who you trust...”

²⁷ Brandon Courtney states, “There’s generally like one presenter [...] and there are other students there as well [...] They’re observing and at times they will kind of work with the other students in groups [...] They’re students who have been through the training” (BC, 2022, 36:26). He explains, “They’re generally in the back...” (37:33).

²⁸ Within an LGAT, communication is tightly controlled, and participants often feel monitored; however, when adult LGAT participants leave the training, they can regain their sense of autonomy in thinking and behavior. At SRA, communication between students and parents (outside the workshops) may be monitored by a staff member (telephone calls, for example) (BC, 2022, 55:48) and students on phase 1 and 2 “have to be in eyesight” at all times” (57:16). This is not conducive to independent thinking.

LGATs Minimize Participants' Ability to Employ System 2

While LGAT organizations may argue that they do not take advantage of their participants, the evidence shows that their processes make participants far more vulnerable to manipulation. An argument has been made that LGAT processes minimize the *motivation* of participants to think critically; however, LGATs also minimize the *ability* of participants to think critically (i.e., to engage System 2). In LGATs: (i) long hours and draining exercises make participants tired (physical exhaustion); (ii) emotionally stressful interactions and exercises are used (emotional exhaustion), which impact memory; and (iii) a large volume of philosophically challenging material is presented, while participants are prevented from writing anything down (cognitive exhaustion). These conditions are not conducive to contemplation or System 2 processing.

LGAT are long and tiring (physical exhaustion)

“Indeed, there is evidence that people are more likely to be influenced by empty persuasive messages, such as commercials, when they are tired and depleted” (Kahneman, 2011, p. 81).

According to Kahneman (2011), an environment that is draining, and which requires constant vigilance is one way to get a person to abandon System 2:

Baumeister's group has repeatedly found that any effort of will or self-control is tiring; if you have had to force yourself to do something, you are less willing or less able to exert self-control when the next challenge comes around. This phenomenon has been named *ego depletion*. (pp. 41-42)

LGATs are exceedingly draining and they require constant vigilance (Hunter, 2018). Brewer (1975) states that the est training “lasts from 15 to 18 hours each Saturday and Sunday for two consecutive weekends,” Mark Fisher (1987) claims a breakthrough was promised in Lifespring “... in the next five days Wednesday through Friday evenings from 6:30 p.m. to midnight, Saturday from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. and Sunday from 10 a.m. to 7:30 p.m.” and relates the experience of a Lifespring graduate who said, “You're feeling all these emotions and you never have time to think it through. The hours are so long, and you're always tired” (M. Fisher, 1987). Rhinehart (1976/2010) describes est in a similar way:

The training normally lasts fifteen to twenty hours a day, and as a result every trainee suffers from a period of “unconsciousness.” At times he is so bored, angry, involved in his own fantasies, or simply exhausted that he is unable to experience or recall what is happening in the training itself. (p. xiii)

In addition to the long hours, the exercises themselves are exceedingly tiring, and – on top of the hours spent in the training room – participants are typically given homework (Badt, 2011; Bennett, 2011; Black, 1997; Braid, 2003; Dafellah, 2004; Hill, 2003; Howard, 2001; Lemonnier, 2005; Mahoney, 1998; Martin, 1998; Scioscia, 2000; Thornburgh, 2011).²⁹ These factors ensure that (tired but stimulated) participants have little time outside of the training to reflect independently on what they have been through, and that they may get to bed later than they are used to. Tiring participants reduces their *ability* to engage System 2, and Kahneman (2011, p. 46) explains the impact of “intellectual sloth” on rationality and the ability to question dubious claims:

Those who avoid the sin of intellectual sloth could be called “engaged.” They are more alert, more intellectually active, less willing to be satisfied with superficially attractive answers, more skeptical about their intuitions.

Distressing interactions and exercises impact critical thinking (emotional exhaustion)

“... just a few days of high doses of synthetic glucocorticoids impairs explicit memory in healthy volunteers” (Sapolsky, 2004, p. 214).³⁰

Glucocorticoids are stress hormones, so Sapolsky (2004) is commenting on the effects of stress on memory. Lifespring and est are described as being exhausting and highly confrontational (Brewer, 1975; Finkelstein et al., 1982; M. Fisher, 1987; Haaken & Adams, 1983), while Landmark acknowledges that, for some, its core training “... may occur as physically, mentally and emotionally seriously distressing” (Landmark, 2013). Because psychological stress is the key ingredient in generating the LGAT “transformational” experience, some detail will be provided in terms of how stress is generated. The following LGAT tactics to maximize stress will be addressed: (i) Participants are not warned about what they will endure; (ii) (Misleading) noble explanations are provided for LGAT exercises; (iii) Arbitrary rules set participants up to fail; (iv) Participants are “forced” to remain in the LGAT and complete all exercises; (v) The extreme LGAT emphasis on responsibility causes stress; (vi) Guided visualization exercises may be psychologically stressful; and (vii) Stress-mitigating factors are restricted in LGATs.

²⁹ Kimberly Sweidy confirms that homework exercises were used in Parent Challenge (e.g., Magical child letter), but also notes that SRA parents, who must often fly in, travel hours to the destination, and who are likely already stressed about the fact that their children are in this type of school, are tired and vulnerable before the workshops.

³⁰ Former SRA student, “Maggie” (2021, 02:12:16), says of the SRA seminars, “... I’m really hazy about everything that happens in them... still... but that like is... I mean a good source of like my trauma really comes from those seminars...”

Participants are not warned about what they will endure

Sapolsky (2004) explains that uncertainty is a form of stress, and that it adds considerably to stressful situations, so – because psychological stress is the key ingredient in the LGAT process – it is vital that participants enter the seminars with very little idea of what they are about to endure. LGATs tell participants that they should not reveal any details about what takes place in the seminar because it will “ruin the experience.” Singer (2003, p. 193) explains:

The program trainers and leaders typically get agreement from participants that they will not tell anyone about the processes that occur. To do so will “spoil it” for your family, friends, co-workers when they take the course. “Tell them what you got out of it,” trainers advise. This means be vague about the actual content and provide glowing endorsements telling others that the training turned your life around, but do not tell them how emotional, dramatic, confrontational, and unnerving the sessions can be for some people. Because of this promise, consumers who buy and attend these seminars do so without information about how psychologically, socially, and sometimes physically stressing the event can be.

Mark Brewer (1975) notes how this occurred in est:

Moreover, it is a crucial and well-respected tenet of est that graduates will not discuss the content of the training with the uninitiated. This rule stems from the est maxim that the training cannot be explained or understood, but only experienced.

Rosemary Mahoney (1998) of *Elle Magazine* similarly states:

We have all signed a confidentiality agreement as well as an agreement not to violate Landmark’s copyright claims.

Describing how LGAT participants are typically unprepared for what goes on in LGATs (and revealing the deceptive way that they are often marketed), Singer (2003, p. 186) notes:

The majority of complaints about this kind of training have centered around the fact that employees weren’t informed either about the intensity of the psychological attacks that would be made upon them as individuals or about any underlying belief system of philosophy being taught.

It should be noted that a plausible (ostensibly noble) reason is given to participants for not warning others about what takes place. This allows those running the LGATs to claim that they are acting in the best interests of participants, as opposed to concealing information that might be considered vital for informed consent.

(Misleading) noble explanations are provided for LGAT exercises

There are multiple ways that LGATs generate stress in participants (see Hunter, 2018, pp. 192-312), however, for the purposes of this document just a few processes are described. While many of these processes generate significant stress, LGATs tend to offer ostensibly noble reasons for incorporating each of them (Hunter, 2018). In Lifespring, for example, they use the *9 Dot Game* and in Gateway there was a similar puzzle to solve. Of our exercise I state, “We were told that we would be given six matches and that we had to make four equilateral triangles from them” (Hunter, 2010, 421-422). This is very much like the *9 Dot Game* in that it was presented as a way to encourage out-of-the-box thinking, and as a way to examine our “self-talk” and our ability to persevere. These sound like worthy goals; however, like the *9 Dot Game*, the *Matchstick Game* seemed to last forever. While I cannot state with certainty what impact the *9 Dot Game* has on participants, I can testify to the fact that many Gateway participants found the *Matchstick Game* incredibly stressful and emotionally draining, both those who could not get the answer themselves, and those who had to witness others struggling (a major source of stress in LGATs). In 2010, I wrote of this experience:

For some people, for whom this sort of thing is not so easy, this exercise was mental torture and induced extreme cognitive fatigue. People sat for ages trying things over and over again, getting brief applause for the first triangle on the ground, but failing to see the next step. (Hunter, 2010, 437-439)³¹

One young woman, for example, had tears running down her face while she was told that if she gave up on the exercise it reflected the way she approached life:

She had no idea how to figure this out, but this did not save her from abuse. I could hear her crying and could see her through the corner of my eye as she was berated for her “failure” in the task. (Hunter, 2010, 453-455)

Given the reality of what occurs in the *Matchstick Exercise*, it is perhaps true to say that it encourages out-of-the-box thinking, facilitates an examination of self-talk, and teaches perseverance, but it is highly misleading. Another major component of LGATs requires participants to reveal often deeply personal and emotionally loaded information to the group, or to a stranger in the group. Participants are then urged (or badgered) to take responsibility for

³¹ Brandon Courtney states that the *9 Dot Game* lasts for about an hour and a half (BC, 2022, 18:20).

these troubling experiences. As occurs in other LGATs, in Landmark this frequently distressing process is (innocuously) described as “sharing” (see Hunter, 2018, pp. 241-256):

These opaque missives came to life, though, through “sharing,” the testimonials that participants gave at the microphones. In our course, at least, this became a speed-walk through the awful things that people do to themselves and to each other – infidelity, incest, anorexia, abuse. Weeping at the mike was so common that one dry-eyed grandmother seemed compelled to explain, “If I wasn’t taking antidepressant pills, I’d be crying right now.” (Thornburgh, 2011)

Both Brandon Courtney and Jean Courtney make reference to “feedback” which occurs at SRA, both during the workshops and as part of the students’ “treatment” (BC, 2022; JC, 2022). The innocent-sounding term “feedback” does not reveal what typically occurs during these interactions. Former SRA student, “Maggie,” (2021, 01:04:36) explains:

... it would be like... feedback is what they always called it, but it would be basically like people telling you... like phrased in the therapeutic way... which I can’t remember but phrased in a way that was meant to be like constructive, but like basically people telling you that they hated you... and that you were like a bad person...

LGAT organizations are incentivized to frame what takes place in their seminars using positive language (euphemisms), but this language may provide a distorted perspective of what actually occurs (see Hunter, 2018, pp. 269-283). To provide another practical example of this, consider that the treatment of est participants is often referred to by est proponents as “tough love.” Dr. James Doty of Stanford University uses a slightly different phrase (“ruthless compassion”) when talking about Werner Erhard and est:

And you know there are many ways to... deal with your bullshit... and some find a path through the Dalai Lama... some find it through other spiritual leaders. I have to say though... Werner’s been a hero of mine because what he does... he practices *ruthless compassion*... (CCARE_at_Stanford_University, 2017, 05:30)

It is worth reflecting on this term (“ruthless compassion”) and deciding for yourself whether it is a fair portrayal of est conditions and treatment of participants, when reading the multiple independent descriptions of what occurred during est, both in this document, and (in greater detail) in Hunter (2018). It is also worth noting that John Hanley pleaded ignorance when asked about the clearly abusive (and clearly routine) interactions which occurred at Lifespring:

“There ought not be any harsh tactics in the training,” Hanley says. Told that trainers still call customers names, he says he is disappointed. “I apologise if anyone in the training was treated in anything but a respectful way.” (M. Fisher, 1987)

These individuals, and organizations, are highly incentivized to provide sanitized depictions and honorable motives for what occurs in these seminars. System 2 should be engaged, and the required effort should be expended, to scrutinize the veracity of these depictions.

Arbitrary rules set participants up to fail

“... by defining and manipulating the criteria of purity, and then by conducting an all-out war upon impurity, the ideological totalists create a narrow world of guilt and shame” (Lifton, 1989, p. 424).

Psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton, who studied the indoctrination techniques used by the Chinese on American POWs during the Korean War, noted how in a thought reform (“brainwashing”) environment, arbitrary rules were created that prisoners would inevitably break. This allowed those running the environment to load guilt and shame onto these prisoners, and LGATs use similar tactics. LGATs all begin by “asking” participants to agree to certain ground rules, but these arbitrary rules are used as a standard of purity against which participants are judged. When participants inevitably break some of these rules they are chastised by the trainer (Hunter, 2018, 2019a, 2019b). Brandon Courtney and Jean Courtney both make reference to the use of ground rules in the SRA workshops (BC, 2022; JC, 2022) and former SRA student, “Maggie” (2021, 01:32:25) notes how numerous arbitrary rules are used at SRA as well:

... like the rules on rules on rules... there’s no way that any sane person could remember all of them... and any single person, no matter how much you try to follow all of them you are going to break something... like there’s just no way... you’re set up for failure...

Participants are “forced” to remain in the LGAT and complete all exercises

The ability to escape from an overwhelming situation reduces the cumulative effect of stress (Sapolsky, 2004), and LGATs – either through explicit rules or strong encouragement – do all they can to ensure that participants remain in the training environment and complete all exercises (Hunter, 2018). During est, participants were told that all they had to do to get the result (“transformation”) was stay in the room:

And if you choose to stay and keep your sole in the room [He gestures toward his feet.] and follow instructions and take what you get, then I guarantee that on next Sunday you'll get it. You may sleep half the time and be angry the other half, but if you just keep your sole here in the room and follow instructions you'll get it. It will blow your minds... (Rhinehart, 1976/2010, p. 10)

The same approach is used in Landmark, although it is less militant:

Leaving during the three fifteen-hour days is discouraged – a posterboard sign warns, IF YOU LEAVE THE ROOM FOR ANY REASON, EVEN FOR A FEW MINUTES, YOU MAY GET THE RESULT BUT HAVE NO RIGHT TO EXPECT IT. (Grigoriadis, 2001)

LGATs cannot afford for participants to get a real break from the stress that is generated in the training environment, and so – initially by force and later, as LGATs recognized that the optics of this force could prove problematic, by more subtle coercion – participants are “prevented” from leaving the seminars (Hunter, 2018). We were told we could leave the Gateway seminar at any time; however, the truth is that we would be “asked to leave” the company if we did not fully participate in and complete these seminars. Brandon Courtney similarly claims that if students do not want to participate in the *9 Dot Game* (or any other exercise presumably), they can “leave at any time” (BC, 2022, 20:43), but this misrepresents the pressure students are under to stay in the workshops, agree with the trainer, and complete all exercises. Students must complete these workshops to progress and eventually leave SRA, so if they chose to “sit out” an exercise and leave a workshop (which Brandon Courtney suggests is not a problem), they would need to go back and do the workshop again. Brandon Courtney later explains:

If a student is not completing their responsibilities, academics, chores, therapy work, if a student is unwilling to participate in therapy, that will impact their ability to move up [...] We have certain program objectives – objectives that a student needs to meet. If they're not meeting those objectives, they would not progress through the program. (BC, 2022, 23:30)

This also impacts freedom of expression and thought (and information), as students will not question the trainer if they believe that it will extend their stay at SRA:

What I already knew was that if you don't finish these workshops, you have to stay there longer. I shut up and gave Jeannie [Jean Courtney] what she was looking for. I said to myself, “I am shutting the fuck up.” (Rearden, 2022, p. 3)

The extreme LGAT emphasis on responsibility causes stress

“Hanley preached that everyone is totally responsible for his life; there is no such thing as a victim. Students sometimes took this to mean they were responsible for lost jobs, family breakups, even how parents had raised them. Some students suffered breakdowns and sued Lifespring. The company argued it was not responsible for the psychological problems” (M. Fisher, 1987).

LGAT organizations claim that they encourage participants to accept personal responsibility for their lives – and this again seems like a noble motive (particularly for people who have taken very little responsibility for their lives up until that point) – however, the way that LGATs encourage participants to accept responsibility is often guilt and shame-inducing. Finkelstein et al. (1982, p. 521) explain that an est trainee is told that he or she is “... the ‘source’ of his or her subjective experiences and must assume absolute responsibility for the experience of everything that occurs in his or her world.” Similarly, Lifespring participants were told that they were responsible for all events their lives (Haaken & Adams, 1983). This is based on the idea that participants can choose how they interpret problematic experiences – a superficially reasonable proposition, and one which is central to cognitive therapy (Corey, 2013). However, the extreme interpretation of this concept and the reckless application of this cognitive process, as occurs in LGATs, is highly problematic (Hunter, 2018).³² A significant portion of LGATs is made up of participants “sharing” problems they are experiencing with the group and having the trainer work through these problems with them. Haaken and Adams (1983, p. 276) explain how the concept of responsibility was used to generate guilt in Lifespring:

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.”

Mark Brewer (1975) of *Psychology Today* relates a similar interaction from est:

³² Rearden (2022, p. 12) astutely picks up on this key element of manipulation – that some of what individuals are being told does make sense: “Where my brainwashing came in is that they said things that did have some validity. There is something to be said for taking feedback in your life. But they would convolute it.”

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.

Providing insight into the abnormal extremes to which this philosophy is taken, journalist Steven Pressman (1993, p. 72) explains, “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.” Since Brewer and Pressman were generally critical of est, the description by est advocate Luke Rhinehart (1976/2010, pp. 94-95) of an apparently typical interaction is useful. In the followings exchange a participant is told that her perspective – that being molested was “dirty” – is just an interpretation; she is taunted by the trainer who suggests that she is responsible for *choosing* to experience her molestation that way:

“When Don asked us to contact an image from the past I got the time when I was ten years old and my uncle molested me. I’ve remembered this incident ever since it occurred – it wasn’t something I had repressed. I was playing on my uncle’s lap when my parents were out and he began doing dirty things with his hands and then making me do dirty things with mine. When I – ”

“Hold it, Diane,” Don interrupts. “‘Dirty things’ is your belief system, your concept, it’s something you just added then and are adding now to what actually occurred.”

Diane stares at Don at first without replying.

“I was only ten years old!” she says.

“I got that,” says Don. “And your uncle touched your right elbow, is that right?”

“No! He touched me... between the legs.”

“Good. I got it. Go on.”

“Well,” says Diane, now a little flushed. “He molested me and later I realized what I had done wrong. My mother – ”

“I’m sorry, Diane,” interrupts Don again. “This coming weekend when we talk about reality and ‘Who did it?’ you’ll understand why I want you to look now at *who* is making what you and your uncle did ‘dirty’ or ‘wrong.’”

“Everybody does. It was *dirty*,” says Diane.

“You choose to experience it as dirty,” says Don, standing on the platform opposite Diane.

“Look, in a graduate seminar a woman shared that for four years she had committed incest with her father and she felt terrible about it. There was incest and there was her feeling terrible about it. Immediately after that woman finished sharing another woman stood up and said, ‘I just realized listening to this woman how much I loved my father and part of me wished my father had committed incest with me. It almost seems like it would have been wonderful.’ Now it’s not that one woman is right and the other one wrong. What I want you to get is that the same physical event can be *experienced* as dirty or wonderful.”

Numerous sources (Badt, 2011; Braid, 2003; Evans, 2010; Fazeli, 2012; Hill, 2003; Howard, 2001; jman76, 2009; Mahoney, 1998; McClure, 2009; O’Brien, 2012; Odasso, 2011; Scioscia, 2000) reveal how Landmark trainers use revelations of trauma, a highly problematic version of cognitive restructuring, and this extreme interpretation of responsibility, to intensify feelings of guilt and shame in those sharing, and in those who must sit and watch. Roland Howard (2001) of the *Daily Mail* reveals the stress this causes when addressing more sensitive topics:

But it is only on the second day when a young man comes to the microphone that my misgivings turn to anger. He tells us with tears streaming down his face that he had been raped by his brother for most of his childhood. He had taken David’s advice the day before and phoned his brother to create a breakthrough. “I was willing to give up the pain for a good relationship,” he says. His brother had put down the phone. David urges him to phone again. “Rape is interpretation. Brutality is interpretation,” he says. He had to forgive him. “Get off your guilt and grow up,” he snaps.

Blogger Sarah Fazeli relates her own experience of this treatment:

I might have stayed even longer, but then I heard this: Everything in your life is your fault, including your rape. They were such assholes to me onstage after I’d bared my soul, and talked about everything from being raped to my husband never wanting to have sex with me. The upshot was essentially, *Guess what, bitch? It’s all your fault!* (Fazeli, 2012)

Jean Courtney says of SRA students who have experienced severe traumas, “What the girls, especially those who have had that kind of experience and others with big traumas love the workshops and the reason they love the workshops is they have finally been in a place for three days where someone really understands... and the number one thing is they stop blaming themselves” (JC, 2022, 44:27). If responsibility is addressed in SRA workshops in the same

way that it is addressed in most LGATs, then it is likely that students would experience elevated guilt and shame through these processes (Hunter, 2018). A former SRA student's description of an interaction with her therapist suggests that the extreme LGAT emphasis on responsibility was not foreign to SRA:

During the final months at Spring Ridge, I was raped on one of my visits home. I was afraid to tell my therapist out of fear that I would be held at the program longer, but she found out about it anyway. She had me talk to her about it and ended up victim-blaming me for it. My entire treatment team was informed, and they shamed and punished me for it by not allowing me to visit home again. (Jennifer, 2021)

The theme of responsibility emerges repeatedly throughout Lifespring, est, Landmark, and other LGATs. When one shifts from accepting that it serves an altruistic purpose and considers the possibility that its primary function is to generate tension, humiliation, and guilt (contributing to the key LGAT ingredient – stress), the tactic becomes quite evident.

Guided visualization exercises may be psychologically stressful

In addition to the general confrontational styles of LGAT trainers, and the often-emotional public confessions (“sharing”) described, LGATs incorporate stress-inducing guided visualization exercises. During these exercises participants are urged to focus on painful experiences from their pasts, or fictional fear-inducing scenarios (Braid, 2003; Brewer, 1975; Finkelstein et al., 1982; M. Fisher, 1987; Haaken & Adams, 1983; Howard, 2001; Lemonnier, 2005; Mahoney, 1998; O’Brien, 2012; Pressman, 1993; Rhinehart, 1976/2010; Scioscia, 2000). Pressman (1993, p. 74) reveals the impact of a guided visualization exercise used in est:

... the intensely introspective nature of the est Truth Process wreaked havoc on their emotional systems. People writhed and thrashed about with their bodies, the sounds of crying and screaming and groaning echoing around the ballroom.

Numerous sources describe the reaction to Landmark’s “fear exercise”:³³

Next day, the leader asked us to sit with our eyes closed and conjure up a painful memory. He then asked us to imagine that we were in a packed London Tube and everyone was looking at us and was out to get us. I can remember feeling terrified. All around the room I could hear these terrible screaming sobs; I realised that I was crying too. (Braid, 2003)

³³ See Hunter (2018, pp. 198-200) for additional examples.

Mark Fisher (1987) describes a “guided fantasy” in Lifespring stating, “... the lights are turned down, trainees sit on the floor and Jim tells a story over a sentimental pop song, asking everyone to conjure up troubling childhood memories.” When asked about the use of visualization exercises at SRA workshops, Brandon Courtney explains that one possible use for these exercises is, “... you know... going back in time to a place in their life...” (BC, 2022: 15:10). Rearden's (2022, pp. 3-4) description of a visualization exercise from SRA's Teen Challenge workshop in January 2020 fits the description of a Lifespring “guided fantasy” provided by Mark Fisher, but sounds even more stress-inducing:

The second day was crazy. For each parent, mother and father, they would play a different song and do a guided meditation with the lights off. Jeannie would be on a microphone asking you to visualize when you are first born and trying to spark memories of when you were growing up. Jeannie takes you through prompts for you to think of all the ways your parents have let you down during the different stages of your childhood [...] These exercises got us all so upset. There was sobbing everywhere. One girl who was adopted was especially triggered. We were then asked to put all of our feelings about our parents into an imaginary “trash bag” and place it on a metal fold out chair in front of ourselves. After Jeannie said so, we must then jump up and beat the shit out of the metal chair with a very tightly wound hard mat (at least it seemed like a mat, it may have been a stick with a rug wrapped around it or something). All this is happening while girls are screaming at you and while it is pitch black in the room. It was horrifying.

Stress-mitigating factors are restricted in LGATs

Robert Sapolsky is the John A. and Cynthia Fry Gunn Professor and Professor of Neurology and Neurosurgery at Stanford University and one of his primary areas of expertise is stress. In his book *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers* Sapolsky (2004) explains that some of the ways to mitigate stress include: (i) Enlisting social support; (ii) Having outlets for frustration; and (iii) Predictability and a sense of control. Each of these is minimized in LGATs.

Enlisting social support

A rule common to LGATs is that participants may not talk to each other during the training and, while being constantly watched by assistants, they are prevented from interacting in any way. Haaken and Adams (1983, p. 274) explain that in Lifespring, “In order to speak, participants had to stand, be acknowledged by the leader and speak into a microphone,” while Mark Fisher (1987) describes the Lifespring ground rules:

The rules are indeed simple. For example, attend the entire training. Be on time. Be seated before the music ends. Don't eat, smoke or chew gum in the training room. No drugs or alcohol during the next five days. No side talking...

Rhinehart (1976/2010, p. 6) captures this restriction in est with one of the ground rules presented by the trainer: "There will be no talking." If you cannot talk to anyone else, you cannot gain social support from anyone else or provide social support to anyone else. The impact of this isolation is magnified by another rule: that participants cannot sit next to anyone that they know and that, after each break, they must find someone new to sit next to:

IF YOU ARE SEATED NEXT TO ANYONE YOU KNEW BEFORE THIS MORNING
RAISE YOUR HAND. THE PERSON SITTING ON THIS SIDE OF THE OTHER IS TO
GO TO THE BACK OF THE ROOM. (Rhinehart, 1976/2010, p. 5)

Finkelstein et al. (1982, p. 519) similarly refer to this rule: "... to not sit in proximity to any familiar person" (p. 519). Some Landmark participants claim that they were explicitly chastised for offering support to fellow participants who had "shared" during the sessions. This inability to provide comfort is stressful both for those who do not receive social support, and for those who are unable to provide it:

Basically, the leader had people stand up and share stories, which were heart breaking. One woman'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, 2009)

After she stood up a break was called. We then reconvened. The leader announced that everyone who had gone up to her and consoled her were her enemies, and went to her because of "the clearing that she was creating." (toadhall, 2010)

While it is unclear whether this restriction of social support occurs in SRA workshops, SRA_Survivor (2017) explains how social support is restricted at SRA more generally:

I wasn't allowed freedom of speech with my family or peers, and the school even put me and my best friend on S-N-S (silence and separation: no speaking, no eye contact, no physical contact, and you can't even be near one another) for three months and all of my phone calls were monitored and timed.

This has apparently been going on since at least 1998, as SRA_Survivor (1998) reports:

The facility controls all communications and correspondence and prevents children from calling for help. The child is punished for attempting to do so either through forced silence, extending the duration of stay, and removal of meager privileges. If a child attempts to give any negative feedback about their experience via monitored phone calls, parents are told they are lying and manipulating them. Children are not able to freely report abuse to parents or the authorities.

Sapolsky (2004) explains how social support reduces stress among primates (including humans) when they are put through a difficult situation and, with a statement that almost seems to have been crafted with LGATs in mind, concludes:

... the best predictors of elevated glucocorticoid levels [stress] among subordinate animals turn out to be if they are frequently harassed by dominant individuals and if they lack the opportunities for social support. (p. 360)

Having outlets for frustration

Linked to social support is the more general concept of *outlets for frustration*. The outlet for frustration might be interaction with a friend, or it may simply be the ability to say what you really want to. Since communication is restricted, and the trainer is an expert at controlling the room and making those who challenge him/her look like fools (to a receptive audience in any event), participants may become frustrated, but feel unable to vent this frustration. Other outlets include the ability to freely (without feeling monitored) get up and leave the room to take a break from the environment. LGATs strenuously discourage participants from doing this (Hunter, 2018). Mark Fisher (1987) says of Lifespring, “The rules are indeed simple. For example, attend the entire training,” and reveals that leaving at any time was difficult:

Three years ago, Lieberman recommended changes in Lifespring to reduce the risks of the training. He asked the company to strengthen the warnings on its sign-up form -- and it did. He asked it to teach trainers to recognize signs of stress in trainees -- and it did. But Lifespring did not change the course to accept “my message that they really have to reduce the pressure on people to stay in the room,” Lieberman says.

Rhinehart (1976/2010, p. 6) reveals that the same was true of est: “THERE WILL BE NO BATHROOM BREAKS FOR ANYONE until the trainer says so...” and former SRA students make similar claims about not being able to leave the room in their workshops:

SRA’s sessions utilized attack therapy, forced emoting and limited food, sleep, and bathroom breaks to create heightened stress. (SRA_Survivor, 1998)

They would deprive us of sleep, food, bathroom breaks, and water. (SRA_Survivor, 2017)

Because sleep disruption is a form of stress (Sapolsky, 2004), because it is often used in LGATs, and because it is discussed in some detail by Hunter (2018), it is noteworthy that both of these students make reference to sleep disruption in the SRA student workshops.

Predictability and a sense of control

According to Sapolsky (2004), “Predictability makes stress less stressful” (p. 258) and “In the absence of any stressor, loss of predictability triggers a stress response” (p. 259). As already noted, LGATs insist that graduates should not reveal what takes place in the training, arguing that it will “ruin the experience” for those they are recruiting. This is true, as a lack of predictability (or an increase in stress) is vital to their “technology.” While a lack of predictability increases the stress experienced by LGAT participants, Sapolsky (2004, p. 263) explains that minimising an individual’s sense of control has a similar effect:

Loss of control and lack of predictive information are closely related. Some researchers have emphasized this, pointing out that the common theme is that the organism is subjected to novelty. You thought you knew how to manage things, you thought you knew what would happen next, and it turns out to be wrong in this novel situation.

Considering the degree to which the behavior and communication of participants are under the control of LGAT leaders, it is important to understand that a sense of control is “an extraordinarily powerful variable in modulating the stress-response” (Sapolsky, 2004, p. 261). LGAT trainers spend a great deal of time ensuring participants agree to rules which, effectively, put them under the control of the trainer. While participants can theoretically get up and walk out at any time, there are powerful psychological forces relating to integrity, commitments, and fear of being singled out, which make participants feel that they are bound by these commitments (ground rules). LGAT organizations may argue that “no one holds a gun to your head” and that “participants are free to leave at any time”; however, as Sapolsky (2004, p. 261) explains, “... the exercise of control is not critical; rather it is the belief that you have it.”

Additional first-hand descriptions of stress at SRA workshops, and at SRA

“The purpose of our workshops... I can talk about my workshop... different than what they were doing in Lifespring... and Lifespring has been a long time ago for me... the purpose of the Red/Black game and all of the experiences in the workshops that I do... provides a safe, supportive environment where, in fact, people can begin to look at their patterns of thinking, feeling, and beliefs that come up for them...” – Jean Courtney (JC, 2022, 15:30)

While Jean “Jeannie” Courtney claims to have modified the SRA workshops, removing the stressful elements that she did not like about Lifespring (JC, 2022), unsolicited descriptions of the SRA workshops by former students indicate that this is not the case. SRA Survivor (1998) says the following about the SRA workshops:

Many of the seminars, or “trainings” as the program refers to them, involve unlicensed current and past students/parents in a supposedly “therapeutic” facilitation role. These highly secretive “trainings,” the essence of their program, come from Jeannie’s prior experience at Cross Creek Manor, a youth facility that was closed due to abuse, and involve questionable cult-like tactics. SRA’s sessions utilized attack therapy, forced emoting and limited food, sleep, and bathroom breaks to create heightened stress. A child’s performance in these seminars dictated much of their progress in the leveled program. Children would often be compelled to lie or invent past traumas in order to be viewed as successfully “working the program” and thus hopefully advance towards leaving the facility.

Note that these conditions would cause significant psychological stress without the trainer having to resort to screaming or swearing. It is the content of what is said by trainers, and believed by participants, which causes distress. Another former SRA student describes the general conditions of the school, which speak to the likelihood that LGAT conditions involving trauma and control were removed by Jean Courtney. Jennifer (2021) states:

At 17 years old I was forcefully threatened into attending Spring Ridge Academy in Arizona where I was traumatized and abused for 15 months. When I started there, I was not allowed any communication with my parents until I “earned those privileges,” or to have any contact with friends from home for several months. The treatments used at this facility are based on shame and excessive control [...] The therapist I was assigned there had total control over my relationships and cut me off from several friends. I lost the first friend I made at Spring Ridge because the therapist determined we were too close and notified staff that we were not allowed to speak to or be anywhere near each other [...] I could go on and on about instances of humiliation, shame, and blatant discrimination I witnessed and experienced at this school. Spring Ridge Academy is a money-hungry cult that exploits struggling young women and their families. It gave me PTSD, severe trust and relationship issues, and horrible self-esteem. My parents have been so manipulated by the program that they refuse to acknowledge how much damage it has inflicted.

Rearden (2022, pp. 8-9) says the following about SRA’s Action workshop:

Before I was removed from SRA, I attended the Action workshop. We were supposed to dance and dress up like fictional characters. One girl confided in the group that she was nervous because she was not a good dancer. We all told her not to worry and just have fun. She danced, and from what I could tell, she really gave it her effort. She was awkward at times. Jeannie kicked the girl out saying she was not in touch with herself and her body and spirit were not connected or aligned. Jeannie also said that the girl must have body image issues. The girl started crying. It was sad because she was actually trying and enjoying herself.

Rearden (2022, p. 9) also describes how the “lifeboat exercise” was used at SRA’s Action workshop. This exercise was used in Lifespring (and is used in many LGATs today):

The “life boat” exercise we did was horrifying. They dim all the lights. It’s explained to us we got in a boating accident and there is not enough room for everyone to be in the life boat. While everyone is screaming we are supposed to pop up, run to front of room, and explain why we should be saved and declare to the room why we deserve to live. It was crazy. Lights are flashing. You are kicked off if you don’t give a good enough reason to live. Jeannie sends girls out if they don’t give what she thinks is a good enough reason to live. Out of my entire Action group of the about 15 girls who started, only about five of us made it through the entire thing, the rest getting kicked out arbitrarily.

SRA_Survivor (2017), who was thirteen years old when she attended SRA, describes the SRA workshops in the following way:

One of the main parts [of] Spring Ridge Academy was the “workshops”/ “seminars” they gave us. These were called Action, Challenge, and Commitment. The seminars consisted of intense group therapy 10+ hours that lasted three days straight. They would deprive us of sleep, food, bathroom breaks, and water. During the seminars they would use fear tactics like time limits³⁴, judgement from other students and/or staff, etc. to make the students going through the workshop want to stay and be able to get through it. Most of the time you would be running off fear of being kicked out of the workshop and having your stay at Spring Ridge become longer. I remember during an activity in Action, I had to stand on a chair by myself in front of 50+ people and be judged if I should stay or leave the workshop. While I

³⁴ This likely refers to the playing of *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (mentioned on page 10). This piece of music was used in Lifespring and is currently used in other LGATs to indicate that a break has ended. Participants who are not seated by the end of the song are subjected to humiliation by the trainer (Hunter, 2018).

was on the chair, Kara confronted me about my parents wanting to pull me early from the school and Jeanie proceeded to humiliate and scrutinize me. Jeannie specifically told me that my family didn't love me, that they were giving up on me, and that I would either die or become a drug addict if they didn't keep me there.³⁵

It is difficult to reconcile Jean Courtney's claim of removing stressful elements from Lifespring and of providing a "safe, supportive environment" with these independent descriptions by former students. Defining the treatment described by these former students as "supportive" is similar to the way that LGAT advocates describe the treatment in seminars as "tough love" or "ruthless compassion." It is disingenuous and, to anyone who has not bought into the extreme LGAT way of thinking, it is misleading at best and blatantly dishonest at worst. It is also worth noting that Rearden's (2022, p. 7) description of how she was pressured into staying at SRA aligns with SRA_Survivor's (2017) account:

I knew from my dad and Suzie and Brandon Courtney that the judge wanted to know if I wanted to stay at SRA or go home. Suzie and Brandon discussed it with me a couple of times (see Paragraph 98). They told me that if I left SRA, I would not be able to function properly in society and adapt. They told me my life would be fucked up if I left. I was afraid to challenge them [...] I was really nervous about the decision to leave. I was afraid I would not adjust to the world.

There are many other ways that LGATs generate stress (see Hunter, 2018, pp. 192-312); however, this section provides a sense of the conditions and exercises which may elevate glucocorticoids (increase stress) over the course of several days in an LGAT. Depending on their contexts, LGATs may use different combinations of these processes to achieve their goals. What may be acceptable in South Africa (possibly a more militant, overtly abuse approach) may not be acceptable in other parts of the world, with a different audience; however, there are multiple ways for LGATs to elicit high levels of stress, and it is only possible to understand how some of these processes generate stress through careful consideration. Because learning and memory are negatively impacted by stress or elevated glucocorticoids (Sapolsky, 2004), LGAT conditions are not conducive to System 2 processing.

³⁵ Former *Second Nature* and SRA student, "Maggie" (2021, 01:14:15) similarly says of *Second Nature*, "They like to have a life or death situation... like to keep you there too... if you don't stay... if you don't keep your daughter here... if she doesn't stay here like she will be like shooting heroin in a ditch in like six weeks' time..."

Excessive information is provided and notes cannot be taken (cognitive exhaustion)

In addition to being physically and emotionally exhausted, LGAT participants are given a considerable amount of information to process which, for many, may be philosophically obscure and difficult to understand. Participants are unable to discuss this information freely during the training, but they are also prevented from revisiting the details later, as note-taking is prohibited. According to Haaken Adams (1983, p. 272) this rule was used in Lifespring:

“Although notes and taping were not allowed during training sessions, we made extensive notes during breaks and at the close of each day’s sessions.”

Rhinehart (1976/2010, p. 6) explains that it was used in est:

“There will be no note-taking or tape recording...”

Numerous sources reveal that it is still used in current LGATs like Landmark. E.g.,

“We are not to take notes, eat or talk (unless instructed to)” (Howard, 2001).

Participants who are (still) motivated to understand what is being said must, therefore, remain cognitively engaged for the duration of the training, retain the information presented, and then later – under less pressurized conditions – think critically about this information, if they hope to process it using System 2. For reasons already discussed, most participants will not be motivated to think critically about what they have been through. If their *motivation* to think critically has been minimized and, additionally, they are physically tired, their memories are hindered through stress, and they have not been able to take notes (and are likely to not be able to remember the details of what took place) then their *ability* to think critically about what they have been through would also be minimized. It should be clear that LGAT conditions are not conducive to System 2 processing, and that under these conditions, participants will be more likely to default to System 1 processing (which renders them more likely to employ cognitive shortcuts, and more vulnerable to influence through peripheral cues).³⁶

³⁶ Rearden (2022, p. 6) notes, “My dad was out of control and angry after leaving Challenge and would not agree to me going home right then and there like my mom wanted.” While one cannot state with certainty that participation in Parent Challenge contributed to this state (multiple confounds would have to be considered), LGAT conditions lead to *ego depletion* and hypomanic-like states in some (Hunter, 2018). Irritability and anger can occur in these dysregulated states and when a person is physically, cognitively, and emotionally exhausted, they are less able to regulate their emotions and behavior (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Hunter, 2018).

LGATs Take Advantage of the Vulnerabilities in System 1 Thinking

It has been argued that LGAT processes are likely to limit participants' *motivation* and *ability* to engage System 2 (and make it more likely that they will employ System 1) and that under these conditions participants are more likely to make use of cognitive shortcuts and be impacted by peripheral cues. One of the cognitive shortcuts that people are likely to utilize is authority figures, and it has been explained how LGAT trainers undermine participants' confidence in their own perspectives, while establishing themselves as the authorities in the seminars. There are four other authorities that LGATs often make use of: (i) misleading "research"; (ii) external experts; (ii) satisfied former participants (testimonials); (ii) and participants in the LGAT (social proof). Each of these will be discussed before addressing the primary peripheral cue utilized: a powerful emotional experience. The impact of emotion on rationality will be outlined and then evidence of the "transformation" elicited at the end of an LGAT will be provided. Various other peripheral cues will also be briefly discussed.

Making Use of Other Authorities

"I kept thinking to myself, 'They wouldn't have this place if there was not legitimacy'."
 – Rearden (2022, p. 10)

Misleading "research"

LGATs are often marketed as being *evidence-based*, and superficial evidence may be offered about the program's effectiveness (Hunter, 2018). It is fair to assume that if peer-reviewed studies demonstrating the long-term effectiveness of LGAT participation had been conducted – and published – that LGAT organizations would widely publicise these studies. The claims that LGAT organizations make about their programs (in terms of their effectiveness and the percentage of participants who benefit) are substantial, so it is also fair to say that if these claims were true, it should not be difficult to verify them with controlled research. Finally, it is fair to say that if such studies were anticipated to add scientific validity to their seminars, then larger LGAT organizations would fund this research. Since their inception, LGATs have faced considerable controversy, and a few methodologically robust studies which demonstrated their medium-to-long term effectiveness would alleviate this scepticism (and boost their sales).

To be clear, while there are various surveys which reveal that recently graduated participants feel "euphoric," "empowered," "energized," and "transformed" – indicative of the transient emotional high triggered through participation – there is currently no peer-reviewed research available which demonstrates that LGATs elicit long-term benefits on any meaningful

psychological measure (Hunter, 2018). In the mid-to-late 1980s, Werner Erhard partnered with researchers J. D. Fisher et al. (1989) to assess the medium and long-term benefits of participation in the Forum (the successor to est and predecessor to the Landmark Forum). Presumably, he expected that benefits would be found and allowed these independent researchers to publish their findings. They concluded:

The short-term outcome analysis revealed that only perceived control was affected by Forum participation, and no long-term treatment effects were observed. (p. 747)

Landmark does not include this independent, peer-reviewed study on its website, although it has a section dedicated to “Independent Research” (Landmark, 2021a). This section instead contains non-academic studies, with unverifiable methodologies, and an “endorsement” by Harvard University. System 1 thinking would associate this “endorsement” with a sense of scientific validity (and conclude that Landmark’s programs must have been carefully assessed by some really smart people); however, looking beyond this superficial “endorsement” to the evidence requires engaging System 2. Further research reveals that while Harvard temporarily used Landmark as a case study in the 1990s, this was in no way an endorsement of Landmark, and Harvard made this clear to Landmark in 1998 (Hunter, 2018). A 2001 *New York Magazine* article not only confirms that Harvard stopped using the case study, but that they were concerned by Landmark’s intention to associate themselves with the university:

As of this year, Harvard is no longer printing the study, teaching from it in courses or keeping it in its library. “Landmark ordered 75,000 copies of the study,” says a source at the school. “That’s when we knew we had a problem.” (Grigoriadis, 2001)

Journalist Rachel Jones (2003), who was sent the case study by Landmark in 2003, adds:

Harvard also made Landmark agree not to use the study for promotional purposes. I guess that means, to Landmark, that recruiters can still cite the study, and that journalists can still get copies they are told they need to assimilate in order to write “the facts” and not get sued.

It is now 2022 and Landmark still has this “endorsement” by Harvard University on their website (Landmark, 2021a). Since it says nothing positive about Landmark, and since Harvard does not endorse Landmark, its only possible purpose can be to create a misleading (System 1) association between Landmark and this institution. For those who look no further than the name of this prestigious university, or who fail to investigate other research which supposedly supports claims made by LGATs (those who do not engage System 2), these sorts of “endorsements” may, however, be effective.

External experts

Since peer-reviewed research has found no long-term benefits to LGAT participation, these organizations may rely on the endorsements of authority figures (Hunter, 2018, 2019a). If an expert (e.g., a medical doctor, a psychologist, or an educational consultant) claims that a program works, it may be tempting to trust this expert and – unless one has good reason to doubt this expert... and is willing to invest the time and effort to thoroughly investigate the program oneself (engaging System 2) – it is understandable that most would outsource their decision-making to this person (defaulting to System 1). Dr. James Doty, for example – during a conversation with Werner Erhard published on YouTube – makes the following statement about est, Landmark, and similar programs:

And if you've followed... est... if you've seen the power of the Landmark Forum... even today... where hundreds of thousands of lives are changed... you'll understand this (...) Innumerable studies have been done that have demonstrated... very scientifically... the extraordinary positive effect that est and these types of trainings have really had on people and changed... really millions of lives... (CCARE_at_Stanford_University, 2017, 06:54)

Dr. Doty is a clinical professor of neurosurgery at Stanford University and the founder and director of the Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education. If you Google him, you may find pictures of him being embraced by the Dalai Lama, and his credentials are very impressive. Few would think to question this endorsement, since it is specific and there is little chance that a Stanford University Professor does not understand what a scientific study is or that he would make this specific claim if such studies did not exist. Dr. Doty is a perfect example of an authority figure, and if you believe what he says without looking at the evidence, this would be an example of System 1 thinking. It should be noted that Werner Erhard highlights Dr. Doty's credentials (authority status) during their conversation:

... the first thing I need to do is if you don't really know who James Doty is, you are privileged to be in the presence of a truly extraordinary human being [...] Take the time to look up James Doty on the internet so that you know who you had the chance to be with... really, really, really makes my hair stand on end when I think about what the guy has accomplished... and maybe even more powerfully... who he actually is... (CCARE_at_Stanford_University, 2017, 09:26)

Because I completed a PhD on LGATs and searched earnestly to find studies such as those he described (I put the time and effort in to engage System 2) ... without any success, I contacted

Dr. Doty and asked him to point me towards just some of these “innumerable studies.” His response reveals the danger of outsourcing our thinking to those we trust to be authorities:

No studies have yet been completed so there is nothing published as well as (t)he final study design and sign off is not complete. I’m not sure where you found the quote, “demonstrated very scientifically the positive effect that est and these types of trainings have on people.” It was not from me. I know of no such study; only anecdotal statements. (Personal email, March 16, 2020, 12:35) ³⁷

Satisfied former graduates (testimonial evidence)

“Most participants learned of Lifespring through the recruiting efforts of friends and family members who were Lifespring graduates” (Haaken & Adams, 1983, p. 273).³⁸

Most marketing of LGATs is done by unpaid LGAT graduates, and participants are “asked” (there is considerable pressure put on participants) to commit to bringing family, friends, and work colleagues to the graduation which typically takes place a few days after the core training ends (Hunter, 2018). The post-training euphoria – during which participants may be convinced that their lives have been changed – tends to last a few days to a few weeks (Hunter, 2018) so new participants are frequently recruited by graduates who are extraordinarily positive about the experience. Making an informed decision about participation requires information relating to both the benefits and the risks. The benefits are overstated (there are no established long-term benefits), but the risks are also understated. Kahneman (2011, p. 140) explains that when a person believes in the value of a technology it is likely that he/she will underestimate its risks:

The striking finding was that people who received a message extolling the benefits of a technology also changed their beliefs about its risks. Although they received no relevant evidence, the technology they now liked more than before was also perceived as less risky.

Because LGATs insist that participants do not reveal what takes place in the training, and because a great deal of LGAT recruitment is done by graduates in a state of “transformation,” the primary indication of participation value and risk is provided by elated graduates who are likely to overstate the benefits and understate the risks.

³⁷ One also has to wonder why Werner Erhard, who worked with J. D. Fisher et al. (1989) and is surely aware that these “innumerable” “very scientific” studies on est and Landmark do not exist, did not correct Dr. Doty.

³⁸ Kimberly Sweidy notes that the “Parent Recommendation List” contacts provided were only of parents who strongly endorsed SRA and the methods used.

Other participants in the LGAT (social proof)

“In general, when we are unsure of ourselves, when the situation is unclear or ambiguous, when uncertainty reigns, we are most likely to look to and accept the actions of others as correct” (Cialdini, 2007, p. 129).

In the same way that thinking may be outsourced to an individual, so it is often necessary to outsource thinking to groups of people. By doing or thinking what most people around us are doing or thinking, it is generally possible to minimize errors, and using other people as social proof is so much a part of everyday decision-making that we are often not conscious that we are doing it. Cialdini (2007, p. 116) notes the problem with this type of System 1 thinking:

As a rule, we will make fewer mistakes by acting in accord with social evidence than contrary to it. Usually, when a lot of people are doing something, it is the right thing to do. This feature of the principle of social proof is simultaneously its major strength and its major weakness. Like other weapons of influence, it provides a convenient shortcut for determining how to behave but, at the same time, makes one who uses the shortcut vulnerable to the attacks of profiteers who lie in wait along its path. (p. 116).

The problem, he explains, “... comes when we begin responding to social proof in such a mindless and reflexive fashion that we can be fooled by partial or fake evidence” (p. 116). Branscombe and Baron (2014) confirm this perspective, arguing that for most people the desire to be accurate is strong, and that this is a powerful source of conformity. Notably, they state that conforming to what the group is doing “... is more likely to be true in situations where we are highly uncertain about what is ‘correct’ or ‘accurate’ than in situations where we have more confidence in our own ability to make such decisions” (p. 284).

LGAT trainers dismantle participants’ confidence in their ability to interpret what is going on around them. Participants are in a state of perpetual uncertainty, never knowing what the next exercise involves or what the correct way to respond to it might be. Furthermore, the philosophy is ambiguous, participants cannot speak to each other to gain insight (this is one of the ground rules in all LGATs), they are exhausted, and the only cues for behavior are those provided by other participants. Since analyzing is both discouraged and restricted in these uncertain conditions, it is likely that System 1 thinking such as social proof will be employed to behave and think in the “correct” way. Cialdini (2007, p. 129) notes the irony of trusting the behavior and thinking of those around us in a statement which applies perfectly to LGATs:

In the process of examining the reactions of other people to resolve our uncertainty, however, we are likely to overlook a subtle but important fact. Those people are probably examining the social evidence too. Especially in an ambiguous situation, the tendency for everyone to be looking to see what everyone else is doing can lead to a fascinating phenomenon called “pluralistic ignorance.”

The pressure to conform in an LGAT is immense and when a critical mass of participants has bought into what the trainer is saying, anyone who challenges the trainer becomes seen as a threat to the possibility of transformation. Participants who have accepted jargon, such as “rackets” or “grungies,” or internalized the idea that analyzing is bad, “recognize” participants who will not “give up their rackets,” who are “coming from their heads” (as opposed to their hearts), who “refuse to participate,” who are unwilling to “receive feedback,” or who are shamed by the trainer for being “uncoachable.” Haaken and Adams (1983, p. 280) reflect on this social pressure in Lifespring, stating, “... as participant-observers, we did share some of the group’s subjective experiences, particularly the extraordinary pressure to conform.” Revealing how researcher Richard (“Dick”) Adams was treated by his fellow Lifespring participants for failing to blindly follow instructions, they explain:

This participant, one of the researchers, had been a symbol of resistance throughout the training by asking questions and at times disagreeing with the trainer. During one group exercise, he had been selected by half of the participants as the “least attractive” person in the group. He was offensive to many participants for being “too analytical,” “rigid,” and “not feeling enough.” In the wake of the morning’s events, affective states were intensified and a mood of hysteria was palpable. While loving feelings were directed toward Lifespring, the hostile component of what had been evoked was now directed more intensively toward the participant-researcher. One participant stood and stated, “I’ve got something to say to Dick. You know, I really hate Dick!” Another participant charged, “You don’t give your love, Dick. All I want, Dick, is for you to love. And you hold back your love!” When Dick explained his reactions to the events of the morning, various participants shouted out angrily, “You’re coming from your head, stop analyzing, come from your heart.” (p. 279)

It is worth noting that “the events of the morning” to which Associate Professor of Sociology, Lewis and Clark College, Portland, Richard Adams PhD, was reacting was the apparent psychotic breakdown of a fellow participant: “... 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” (Haaken & Adams, 1983, p. 278). Various commentators notice the impact of social influence in other LGATs like Landmark:

... but I’m troubled by something else: the effect the group has had on me. I hadn’t even known there was a group until, cell phone still in pocket, I realized I wasn’t part of it. I begin to sense the congealing, becoming monolithic. Suddenly there is a magnetic core, and those not yet attached to it are being sucked in. (O’Brien, 2012)

... this desire to conform is something I felt they played on at Landmark, too. Deeply rooted in our most basic psychology, human beings are pack animals after all. Positioning yourself as an outsider is also something akin to suicide on a primal level. (Warrington, 2015)

As described, questioning, or pushing back against the leader is often framed as “being uncoachable,” “resisting,” or “refusing to receive feedback.” By framing critical thinking like this, trainers can shame participants into silence and justify abusive treatment. Rearden (2022, pp. 2-3) describes a relevant situation from the Teen Challenge workshop as follows:

We then sat in a circle and talked about the feedback. One girl had NLD, which is like autism. She was socially awkward. She was really new to the place and she received a lot of negative feedback. Jeannie [Jean Courtney] made her sit in front of all of us. The girl was upset, claiming in her defense, “I don’t know any of these girls.” Jeannie confronted her and made each person explain to this new girl why they gave her negative feedback. She was ridiculed. If she argued against the feedback, she was labeled by Jeannie as being “combative” and not being receptive to “feedback.” [...] Jeannie kicked the girl out and said, “You are not ready to be in Challenge. You need to leave.” This poor girl stood up and ran out, sobbing.

By carefully controlling the behavior of participants during an LGAT, and achieving support from a critical mass of participants, it is possible to get increasingly exhausted participants, whose *motivation* and *ability* to think critically has been severely undermined, to fall in line with the rest of the group. This says nothing of the use of “plants” – former graduates of the seminars who attend, often without the knowledge of other participants. These graduates know how to use the jargon, how to respond in the numerous ambiguous exercises and interactions and, importantly, they receive positive feedback from the trainer (Hunter, 2018; Singer, 2003). It is understandable that the other participants – who may want to avoid negative interactions with the trainer, or who may simply want to “successfully” get through the seminar/workshop – might look to what these participants are doing and follow their lead.

Triggering a Powerful Emotional Experience

“... recent investigations of the normal reasoning process also reveal the potentially harmful influence of emotional biases” (Damasio, 2006, p. xxii).

By the time LGAT participants reach the end of the seminar their *motivation* and *ability* to engage System 2 is minimized and “experience,” “natural knowing,” or some equivalent has been pointed to by the trainer as the supreme way of knowing. These participants are thus more likely to make decisions and form beliefs based on “peripheral cues,” like a powerful emotional experience. It is relevant then that LGATs culminate with a powerful emotional experience. Dr. Margaret Singer (2003, p. 198) says the following of this LGAT experience:

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.

Because LGATs trigger a powerful emotional experience (a peripheral cue)³⁹, it is necessary to delve further into the relationship between emotion and critical thinking. Professor of neuroscience, neurology, and psychology at the University of Southern California, Antonio Damasio – in his book, *Descartes’ Error* – explains that effective reasoning requires interaction between certain cortical (traditionally thought to be rational) and subcortical (emotional) parts of the brain, and that without emotional input, decision-making is flawed. Referring to feelings, Damasio (2006, p. 159) states, “they come first in development and retain a primacy that subtly pervades our mental life...” and, describing their impact on thinking, states “... feelings have a say on how the rest of the brain and cognition go about their business. Their influence is immense” (p. 160). Damasio (2006, p. xvii) in fact argues that, at times, it is necessary to base decisions entirely on emotion:

To be sure, on certain occasions, emotions and feelings can be a substitute for reason. The emotional action program we call fear can get most people 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. (Damasio, 2006, p. xvii)

³⁹ Sweidy (2021) states, “The methods used by Resource Realizations and SRA are identical...” (p. 5), and – referring to the impact of Resource Realizations participation states, “The outcome of such an intense experience was an extraordinary high, the feeling of a life-changing experience...” (p. 6).

Importantly, however, he clarifies that using emotions rather than reason can sometimes be a terrible idea. While emotion is a useful substitute for reason in certain circumstances, Damasio (2006), like Kahneman (2011), emphasises that emotions can significantly impair rationality:

This is not to deny that emotions and feelings can cause havoc in the process 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. (Damasio, 2006, p. xxii)

When System 2 is minimized, System 1 (which uses things like emotions/feelings to guide it) gains prominence. LGATs minimize System 2, convince participants that they should trust “natural knowing,” and then elicit a powerful emotional experience, which may become associated with the LGAT. Damasio (2006, p. 162) warns, “By overassociating positive emotions with people, objects, or places, too often and indiscriminately, we may feel more positive and relaxed about many situations than we should...” and, considering the lack of scientific evidence for the safety and effectiveness of LGATs, it is not a good idea to feel too relaxed about these seminars. The LGAT “experience” involves compelling (but transient) feelings of euphoria, and confidence, and results for many in a positive shift in perspective (Hunter, 2018). This powerful experience (a peripheral cue) may serve as a substitute for critical thinking when System 2 is minimized, so evidence on each element is provided.

Euphoria

Many LGAT participants report a powerful euphoria, typically beginning on the last day of the training, and lasting a few days to a few weeks afterwards (Hunter, 2018). Haaken and Adams (1983) note that Lifespring participants experience “a heightened sense of well-being ...” (p. 271) or “elation” (p. 279), Brewer (1975) makes reference to “Est ecstasy,” describing participants as “Afloat on the new surge of confidence and light-heartedness,” while Finkelstein et al. (1982) state that the est training “... appears to create in many of the trainees a euphoric sense of well-being and community” (p. 522). Rhinehart (1976/2010, p. 166) relates the (representative) experience of one est participant at the end of the seminar:

“Utterly, utterly, utterly amazing,” Jerry says with a big smile. “Why do I feel so good? I don’t even agree with what you’ve been saying, but I feel like I’m floating two feet off the ground. But why? It’s incredible...”

Like Lifespring and est, Landmark generates a euphoric state in participants, with Stern Magazine (1998) claiming, “The euphoria at the end is a hard and fast component” of the

training. Describing this euphoria, journalist Vanessa Grigoriadis (2001) relates the experience of a Landmark participant:

“For six months, I was just hooked,” says a recently counseled Landmark participant from Denver, Colorado. “My parents kept pushing me to do it, and I thought, ‘My God! If everyone did this, there would be no need for drugs, ‘cause the euphoria is just so... euphoric!’”

Confidence

Dramatically increased confidence is promised by LGATs, and reported by participants (Brewer, 1975; Fiona, 2010; GloriaG, 2010; Grigoriadis, 2001; Haaken & Adams, 1983; Hill, 2003; JackSF, 2003; Landmark, 2016a, 2016b; Lifespring, 1974; Rhinehart, 1976/2010; Scioscia, 2000; Yankelovich, 2021). Haaken and Adams (1983, p. 277) describe a “sense of expansiveness and boundless power” in graduates, Grigoriadis (2001) claims Landmark participants leave with “... an unholy confidence in what they can accomplish,” and while Citizen Skeptic (2014) described the behavior of some graduates as “grandiose,” other graduates reported “a level of freedom and confidence and joy that I could not even have imagined before doing it” (Fiona, 2010), or claimed that they left the training “feeling utterly amazing,” believing they had “the power to conquer the world” (GloriaG, 2010). An increase in confidence is often promised by LGAT organizations, as is the case with Landmark:

What people experience is being at ease no matter where they are, who they are with, or what the circumstances [...] Imagine yourself stepping into situations where you were once limited, but now have the confidence to act in the face of self-doubt... (Landmark, 2016a)

Positive shift in perspective

Numerous sources attest to the impact of LGATs on perspective (Hill, 2003; Howard, 2001; JF, 2004; Landmark, 2019; Rofé, 2010; Stern Magazine, 1998). Klar et al. (1990, p. 99) explain that, “In general, LGATs espouse the idea that people are capable of changing their lives, not so much by modifying their external circumstances, but by changing the way they interpret them.” Finkelstein et al. (1982, p. 518), Brewer (1975), and Rhinehart (1976/2010, p. 27) describe the primary purpose of est as “... 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” and, referring to the effects of Lifespring, its founder says, “... most often, what is needed is not a shift in circumstances, but a shift in the lens through which we see the world” (Hanley, 2018). Landmark, likewise, claims that, as a result of participation,

“... your view of life, your thoughts, your feelings and your actions shift, and the change is immediate, dramatic, and without effort...” (Landmark, 2016a); and “Life becomes framed in a new way. The way that we approach the world, and the world approaches us, changes” (Landmark, 2019). These claims are born out by testimonies, with one est participant stating, “I see things differently – standing in the same mire, to be sure, but looking 180° outside my usual viewpoint” (Rhinehart, 1976/2010, p. 196); while a Landmark graduate explains:

What I realized is that... everyone on the outside hadn't changed... the only person who had changed after those 72 hours was me... the way I saw the world... the way I viewed people... (Estelle Mae, 2017)

There is no evidence that LGAT-induced euphoria, confidence, or the positive shift in perspective is enduring; however, participants – whose System 2 thinking has been minimized by the LGAT process – may form an uncritical positive association between this wonderful feeling and the LGAT (as well as its principles and obligations).

The experiencing vs. the remembering self

“What we recall about any experience – what lives on and determines our long-term sense of enjoyment or pain – is generally governed by what it was like at its most extreme moment and what it was like at the end” (Gilovich & Ross, 2016, p. 175).

Anyone reading this document might ask themselves how someone could go through something so objectively unpleasant and come out of it thinking that it was a great experience (and that they should recruit family members, close friends, and work colleagues to go through the same stressful seminar). It is likely, however, that participants do not accurately recall what took place in the LGAT and that – because they are probably relying on System 1 – their vague recollections will be infused with the powerful euphoria that is triggered at the end of the training. As has been explained, LGATs minimize System 2 processing and one of the major ways they limit reflection is by preventing participants from taking notes during the seminar (of course, they explain this by telling participants that this will allow them to “be more present,” or something to that effect) (Hunter, 2018). Because participants are not critically engaged, because the volume and stressfulness of the exercises is likely to negatively impact memory, and because the hours of an LGAT are generally very long, participants are unlikely to recall what took place. Rhinehart (1976/2010, p. xiii) captures this as follows:

The training normally lasts fifteen to twenty hours a day, and as a result every trainee suffers from a period of “unconsciousness.” At times he is so bored, angry, involved in his own

fantasies, or simply exhausted that he is unable to experience or recall what is happening in the training itself.

This was not known when LGATs were first operating in the early 1970s, or indeed when more “recent” studies of LGATs were published in the early 1990s, but Kahneman (2011) describes the “peak-end” rule in *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, explaining that “... our memory, a function of System 1, has evolved to represent the most intense moment of an episode of pain or pleasure (the peak) and the feelings when the episode was at its end” (p. 385). The *intense* LGAT “experience,” which occurs *at the end* of the LGAT, is likely to be remembered, rather than what was experienced. This is particularly true when participants have no notes to refer to.

Incorporating Other Cognitive Shortcuts and Peripheral Cues

Commitment and consistency

“Indeed, one of the most consistent and remarkable findings in the behavioral science literature over the past century is that people’s behavior is often more predictive of their attitudes than their attitudes are of their behavior” (Gilovich & Ross, 2016, p. 108).

In experiments extending back for decades, social psychologists have demonstrated that, by getting people to behave in a particular way, it is possible to shape their future thinking and behavior. Cialdini (2007) refers to this phenomenon as *commitment and consistency*, which he describes as: “... our nearly obsessive desire to be (and to appear) consistent with what we have already done. Once we have made a choice or taken a stand, we will encounter personal and interpersonal pressures to behave consistently with our commitment. Those pressures will cause us to respond in ways that justify our earlier decision” (p. 56). Within the context of LGATs, this phenomenon is highly relevant. Behavior is carefully controlled, and participants are required to commit to a set of rules which govern their behavior during the training. They are also, when tired and arguably euphoric, pressured to commit publicly to taking further courses and to recruit family and friends (Hunter, 2018). Compliance professionals understand that by requiring certain behavior and extracting commitments – particularly public commitments – individuals will be likely to follow through. After following through with certain behaviors, participants will likely feel the need to think in a way that is consistent with their behavior:

Once a stand had been taken, the need for consistency pressured these people to bring what they felt and believed in line with what they had already done. They simply convinced

themselves that they had made the right choice and, no doubt, felt better about it. (Cialdini, 2007, p. 58)

Commenting on the power of this form of influence, Cialdini (2007, p. 59) continues:

But is this tendency to be consistent really strong enough to compel us to do what we ordinarily would not want to do? There is no question about it. The drive to be (and look) consistent constitutes a highly potent weapon of social influence, often causing us to act in ways that are clearly contrary to our best interests.

There are various factors that can elevate the impact of this phenomenon, but two that are particularly relevant to LGATs are *public commitment* and *the cost of commitment*. The most overt public stance in an LGAT occurs when participants recruit family members, friends, and work colleagues. Involving people that you care about is the ultimate *public commitment*, and one that is difficult to undo. The degree to which a person endures hardship, or the degree to which being wrong about an experience will result in hardship (*the cost of commitment*), is also positively correlated with the degree to which a person will overvalue that experience. The more a person commits to an experience, in terms of time, money, his/her reputation, or the wellbeing of family, friends, and colleagues, the less likely that person will be to consider evidence which challenges the validity of that experience. Gilovich and Ross (2016) and Cialdini (2007) explain that hardship (the cost of commitment) often results in individuals exaggerating the value of an experience, and making greater changes to their attitudes:

People who endure hardship for a cause, whether a noble or ignoble one, value it more – and the greater the hardship, the greater the value attached to the cause. (Gilovich & Ross, 2016, p. 113)

And the evidence is clear that the more effort that goes into a commitment, the greater is its ability to influence the attitudes of the person who made it. (Cialdini, 2007, p. 85)

The principle which drives this System 1 thinking is that people do not want to believe that they have wasted their time or endured something challenging for no reason. LGATs require participants to endure hardship, they are time-consuming, they cost money and – if family and friends are recruited⁴⁰ – it is not just your own hardship, time, and money at stake. The heavy emphasis on graduates to recruit others may, therefore, be seen as serving at least two distinct

⁴⁰ Or if you have put your children through these seminars*. Jennifer (2021, p. 2), for example, states, “My parents have been so manipulated by the program that they refuse to acknowledge how much damage it has inflicted.”

purposes. The first is clear: it brings trusting participants to the LGAT (which does not have to commit funds to marketing). The second, subtler, purpose is that it is likely to cause participants, who have publicly endorsed the LGAT, to place greater value on the training and its principles, and (unconsciously) make them less likely to review these opinions:

Once people have acted in a way that seems consistent with a particular belief, they are inclined to endorse that belief. (Gilovich & Ross, 2016, p. 109)

A person thinking critically (engaging System 2) is less likely to make this cognitive error; however, by the end of an LGAT, participants are not likely to be cognitively engaged.

Repetition

“A reliable way to make people believe in falsehoods is frequent repetition, because familiarity is not easily distinguished from truth. Authoritarian institutions and marketers have always known this fact” (Kahneman, 2011, p. 62).

As the above quote indicates, the repetition of ideas – without additional evidence – can make those ideas seem more believable (again, this is less likely to occur when System 2 thinking is being employed). Rhinehart (1976/2010) says of est, “... the training itself involves a lot of repetition [...] Such repetition is essential for the success of the training...” (p. xiii). He continues, “Notions are hammered in over and over, objections are voiced over and over, and we trainees drift into unconsciousness and then out again” (p. 24). Haaken and Adams (1983) similarly note that certain Lifespring exercises were “... used repeatedly throughout the training...” (p. 275), that as the training progressed, “... the trainer’s words were repeated by group members” (p. 277), and that there was “repeated emphasis on submission and surrender” (p. 279). While participating in Gateway in 2010, I noted that all concepts were repeated over and over again, saying of our trainer, “He also kept repeating everything two or three times, speaking very precisely and very slowly – emphasising each word in an almost rhythmic manner” (Hunter, 2010, 84-86). Various commentators make identical observations about Landmark. Former Landmark participant and staffer (volunteer), Robert Black (1997), states, “There is repetitious doublespeak, catchy phrases, moving testimonials and promises of great change in your life,” journalist Vanessa Grigoriadis (2001) of *New York Magazine* says, “... the Forum drives its points home with loaded language, relentless repetition, and a carefully constructed environment,” while Henry Alford (2010) of the *New York Times* says of his trainer, “Roger raises weighty questions and makes lots of challenging literary references, but every important point is said twice (everything important is said twice).”

Bonding (Us vs. Them)

A common criticism of LGATs is that, while they promise to strengthen relationships, unless people in the lives of those who participate also take part, they may lead to tension between loved ones. Graduates may leave the LGAT believing that they have gone through something life-changing, but this “experience” is difficult for graduates to convey. Mark Fisher (1987) of *The Washington Post* reveals this common challenge, while quoting Lifespring trainer Jim Cook coaching participants on how to recruit others:

PEOPLE WILL ASK YOU, “WHAT IS IT?” AND YOU CAN’T EXPLAIN IT. SO YOU’LL SAY, “JUST DO IT, DO THE TRAINING.”

Oliver Libaw (2002) of *ABC News* similarly says, “But Wilmore and others involved in Landmark say it’s difficult to fully explain the Forum to people who haven’t taken the course,” Marita Vandenberg (2000) of *Contact Magazine* states, “The person who invited me said it was difficult to explain Landmark: I should see for myself [...] No specifics about the training were given because it was a ‘technology’ that was hard to describe,” while blogger Jenny Sansouci (2014) claims, “Landmark seems to be the type of thing that everyone has a million questions about and nobody really knows what goes on until they experience it.” Unless loved ones participate, they may feel left out of this experience. It is not also uncommon for LGAT graduates to become zealously dedicated to these organizations, volunteering their free time to work (“assist”) for them, and this may cause tension in relationships where one person has participated, but others (often a partner or spouse) have not (Hunter, 2018).⁴¹ According to Marc Fisher, Lifespring was heavily reliant on unpaid volunteers:

Thousands of Americans now call themselves Lifespringers and spend hundreds of hours recruiting new students with no compensation other than the belief that they are helping people revolutionize their lives. Graduates often get their whole families to sign up... (M. Fisher, 1987)

Describing the regularity with which est graduates became unpaid salespersons, Mark Brewer (1975) of *Psychology Today* similarly stated:

⁴¹ SRA workshops for students and parents are staffed by former participants (BC, 2022; JC, 2022). Kimberly Sweidy notes that parents of children who are no longer at SRA still staff these seminars, often for years after their child’s departure. Also, graduated SRA students return to staff the student seminars.

Many est graduates eschew the evangelical role and resent the insidious salesmanship. But they are a minority, and the much larger result is a sort of legally clean pyramid sales routine that has, in each year est has operated, doubled the number of graduates.

Rosemary Mahoney (1998) of *Elle Magazine* likewise says of Landmark, "... the corporation, which has around 300 paid employees (including forty-odd charismatic seminar leaders), boasts an army of some 7,000 volunteers worldwide." Vanessa Grigoriadis (2001) of *New York Magazine* states:

Some Landmark graduates also volunteer for the company, which has approximately 500 employees and a reported 7,500 unpaid "assistants" (though Landmark puts this number much lower) who answer phones, sign up recruits, and cater to the Forum leaders. "They have a person designated to make them lunches," says Laura White, a former volunteer at the Washington D.C., Forum office. "Someone makes sure they have a clean pair of socks after the second break."

If your loved one participates in an LGAT and then begins to volunteer much of their free time at this organization and you do not know what they got from participation (because they will not tell you and often are not able to tell you), this may cause tension in a relationship and drive a wedge between loved ones. The observation is also often made that when a person returns from an LGAT, that individual appears to have bonded closely with the other participants who have shared this "transformational" experience. The impact of participating in something challenging on bonding within a group can be seen in the military and in the "hazing" processes that sometimes occur in schools and universities. As noted earlier, when the cost of joining a group is elevated, the value of that group will be unconsciously elevated, but the other important thing about challenging/unpleasant group activities is that they have been shown to lead to intense bonding between group members. Whitehouse⁴² and McQuinn (2013) use the term *imagistic rituals* to describe processes that are "extremely terrifying or painful" (p. 3) but which elicit moments of deeply felt insight. Introducing their work, they state:

It has long been appreciated that rare, traumatic rituals promote intense social cohesion but efforts to tease apart the psychological mechanisms involved only really took off in the 1950s, much of the work inspired by Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance (1956). Rituals incur costs (e.g. time, labour, and psychological endurance) often with the promise

⁴² Harvey Whitehouse is an anthropologist and is the Director of the Centre for the Study of Social Cohesion at the University of Oxford.

of only poorly defined or indeterminate rewards, and in some cases for no explicit purpose at all. In the case of initiation rituals, for instance, the costs are typically extreme, involving physical or psychological tortures. (p. 4)

LGATs could certainly be considered psychologically traumatic for many participants, and their “transformations” are described by many as “deeply felt insights.” Whitehouse and McQuinn's (2013) findings on the effects of participation in imagistic rituals should, therefore, be of some concern to LGAT participants (and their loved ones):

Traumatic ritual ordeals increase cohesion and tolerance within groups but they also seem to intensify feelings of hostility and intolerance towards outgroups. Recent studies using psychological experiments, economic games, and cross-cultural surveys suggest that within group liking and outgroup hostility are directly correlated.⁴³ (p. 4)

If an LGAT graduate sees other LGAT participants as the *ingroup* and those who have not participated in the LGAT as the *outgroup* – which considerable independent research suggests is a possibility and which is in line with many complaints about LGAT graduates (Hunter, 2018) – then LGAT participation may cause division among loved ones. Additionally, LGATs introduce considerable jargon and redefine numerous words and phrases.⁴⁴ While LGATs insist that their jargon is necessary to impart vital concepts and that it facilitates more powerful communication with others, outsiders may feel isolated, rather than included, by this language. Haaken and Adams (1983, pp. 276-277) describe the unique language used in Lifespring:

The language of the human potential movement, which provided the “official” lexicon of Lifespring, seemed to exhaust and encompass all of the human experience, e.g., “getting off automatic,” “going for it,” “taking risks,” “taking responsibility,” and “creating your own reality.” These phrases took on an almost magical communicative power within the group.

Rhinehart (1976/2010) reveals how est jargon was taken on by graduates (and resulted in weaker, rather than stronger, communication with the uninitiated):

He tried to explain it to me but it all comes out est gobbledygook. (p. 3)

Traci Hukill (1998) of *Metro News* made a similar observation about est jargon, stating:

⁴³ Rearden (2022, p. 12) states, “At SRA, you are left with the impression that all the people you were with before were horrible people.”

⁴⁴ This is what psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton (1989) calls “Loading the Language” and it is addressed in detail in Hunter (2018, pp. 269-283).

Family members of est graduates complained that est jargon invaded every conversation and that esties – or estholes, as detractors called them – shunned people who didn’t “get it.”

Referring to Landmark, she continues:

Like any exclusive group of people who know something the rest of the world doesn’t, Landmark has its own language. It happens to be the same vocabulary esties learned, and it serves to separate the ones who “get it” from those who don’t.

Dr Margaret Singer (2003, p. 187) makes a similar observation about the effects of LGAT jargon in the workplace:

In addition, negative social consequences in the workplace have arisen from these programs. In certain workplaces, you find an in-group and a group of outsiders. The insiders are those who have attended the program and, through compliance and adherence, have taken on the jargon taught in the seminars.

Because of misleading “research,” often-misleading endorsements by external experts, and the misleading related testimonies of former graduates (who have been told not to reveal important details about the seminars), most participants enter LGATs believing that these seminars work (for which there is no evidence), that their processes are supported by the scientific community at large (which they are not), and that they are safe (which, at least for some, they are not). By the time they attend, they have also likely paid to attend the course and this *commitment* – along with all this other “evidence” – is likely to keep them from leaving the seminar, even when things seem inappropriate or distasteful. During the LGAT their System 2 thinking is dismantled, while they are convinced that the trainer is an authority, and the environment is controlled to ensure that most participants fall into line. Participants are convinced that they should trust their “natural knowing” and then a powerful emotional experience is elicited. Because they are tired, are likely relying heavily on System 1, and are not able to look back on notes, they are more likely to remember the LGAT experience based on how it felt at its peak and at the end (which happens to be “Amazing!”). Additionally, they have likely bonded intensely with their fellow participants (a new ingroup), but not with those who have not gone through the experience and do not share the same new philosophies and jargon. Regardless of claims that the motives of LGATs are noble (which should be questioned), any process that deliberately minimizes critical thinking (System 2), emphasizes intuitive/automatic thinking (System 1) and then manipulates multiple levers which are known to impact System 1, without the awareness of participants, should be treated with extreme caution.

A Neurobiological Explanation for the Powerful Emotional Experience in LGATs

It has been argued that the fundamental LGAT process involves *significant psychological stress followed by social reward* and while psychological stress in LGATs has been described, it is necessary to briefly communicate how *social reward* tends to occur. This is explained in greater detail in Hunter (2018, pp. 320-325), but essentially, after days of treating participants negatively, undermining their senses of self-worth and heightening stress levels, the atmosphere of the seminar switches to one of love, affirmation, and joy. Dr. Margaret Singer explains, “After several days of being dragged down into the pits the final day of exercises is usually designed to pump you up” (Mathison, 1993), and, referring to the change in the demeanor of the trainer towards the end of the seminar, states:

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)

It is common for LGATs to end with a celebration for the “graduates” in which past graduates appear and there is much love and affirmation (Hunter, 2018). Describing the end of a five day LGAT, Singer (2003, p. 195) explains, “Day five is one of *lightness; there is dancing after rest room and lunch breaks* [...] At the end of the day, a surprise is staged, with friends and family unexpectedly appearing to congratulate ‘the graduate’,” while Haaken and Adams (1983, p. 278) state, “During the final two days of the training, there was a great deal of hugging and other indications of affection among participants.” This combination of *significant psychological stress followed by social reward* provides a plausible mechanism by which LGATs achieve their “transformational” experiences. This mechanism, referred to in Hunter (2018) as *the allostatic manic-defense hypothesis*, not only provides an explanation for LGAT “transformations,” but also for many of the commonly reported negative effects of participation [which is discussed under *Risks of Participation* (p. 69)].

An Overview of the Allostatic Manic-Defense Hypothesis

Stated simply, the allostatic manic-defense hypothesis asserts that when we are psychologically threatened, this does not feel good and we are, therefore, in a state of allostatic imbalance. Because the human brain has evolved to seek balance, it will attempt to restore it in some way (Sapolsky, 2004); however, in an LGAT, many of the ways that a person might normally alleviate stress are restricted (see p. 39). Because these other ways to alleviate stress are restricted, an endogenous (internal) mechanism – which makes a person feel confident,

energized, and optimistic (useful things to feel when a person is psychologically threatened) – must do the “heavy lifting” and is consequently significantly activated. When the environment is psychologically threatening this endogenous mechanism attempts to facilitate psychological allostasis (balance); however, when the environment abruptly shifts from hostile to affirming – which occurs at the end of an LGAT – this mechanism does not only fail to shut down but, because it responds powerfully to reward, it increases in intensity. The result is that at the end of an LGAT participants are receiving love, support, and affirmation in the environment (which would ordinarily elevate mood) AND the endogenous mechanism (which was initially activated to counter the extremely negative environment) is also fully activated. The result is a powerful euphoric experience (“transformation”) which tends to last for a few days to a few weeks (until the overstimulated endogenous mechanism “realizes” that it is no longer required). The following subsection provides a high-level explanation of the neurobiology of the proposed endogenous mechanism which counters psychological threats.

The Subcortical Dopaminergic System as a Psychological Defense

It has been argued that LGATs involve significant psychological stress and that several key stress-mitigating factors are restricted during LGATs. It has further been asserted that our brains have evolved to seek balance (allostasis) and that, in the absence of other stress-mitigating mechanisms, an endogenous mechanism may have to compensate. The hypothesis for how this occurs was conceived while participating in an LGAT in 2010. Having lived with bipolar disorder for seven years and having studied it informally, I noticed the following:

1. The LGAT involved significant psychological stress and sleep disruption [sleep disruption is a form of stress (Sapolsky, 2004)].
2. The LGAT culminated with an abrupt removal of this stress and the application of love/acceptance/affirmation (social reward).
3. Almost all participants appeared to be pushed into an elevated state (they were euphoric/elated, confident, energized, viewed the world and their lives more positively, and some appeared to engage in impulsive/reckless behavior).

This was interesting to me because I knew the following about bipolar disorder:

1. Psychological stress and sleep disruption are established triggers of (hypo)mania (e.g., Bostock et al., 2015; Koenders et al., 2014; Miklowitz, 2011; Otto, 2011).
2. Goal-attainment (e.g., social reward) is an established trigger for (hypo)mania (e.g., Bostock et al., 2015; Miklowitz, 2011).

3. Symptoms of (hypo)mania include euphoria/elation, elevated confidence, increased energy, viewing oneself and the world more positively, and impulsive/reckless behavior (Goodwin & Jamison, 2007).

I had also noticed this pattern of *significant psychological stress followed by stress removal and social reward* leading up to both of my early manic episodes (the first being in London in 2003 and the second being in Johannesburg in 2009). Having also experienced hypomania several times by 2010 and having studied it carefully, my opinion was that the LGAT “transformation” among my fellow participants looked very similar to hypomania. Because there appeared to be similarities between: (a) the conditions and results of LGATs; and (b) established precipitants and symptoms of bipolar disorder, I considered existing theories which explained bipolar (hypo)mania. If I could understand these mechanisms, they might offer insight into LGAT “transformations.”

Early psychodynamic theorists posited that (hypo)mania was a defense against psychological threats (Bentall, 2003) – that when a person’s self-worth was threatened their unconscious mind would conjure up positive thoughts to counteract those negative feelings. The *manic-defense hypothesis*, introduced by Karl Abraham in 1911, asserted that in people with bipolar disorder (referred to as manic depressive illness at that time) these positive thoughts spiralled out of control and that, rather than simply counteracting those negative feelings, they pushed the person’s mood far too high (hypomania/mania). Psychodynamic theories are difficult to test; however, recent empirical evidence supports this idea. Johnson et al. (2008, p. 269) explain:

Consistent with the idea that mania is tied to decreased sensitivity to threat, laboratory studies using cognitive paradigms and functional neuroimaging suggest that responses to cues of threat seem blunted during manic episodes compared with euthymic periods.

Because of more recent findings in neuroscience, and more recent theories explaining (hypo)mania, it is now possible to offer a neurobiological explanation for the “manic-defense.” The *dopamine hypothesis of bipolar disorder* as an explanatory mechanism for bipolar (hypo)mania is well-supported in the literature (Ashok et al., 2017; Berk et al., 2007; Cousins et al., 2009), the argument being that elevated subcortical dopamine contributes significantly to (hypo)mania. There are many reasons to believe that dopamine plays a central role in (hypo)mania, but the most simple reason is that elevation of subcortical dopamine in the mesolimbic pathway results in euphoria, increased confidence, elevated energy, a more positive view of oneself and the world, and sometimes impulsive/reckless behavior (Panksepp

& Biven, 2012; Purves et al., 2008). This dopamine pathway may also be targeted by drugs of abuse like cocaine and amphetamine, which produce similar effects (Panksepp & Biven, 2012; Purves et al., 2008), and when this pathway is overstimulated, psychosis may result (Howes & Kapur, 2009; Kapur, 2003; Panksepp & Biven, 2012; Purves et al., 2008).

If elevated subcortical dopamine can explain the effects of LGAT “transformation” then one must ask how LGAT conditions lead to an elevation in dopamine. Relatively recent findings show that acute stress elevates subcortical dopamine (DA) and that elevated subcortical dopamine facilitates coping with stressors (Bloomfield et al., 2019; Cabib & Puglisi-Allegra, 2012; Pani et al., 2000; Rougé-Pont et al., 1999). Pani et al. (2000, p. 14) explain:

Compelling results have demonstrated that the dopaminergic system is important not only for hedonic impact or reward learning but also, in a broader sense, for reactivity to perturbation in environmental conditions, for selective information processing, and for general emotional responses, which are essential functions in the ability (or failure) to cope with the external world.

Cabib and Puglisi-Allegra (2012, pp. 82-83) more specifically assert that:

... activation of mesoaccumbens DA release in stressful conditions may be associated with activation of defence against threatening stimuli. In stressed animals, DA release has been reported to increase in the shell but not the core component of the [nucleus accumbens] ...

These findings explain how the psychologically stressful LGAT conditions may result in elevated subcortical dopamine. Panksepp and Biven (2012, p. 99) add that “all unpleasant states of homeostatic imbalance” (homeostatic imbalance being synonymous with stress) make this system even more responsive to rewards, and it has been explained that LGATs end with a powerful social reward. Purves et al. (2008, p. 756) explain that the subcortical dopaminergic system responds to “complex social rewards,” so in summary:

1. LGATs involve significant psychological stress, which elevates subcortical dopamine.
2. The subcortical dopamine system responds to rewards (including social rewards).
3. Significant psychological stress (an unpleasant state of homeostatic imbalance) makes the subcortical dopamine system particularly responsive to rewards.
4. LGATs end with a powerful social reward.
5. The effects of LGAT “transformation” look similar/identical to those which can be elicited through the elevation of subcortical dopamine in the mesolimbic pathway.

A Description of the LGAT process by a Former SRA Student

Former SRA student, Raelyn Kaplan, had the following to say about the use of *significant psychological stress followed by social reward* at Spring Ridge Academy. Consider how closely this unsolicited description of what occurs at SRA aligns with what has been described in this document (and has been described for half a century as occurring in LGATs):

I was sent to Spring Ridge Academy for thirteen months, and it was in rural Arizona. The pattern of behavior modification programs is to manufacture an experience that completely breaks a kid down, but then to follow it up with a euphoria-inducing experience. We had to get up in front of everyone constantly and disclose the most intimate details, only then to be criticized for the vulnerabilities we just shared. I was forced to carry a five-pound sandbag with me everywhere I went... for three months. Following these experiences, we would do things like organized dance parties, or hugging circles... so it created this cycle of becoming dependent on those lows for those highs... (Lifetime, 2022, 07:03)

I do not believe that the people who “developed” LGATs had any understanding of the neurobiology involved in this process when they began offering these seminars to the public in the early 1970s. LGATs were not intelligently designed – they evolved from other processes and the elements which seemed to work were likely kept (and intensified), while the elements which did not work were likely discarded. Because the mechanism I am proposing involves *significant psychological stress, followed by stress-removal and social reward*, and because the “originators” of this technology lacked the academic credentials and the relevant academic literature to understand this process, it seems unlikely that anyone who copied these processes would remove these *active ingredients*. LGATs are not designed to provide traditional learning – they are “experiential” – and if the mechanism for generating the experience (significant psychological stress) is removed, then they have very little to offer.

Risks of Participation

“There is no reason to assume, on the basis of the evidence we have so far been able to gather, that large group awareness training could not create psychiatric risk for some. What is clearly lacking, however, is a coherent theory for linking a set of experiences ordinarily encountered in large group awareness training to the development, exacerbation, or intensification of psychopathology” (Lieberman, 1987, p. 463).

A quarter of a century ago Lieberman (1987) stated that there was no reason to assume that LGATs could not harm some people, but that at that time, there was no theory to explain how LGAT conditions could lead to the sorts of casualties that were being reported. He noted, “Emotional intensity, which is the dominant causal element reflected in the literature, is not of itself a known pathogenic factor” (p. 463); however, research that has emerged since that time has shed light on the impact of “emotional intensity” (significant psychological stress) on psychosis, mania (“elation”), and depression. These are among the most commonly reported negative effects of LGAT participation (Hunter, 2018).

Psychosis

“Thus, the current evidence is consistent with dopamine hyperfunction being most closely linked to the dimension of psychosis” (Howes & Kapur, 2009, p. 555).

Peer-reviewed studies on both Lifespring and est reveal cases of psychosis occurring either during or immediately after participation (Glass et al., 1977; Haaken & Adams, 1983; Kirsch & Glass, 1977; Lieberman, 1987) and Glass et al. (1977), Kirsch and Glass (1977), and Singer (2003) note that many of these participants had no history of psychiatric illness prior to participation. While Landmark has dismissed suggestions that participation could cause psychosis (Scioscia, 2000), officially it warns those with bipolar and psychotic disorders not to participate and acknowledges that psychosis has been noted in participants in the past (Landmark, 2013). Mark Fisher (1987) reported the following regarding Lifespring:

There is another side to Lifespring, one of court battles about emotional trauma, psychotic episodes and even death. There are experts who believe that Lifespring is a dangerous company that uses psychological tricks to manipulate minds, a view Lifespring and its paid experts dispute. There are deprogrammers and lawyers who have built careers out of suing the company. And there are dozens of “casualties,” the company’s name for people who leave the training with severe psychological problems.

Glass et al. (1977, p. 245) published a (peer-reviewed) case study on est, noting the following:

Erhard Seminars Training (est) is a large group experience that is becoming widely available in this country. This is the first case report in the professional literature of psychiatric disturbance following est training. Five patients, only one of whom had a history of psychiatric disturbance, developed psychotic symptoms including grandiosity, paranoia, uncontrollable mood swings, and delusions.

While a “coherent theory for linking a set of experiences ordinarily encountered in large group awareness training to the development, exacerbation, or intensification of psychopathology” may have been lacking in 1987, this is no longer the case. The allostatic manic-defense hypothesis explains how LGAT conditions may elevate dopamine and thus elicit psychosis.

Dysregulation of Mood

Mark Fisher (1987) asserts that Lifespring executives were aware of these psychological casualties, revealing that in addition to other symptoms, some participants became depressed:

FOR MORE THAN A DECADE, LIFESPRING executives have known about adverse reactions to the training. James Moore, a former Lifespring vice president, said in a deposition that Lifespring executives in 1977 discussed “casualties,” “wackos” and ‘basket cases,” their terms for people who suffered ill effects [...] Dozens of “incident reports” describe trainees who became panicky, incapable of making decisions, “erratic and hyper,” incoherent and nervous. Some trainees ended up in psychiatric wards. Some had visions. Some regressed to the womb. Some became terribly depressed. Six trainees died. And about 35 trainees sued Lifespring.

Journalist Steven Pressman (1993, p. 194) explains that the executive director of New York City’s Lincoln Institute for Psychotherapy stated that they regularly dealt with est graduates who were “... confused and jarred,” and that “the same pattern – elation, depression, feelings of omnipotence followed by feelings of helplessness” was repeated “over and over again.” While Pressman was highly critical of Werner Erhard, est proponent Rhinehart (1976/2010, p. 188) quotes a woman at an est graduation evening with these exact symptoms:

I’m confused. I guess I was confused during most of the training and I’m confused now. I was feeling great Monday, really great, and yesterday I was more depressed than I’ve been in years. This morning was great and this afternoon is horrible. I knew life was supposed to be a roller coaster but I mean really, since est, it’s a bit too much.

This dysregulation of mood has been noted in Landmark participants as well. Henry Alford (2010) of the *New York Times* relates one woman’s response to her husband’s participation:

“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.

The relationship between stress and mood swings in bipolar disorder has been established and, while acute stress elevates subcortical dopamine, chronic stress can reduce dopamine transmission and contribute to depressive symptoms (Sapolsky, 2004). Shapero et al. (2014) summarize more recent findings regarding the impact of stressful events on depression:

Stressful life events have been consistently associated with an increase in depressive symptoms (see Mazure, 1998 for a review) and the onset of major depression in both adults (Hammen, 2005; Stroud, Davila, & Moyer, 2008) and adolescents (e.g., Abela & Skitch, 2006). (p. 209)

If LGATs are achieving their results by manipulating mood, it is little wonder that this highly standardized process negatively impacts some (non-standardized) participants' moods.

Other Psychological Harm

"I have PTSD, irreparable family relationships, trust issues, and nightmares to this day" (SRA_Survivor, 1998).

Describing the negative effects experienced by LGAT participants, Dr. Margaret Singer states:

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)

She further asserts that psychological harm in LGATs is not uncommon, and describes some of the lawsuits she personally worked on as an expert witness:

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)

While other psychological casualties have been reported as a result of LGAT participation (Singer, 2003), the most notable reports include psychosis and dysregulation of mood (participants switching between elation and depression) (Hunter, 2018). Psychosis is a feature of both bipolar mania and schizophrenia and it is believed to be associated with elevated

subcortical dopamine (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Goodwin & Jamison, 2007; Howes & Kapur, 2009; Kapur, 2003; Panksepp & Biven, 2012). The allostatic manic-defense hypothesis provides a plausible explanation for the link between LGAT conditions and elevated subcortical dopamine. When participants describe periods of “elation” or “omnipotence,” this could easily reflect a person who lacks the clinical terminology to describe hypomania or mania. It has been established that psychological stress and goal-attainment (e.g., social reward) elicit (hypo)mania and the allostatic manic-defense hypothesis offers an explanation for how LGAT conditions might lead to this “elated” state. Recent research has shed light on the impact of stressful life events on depression, the relationship between stress and “stress-related illnesses” is self-explanatory, and so is the relationship between stress and PTSD.

While Lieberman (1987, p. 463) stated that “a coherent theory for linking a set of experiences ordinarily encountered in large group awareness training to the development, exacerbation, or intensification of psychopathology” was lacking; this is no longer the case. Considerable evidence now exists to provide a compelling and coherent theory which links what takes place in LGATs (“emotional intensity,” or significant psychological stress) with some of the most consistently reported, and concerning, casualties of participation.

Screening Participants for Potential Psychological Harm

“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).

Although Lifespring provided a preliminary questionnaire to screen out those who were under psychiatric treatment and emphasized that the training was educational rather than therapeutic, participants were still harmed through participation (M. Fisher, 1987; Haaken & Adams, 1983). Landmark (2013, p. 4), which by many accounts is a milder version of est (Hunter, 2018), also attempts to screen out vulnerable participants, as this excerpt from their “disclaimer” reveals:

While it is ultimately your choice, OUR ADVISORS STRONGLY RECOMMEND THAT YOU SHOULD NOT PARTICIPATE in the Program if you:

- (a) have a personal or family history of bi-polar affective disorder (manic-depressive disorder), schizophrenia, acute or chronic depression or other psychotic disorder, whether or not you or they are being or have ever been treated or hospitalized;
- (b) are taking, have taken or been prescribed to take within the previous twelve months anti-anxiety drugs (such as Librium, Ativan, Klonopin, Xanax, Dormicum or others); anti-

depressants (such as Elavil, Prozac, Zoloft, Celexa, Cipram, Prothiaden or others); anti-psychotics (such as Thorazine, Haldol, Stelazine, Risperdal, Zyprexa, Dogmatil or others); any medication to treat bi-polar disorders (such as Lithium, Gabapentin or Depakote); any drugs or medicines, whether prescription or non-prescription, intended to treat or affect mental processes or mood or to treat a chemical imbalance; or anabolic steroids;

(c) have an unresolved history of drug or steroid abuse;

(d) are or have in the past year been depressed and/or considered or had ideas of suicide, self-harm or harm to another;

(e) are currently in therapy and your therapist sees a health reason why you should not participate in the Program; or

(f) are uncertain about your physical, mental or emotional ability to participate in the Program.

Lifespring, est, and Landmark target(ed) healthy *adult* participants; however, Lifespring's seminars resulted in numerous psychological casualties. There are claims of psychological casualties resulting from participation in est and, significantly, many of these participants had no history of psychiatric illness prior to their participation (Hunter, 2018). What is concerning about SRA workshops is that they are being used on a particularly vulnerable group of *adolescents*. Jean Courtney confirms that SRA students have histories of serious trauma, suicidality, drug addiction, clinical depression, and sexual abuse (JC, 2022, 43:10) and Suzanne Courtney states that no students arrive at SRA with no mental health diagnoses (SC, 2022, 15:10). It is likely that others have been diagnosed with bipolar disorder and other psychological disorders, many are on anti-depressant (or other) medications, and all SRA students are in therapy. There are also likely to be students who are *not yet* diagnosed with certain disorders, but who may be vulnerable to depression, bipolar disorder, psychosis, and other stress-related disorders. Explaining how those vulnerable to developing health conditions may require a stressor to activate these conditions, Sapolsky (2004, p. 308) states:

... have a life sufficiently free of stress, and even with a genetic predisposition, you may be safe – a car whose brakes are faulty presents no danger if it is never driven.

The average age of onset for major depressive disorder and for schizophrenia (psychosis) among women is between the mid-twenties and the early thirties, while the average age of onset for bipolar disorder is between fifteen and twenty-five (Baldessarini et al., 2012; Hafner et al., 1993). For students who are predisposed to these and other conditions, an LGAT may be the

stressor which activates the disorder. Landmark (2013) strongly warns *adults* to stay away from their introductory seminar if they have any of the above risk factors; SRA does not take similar precautions with vulnerable *adolescents*. Given the established impact of stress on these conditions and the lack of evidence to support the effectiveness of LGATs for treating them, the risks appear to vastly outweigh the rewards (from an evidence-based treatment perspective).

Discussion

“... a message with strong arguments should produce more agreement when it is scrutinized carefully than when scrutiny is low, but a message with weak arguments should produce less overall agreement when scrutiny is high rather than low” (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986, p. 138).

If strong arguments produce greater agreement when carefully scrutinized, one must ask why LGATs are, apparently, designed to minimize scrutiny of their assertions. LGATs employ an organized process, which minimizes System 2 thinking and triggers a powerful peripheral cue (as well as utilizing other peripheral cues), while presenting a message. While this sort of process may be employed to an extent in other contexts, the degree to which it is applied in LGATs is extreme. Advertisements may, for example, incorporate an appeal to an authority figure or create an association between a positive feeling and a product, but during LGATs participants are effectively isolated, for days, from perspectives other than those of the trainer. Their motivation and ability to question is systematically undermined, they are persuaded that experience is the most trustworthy form of evidence, and then an experience is generated. This experience is neither subtle nor brief and many participants feel that, as a result of the training, they have “transformed” (Hunter, 2018). Because of the extent to which System 2 processing is destabilized and the magnitude and volume of peripheral cues elicited, this form of persuasion is not the same as a television advertisement or the endorsement of a product by a celebrity, and the ethics of its utilization require careful review. This says nothing of the lack of evidence for the efficacy of LGATs as a form of therapy or of the risks this type of intervention pose for the psychological wellbeing of vulnerable young women. Commitment and consistency – believing in something because it aligns with what we have already done – is a dangerous source of persuasion, and it may be tempting to believe that LGATs (and schools which make use of them) *must be* safe and effective (System 1 thinking). Careful consideration of the evidence (System 2 thinking), however, tells us that this is not the case. As has been demonstrated, LGATs are problematic for many reasons and, particularly when there are evidence-based alternatives available, there is no reason that the mental health of vulnerable adolescents (or anyone for that matter) should be gambled with in these seminars.

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