Life After Social Death: Leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses, Identity Transition and Recovery

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Abstract

It is well documented that religiosity is linked with positive indicators of wellbeing, but less research has examined the psychosocial impacts of leaving 'high-control' religions. Theoretically situated in recovery and desistance literature underpinned by the social identity approach, the current study examined cross-sectionally the extent to which 'disfellowshipped' former Jehovah's Witnesses experiences of ostracism and post exit identification with others are associated with diminished psychological wellbeing and identity transition success. It also examined the extent to which type of exit (forced vs voluntary) and prior religious commitment shaped these outcomes. 554 adults (62% female; M age = 37.26, SD age = 12.82) were recruited via online social support networks for former Jehovah's Witnesses. Path analysis tested the mediating and moderating functions of exit method (forced vs voluntary), commitment levels during membership, and post exit group identification with groups on outcomes of identity transition, recovery identity, self-esteem and wellbeing. Results indicate that individuals who voluntarily left the Jehovah's Witnesses reported more ostracism than those who were disfellowshipped (forced out) and that prior religious commitment was associated with post religious identity transition success and diminished self-esteem. Findings further suggest that distinct aspects of respondents' social identity were related differentially to outcomes in partial support of the theoretical framework. Future research and theory development efforts are deemed necessary to better understand the aetiology of how exiting high control religions impacts psychosocial outcomes.

Key words: Jehovah's Witnesses, ostracism, identity, self-esteem, wellbeing, religious exit.

Introduction

Religious affiliation can be associated with a range of psychological and social outcomes. Members of religious communities advocate that having a relationship with the '*divine*' impacts positively on self-esteem and can help to counteract negative life experiences such as ostracism (Aydin, Fischer, & Frey, 2010). Additionally, relationships with like-minded believers can bestow feelings of commonality (Pargament, Koenig, & Perez, 2000), and provide social support to members (Gebauer, Sedikides, & Neberich, 2012). Religiosity has also been described as a coping mechanism for individuals facing social isolation and loneliness (Ai, Tice, Peterson, & Huang, 2005; McIntosh, Silver, & Wortman, 1993), and is found to predict wellbeing (Park, Holt, Le, Christie & Williams, 2018; Sherman, et al., 2009). On the other hand, spirituality rather than religiosity *per se* has been linked to wellbeing and stress management (Jackson & Bergeman, 2011). Similarly, other research indicates that religious membership may not always be beneficial for recovery from substance misuse, and that spirituality may play a more prominent role (Kelly & Eddie, 2020), with Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) having spirituality at the core of its recovery system (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001; Kelly, 2017; Tonigan, Rynes, & McCrady, 2013). In view of these somewhat mixed findings concerning benefits of religious membership and / or spirituality, it is also useful to examine what happens when membership is terminated as this can have considerable influences on the lives of those affected.

Perhaps as a 'reciprocity fee' for benefits to members, throughout history religious groups have realised the influence they have over the lives of their followers towards maintaining unity and adherence to a given set of ideals (Miller, 1988). By the same token, it is not uncommon for some religions to attempt to exert control over those who have left. Known as religious shunning, the complete withdrawal of social and spiritual contact with former believers may, for example, be used as a means of exerting a degree of control over

leavers and to possibly motivate them to return to the fold (Gutgsell, 2017; Holden, 2002 ; Holden, 2002). By now it has become apparent that religious shunning can be associated with an array of negative impacts (e.g., including social, intellectual, legal and logistic challenges) on the individuals involved (Berger, 2015; Fazzino, 2014; Gutgsell, 2017; Iannaccone, 1994). In this way, research documents that such practices can impact adversely the lives and life-chances of leavers of high control religions, including Ultra-Orthodox Jews (Berger, 2015), Muslims (Khalil & Bilici, 2007), Mormons (Bahr & Albrecht, 1989), Evangelicals (Fazzino, 2014) and Amish (Faulkner, 2017) people. This body of work indicates that leaving comparatively strict religious groups can result in detrimental effects to the health and wellbeing of those affected (Friedson, 2014; Faulkner, 2017; Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010). Research in this domain, which has tended to be qualitative in nature, has therefore played an important role in giving a voice to those experiencing religious ostracism. It has also laid the groundwork for developing theoretical models of how both risk and protective factors may impact individuals' wellbeing which can be tested in larger scale samples. Towards this aim, the current study reports findings from a survey of former Jehovah's Witnesses.

Jehovah's Witnesses are a fundamentalist Christian religious organisation established in the USA in 1879 by Charlies Taze Russell that is often classed as a new religious movement (Wilson & Cresswell, 1999). JWs believe that humans are living in a time period that the bible calls 'the last days', and that the biblical war of 'Armageddon' is due to occur imminently (Holden, 2002; Stark & Iannaccone, 1997). Rejecting politics and all other religions (Holden, 2002), they class themselves as 'no part of the world' (Wallis, 1984). As such, although they are in the world, they do not consider themselves to be *part* of it, rejecting all religious holidays (e.g., Christmas), acts of patriotism and unnecessary social interactions with non-believers. JWs are considered a 'high-cost' religion mainly due to the consequences of exiting the faith (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010). Specifically, although

members gain a large social network of fellow believers, those exiting may be viewed as choosing to become part of the world and ostracised by family, friends and the wider religious community who remain in the organisation (Holden, 2002). Ostracism, in this way, is both used to reinforce 'worldly distinctions' between JWs and non-JWs and acts as a deterrent against leaving. In considering the use of ostracism in high-control religions such as the JWs, it may be useful to examine how theoretical accounts of ostracism account for its deleterious effects.

Williams' (2009) Temporal Need -Threat Model (Williams, 2009), for example, suggests that ostracism threatens four basic human needs: control, meaningful existence, self-esteem and belonging. This three stage model posits that responses and reactions to ostracism change over time with an initial *reflexive* response of distress (Gonsalkorale & Williams, 2007; van Beest & Williams, 2006; Wesselmann & Williams, 2017) and 'social pain' (Ren, Wesselmann, & Williams, 2018; Wesselmann, Nairne, & Williams, 2012), leading to a second *reflective* stage which is seen to stimulate coping responses that serve to fortify threatened needs (e.g., control - Wesselmann & Williams, 2017; Zadro & Williams, 2006; Williams, 2008). Finally, the third stage, *resignation* is said to occur in the face of longer-term ostracism and can be associated with feelings of helplessness, alienation, despair, depression and suicidal ideation (Williams, 2009). By conceptualising experiences of ostracism as a non-static process which may change alongside an individual's circumstances, this model appears well suited to help explain how religious ostracism develops over time as people leave. To date, however, the theory has primarily been tested under laboratory settings (e.g., using the Cyberball paradigm; Hartgerink, van Beest, Wicherts, & Williams, 2015) and, as such, may not be generalisable to real-world contexts. Furthermore, the effects of longer-term ostracism are difficult to account for (ethically) under experimental settings. In view of potentially harmful psychological effects of ostracism, a consideration of the leaving

experiences of former JWs may therefore help cast light on real-world ostracism as well as its longer-term effects.

There are typically two routes of leaving the JWs: (i) disfellowship (forced exit), the result of contravening religious rules, and (ii) leaving the group voluntarily (known as disassociation or fading). Regardless of the exit route, former members often report being mandatorily 'shunned' by their family and friends who remain in the faith (Holden, 2002; Hookway & Habibis, 2015; Lalich & McLaren, 2010; Testoni et al., 2019) and this can impact individuals in different ways. For example, in a study of former members who had been born and raised JWs before accepting that they were gay, and subsequently finding it impossible to reconcile their sexual and religious identities, respondents describe their religious exit as a distressing experience associated with self-destructive behaviour, suicide and suicidal ideation (Lalich & McLaren, 2010). Similarly, Hookway and Habibis' (2015) in-depth study of former JWs raised in the organisation, details distressing accounts of disaffiliation as they transitioned out of the JWs because of a perceived incompatibility between their desire for a more hedonistic lifestyle and the comparative asceticism of life in the JWs. Other research specifically explores the effects of being disfellowshipped from the JWs. Gutgsell's unpublished qualitative work (2017), for instance, details respondents' reactions to ostracism which included decreased psychological wellbeing. Overall, this growing body of work highlights the potential harm to people's wellbeing as a result of experiencing ostracism. In these studies, respondents were either disfellowshipped or felt that they had little choice but to leave, providing an indication of the possibility that forced choice exits may pose particular challenges to the wellbeing of individuals. Indeed, contrasting a forced exit with more voluntary forms of leaving may be an important consideration when seeking to understand the psychological and social impacts of leaving the JWs. In support of this notion, a qualitative examination of the exit stories of those who left the JWs voluntarily

found that although a measure of distress was experienced, those exiting tended to describe leaving the JWs as a positive life affirming experience, and as way of building an authentic identity (Testoni et al., 2019). This may indicate that religious exit is not necessarily a linear process and that different factors may mitigate individual experiences. As such, findings of previous studies converge to provide a preliminary indication that those who left of their own accord may find navigating life outside the organization easier than those who were disfellowshipped.

In addition to the possibility that mode of exit may impact leaving outcomes, research into leaving other religions highlights that the effects of exiting may differ as a function of motives for disaffiliation. In research examining characteristics that best describe motivations for deconversion, denial and disagreement with beliefs, moral criticism, emotional suffering, loss of religious experience and religious community are suggested as motives for departure (Streib, Hood, Keller, Csöff & Silver, 2009) with most 'deconverts' choosing a secularising exit. A study examining defection from the Mormons (Bahr & Albrecht, 1989), for example, documents how the desire for perceived freedom could serve as a strong motivation for exiting. In this study, respondents often reported knowing comparatively little about their religion and rejected what they perceived as a strict lifestyle. Describing themselves as not being 'real Mormons', respondents identified a tension between what they viewed as an enforced lifestyle and the one they desired. These findings align with those by Davidman and Griel (2007 - see also Davidman, 2014) who found similar results among former Ultra-Orthodox Jews while also documenting themes of uncertainty, fear and loneliness upon entering the secular world (see also Bar-Lev & Shaffir, 1997). Similarly, a recent Israeli study (Itzhaki, Yablon, & Itzhaky, 2020) exploring Ultra-Orthodox Jewish high school dropouts found that becoming less religious was associated with reduced psychological

wellbeing. In this study, youths reported experiencing reductions in parental love because of their unwillingness to comply with religious norms.

Studies of exiting evangelical movements, in contrast, have yielded divergent findings with regards to how motives and commitment to religions may intertwine to shape exiting. On the one hand, a study in the USA found that motivations for leaving included failure to retain commitment to a belief system with respondents wanting to pursue what they regarded as a more authentic life (Fazzino, 2014). On the other hand, research among leavers of an evangelical community in the USA found that participants expressed a desire to embark on a new faith journey and to pursue a different type of religious lifestyle (Jamieson, 2002). Finally, an exploratory study regarding conversions out of Islam that included an examination of websites run by Christian missionaries and former Muslims, respectively, identified intellectual/ideological motivations and social/experiential motives for disaffiliation as well as different conversion destinations such atheism, Christianity and agnosticism (Khalil & Bilici, 2007). These studies begin to paint a picture of the motivations people have for leaving a religion and may, partly, reflect initial levels of religious commitment. Together, these studies' findings may suggest that post-religious exit paths can differ substantially as a result of, and are shaped by, motivations regarding religious exiting. More specifically, while not empirically examined to date beyond these formative qualitative studies, existing research highlights the possibility that initial commitment to religions of those who leave could also shape psychosocial outcomes post exit.

In addition to the apparent associations between leaving outcomes and form of exit (e.g., voluntary), religious commitment and motivations for exiting, research also documents that loss of group membership may also be associated with psychosocial difficulties. As such, loss of social support can also be associated with threats to identity. For example, individuals who exited the Mormon (Joseph, Joseph, & Cranney, 2017) and the Jewish Ultra-Orthodox

(Davidman & Greil, 2007) faiths, may struggle to reconcile their post religious personal identity with that of their former religious culture. In this way, individuals may attempt to build a new identity by searching for social support in diverse places such as nonreligious relatives, online support groups, or counsellors (Berger, 2015). Similarly, exploration among ostracised former Amish (Faulkner, 2017) and Ultra-Orthodox Jews (Davidman & Griel, 2007) suggests that individuals exiting can experience difficulty abandoning their religious identity, resulting in a 'holdover identity'. Although holdover identities have not been the subject of exploration among former JWs, this work into other religions (see also work on 'role-exit' by Ebaugh 1988), provides an indication that threatened identities may be associated with religious exit and ostracism and may, therefore, be relevant when considering impacts of transitioning out of the JW organisation. Indeed, one study in the ex-JW community describes losing relationships as 'social mourning' (Testoni et al., 2019). On the other hand, Fazzino (2014) suggests that although leaving a high-control (Evangelical) group can present psychosocial challenges initially, with loneliness as a motivation to find new social ties, deconversion is viewed as a liberating experience leading to relief and happiness. This suggests that, for some at least, time may act as a healing influence on recovery from social losses.

Considering the apparent significant role of social ties in these studies, it is conceivable that the advantages of religious membership may be accounted for theoretically by tenets of the social identity approach (Brown, 2020; Tajfel,1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This perspective suggests that ties with like-minded individuals can create a sense of belonging (Levine, Cassidy, Brazier, & Reicher, 2002; Swann, Gomez, Huici, Morales, & Hixon, 2010; Swann, Jetten, Gomez, Whitehouse, & Bastian, 2012; Turner & Hogg, 1987) vis-à-vis the alignment of personal identity with that of the group, to create a visceral sense of *fused identity* (Swann et al., 2010; Swann et al., 2012) that can endure an exit from a group

(ibid). While not applied to religious exit to date, a growing body of work also documents the extent to which social identification can aid (mental) health outcomes (Haslam, Jetten, & Alexander, 2011), and it is therefore necessary to examine how identity processes impact individuals leaving high control religious organisations such as the JWs.

Applying the social identity approach to explorations of leaving high control religions may, in this way, be aided by considerations of theoretical insights derived from the desistance from crime and substance abuse literature (Best, Irving, & Albertson, 2017). Recovery, from this perspective, can be conceptualised as a process of identity transition in which individuals reorient towards groups impacting positively on their journey towards improvement (Best et al., 2016, Kay & Monagahan, 2019). This transferring of group identity in the substance use literature, for example, is suggested to increase the likelihood of recovery, while decreasing the likelihood of a relapse (see also Frings & Albery, 2014). Assessing the processes of transitioning out of a high dependency identity (see Herold & Søgaard, 2019) may therefore also be a valuable tool to help explain the extent to which changes in group membership may facilitate or impede those transitioning out of high-control religions such as JWs.

Purpose of the Present Study

In summary, and in conjunction with initial insights derived from qualitative research among former JWs and those in similar religions (Berger, 2015; Lalich & McLaren 2010; Testoni et al., 2019) there is a need to examine in larger populations the extent to which factors interact to shape the life chances of people leaving high-control religions. Further, by considering the theoretical insights regarding benefit of identity reformulation (Best, et al., 2017; Jetten, et al., 2017) and the stages/effects of ostracism, and highlighting whether religious exit may vary as a function of exit method, commitment and social support, the

current research aims to provide initial cross-sectional insights into the effects of longer-term of religious ostracism in a real-world setting.

It examines whether the extent to which former JWs have progressed in the reformulation of their identity impacts self-esteem and mental wellbeing in the face of religious shunning from former friends as well as family members. The following hypotheses were generated. First, it was hypothesised that former members who experienced forced exit from the JWs would experience more ostracism and greater deleterious effects on self-esteem and mental wellbeing than those who left voluntarily. Second, we hypothesised that heightened religious commitment during JW membership would be associated with more difficulty in establishing a post religious sense of self and adverse outcomes. Finally, it was hypothesised that identification with social support groups would be associated with progress regarding identity reformulation and benefit psychosocial outcomes.

2.0 Method

2.1. Design:

A cross-sectional survey was utilised to investigate the effects of ostracism in individuals leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses.

2.2. Participants:

554 (18-70 years, M = 37.57, SD = 13.10, 62% female, 37% male, 1% other) ex-JWs, including 20 Current JWs were recruited using social media groups, and snowball sampling. Participants received no monetary reimbursement for their participation. The original sample contained 890 participants. From this, 554 had completed the questionnaire 80% and above which is considered to provide robust and unbiased error estimates (Mass & Hox, 2005). Of these 554, 121 were disfellowshipped (21.8%), 95 disassociated (17.1%), 315 faded (56.9%), 20 claimed to still be JWs (3.6%), and three did not disclose (.5%).

2.3. Measures:

Pre-test questions included demographics (age, gender). Questionnaires included: The 'Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale' (CES-D - Radloff, 1977), the Collective Self-Esteem Scale (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992), the Self-Esteem scale (Dhingra, 2013; Rosenberg, 1965). Perceived ostracism was measured by an adapted Workplace Ostracism scale (Ferris, Brown, Berry, & Lian, 2008), and control by the Perceived Behavioural control scale adapted from (Fielding, McDonald, & Louis, 2008) Social support was measured using the multi-dimensional scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988). Identity was measured using the Recovering Addict Identity scale (Buckingham, Frings, & Albery, 2013), adapted from (Doosje, Ellemers, & Spears, 1995), and identity transition using the Exeter Identity Transition scale (EXITS - Haslam et al., 2008). Other questions included questions relating to length and method of JW membership, consequences of exit, and experiences of being, and leaving the JWs. Participants were also given space to express their leaving stories if they wished to do so.

2.4. Procedure:

Following ethical approval from the University ethics boards, participants were recruited via purposeful sampling through adverts on various social media platforms such as Facebook and Reddit. Further participants were recruited through snowball sampling. Participants were recruited from December 2019 – January 2020. All participants gave informed consent. After being briefed with the information sheet, participants provided their demographic details, and then were given access to the full questionnaire, which was made available using a link to Qualtrics software, where the questionnaire had been designed.

3.0 Results

2.5. Analytical procedure:

Data screening

The data set was checked for univariate outliers, and pairwise plots examined for any heteroscedasticity. Multivariate outliers were checked as per Tabachnick and Fidell (2006), resulting in 72 participants being excluded. Variances for the dependent variables were adjusted to all be within a 10:1 ratio (Kline, 2005). The final sample for analysis consisted of 482 participants (*M* age = 37.26, *SD* age = 12.82), with 301 female.

Final variables were computed using SPSS and summary descriptive statistics are shown in

Table 1.

Table 1. Final scale descriptives

Measure	M (SD)	Variance	Reliability[1]
Recovering identity score	19.50 (3.93)	15.45	.75
Identity transition score	39.15 (10.14)	102.80	.73
Exit no choice	1.78 (.41)	.17	
Ostracism score	47.33 (19.69)	387.66	.97
Self Esteem score	21.87 (7.07	49.94	.93
CESD score	21.10 (15.40)	237.00	.95
CSE membership scale	20.28 (5.12)	26.21	.78
CSE private	19.45 (2.66)	7.09	.78
CSE public	20.63 (4.23)	17.86	.78
CSE importance to identity	17.25 (4.66)	21.75	.66
Commitment	7.63 (2.47)	6.08	

[1] Split-half reliabilities

An initial correlation matrix between the variables was then carried out using SPSS, summary shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Correlation matrix between variables for final model

	Ostracism	Membership CSE	Commitment	Importance to identity CSE	Public CSE
Exit no choice	-.34***	-			
Commitment	.13(.01)	-	-		
Identity transition	-	.16***	.18***	.15***	
Self esteem	-	-.57***	-.07	.21***	-
CESD	-	-.44***	-	.16***	-.10(.01)
Recovering identity	-	-	-	.18***	-

* *p* < .05, ** *p* < .01, *** *p* < .001

For the Ostracism scale, a negative correlation was shown between exit no choice, and a positive correlation with commitment. A positive correlation was shown between commitment and identity transition, and a negative correlation between commitment and self-esteem. A positive correlation was seen between membership CSE and identity transition, and negative correlations were seen with self-esteem, and CESD scores. A negative correlation was seen between, Public CSE and CESD scores. Importance to identity CSE was positively correlated to CESD score, self-esteem score, recovering identity score, and identity transition score.

3.2 Main Analyses

Analyses were carried out using AMOS 25. Path analysis aims to arrive at the most parsimonious model that explains the underlying data and does not significantly differ from it. Increasing the number of parameters in a model tends to improve fit, but necessarily decreases parsimony. The best model optimises fit and parsimony.

An initial model was created with the initial predictor as ostracism. Paths from ostracism were drawn to method of exit, commitment, social support, perceived behavioural control, whether individuals were JWs from birth, how long since individuals had left the JWs, and how many years since exiting the group. The final outcome variables were collective self-esteem (membership, public, private and importance to identity), identity transition, identity recovery, self-esteem and CESD scores. Paths between all these variables were allowed to vary. The parameters for this initial model can be seen in Appendix A, table 1.

Having examined the output and the parameters, those which were not a good fit to the data, with variables that were not significant or that had standardised values of less than .10, were removed. Removed paths were ostracism to social support, perceived behavioural control, JW from birth, how long since left and how many years since exiting. A new path was added from commitment to self-esteem, which yielded the final model. The parameters for the final model (see Tables 3 and 4) show that the final model fit was excellent (X^2 (35) = 43.67, p = .15).

Table 3 Parameter estimates for final model

Path	Unstandardised Estimate (Standard Error)	Standardised Estimate
Ostracism Score → Exit No Choice 1	-.01 (.00)	-.34***
Ostracism Score → Commitment	.02 (.01)	.13***
Commitment → Identity Transition	.73 (.17)	.18***
Commitment → Self-Esteem score	-.19 (.09)	-.07***
Membership CSE → CESD Score	-1.25 (.13)	-.44***
Membership CSE → Self - Esteem	-.76 (.05)	-.57***
Membership CSE → Identity Transition	.26 (.09)	.16***
Importance to Identity CSE → CESD Score	.47 (.13)	.16***
Importance to Identity CSE → Self Esteem	.30 (.06)	.21***
Importance to Identity → Identity Transition	.35 (.10)	.15***
Public CSE → CESD Score	-.36 (.15)	-.10***
Importance to Identity CSE → Recovering Identity	.15 (.04)	.18***

Covariances	Unstandardised Estimate (Standard Error)	Standardised Estimate
Membership CSE ↔ Public CSE	10.52 (1.06)	.51***
Membership CSE ↔ Importance to Identity CSE	5.0 (1.08)	.21***
Public CSE ↔ Importance to Identity CSE	3.36 (.88)	.18***
Private CSE ↔ Membership CSE	5.90 (.63)	.47***
Private CSE ↔ Public CSE	4.60 (.51)	.45***
Self Esteem Score ↔ CESD Score	35.80 (3.75)	.48***
Private CSE ↔ Importance to Identity	3.63 (.54)	.32***
Recovering Identity ↔ CESD Score	4.90 (2.01)	.10***

Variances	Estimate (Standard Error)
Ostracism Score	383.10 (24.70)***
Exit No Choice	.15 (.01)***
Commitment	5.94 (.38)***
Membership CSE	25.57 (1.65)***
Public CSE	16.94 (1.10)***
Importance to Identity CSE	21.10 (1.36)***
Private CSE	6.10 (.39)***
Self Esteem Score	32.83 (2.12)***
Identity Transition Score	86.85 (5.60)***
Recovering Identity Score	14.80 (.95)***
CESD Score	168.78 (10.86)***

| Squared Multiple Correlations	
Exit no Choice	.12
Importance to Identity CSE	.00
Public CSE	.00
Membership CSE	.00
Commitment	.02
CESD Score	.25
Recovering Identity Score	.03
Identity Transition Score	.10
Self Esteem Score	.31
Private CSE	.00

*$p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 4. Model fit parameters

	CMIN	df	p	NFI	CFI	AIC	RMSEA	Low	High
Initial Model	901.65	84	<.001	.40	.39	1075.65	.14	.14	.15
Final Model	43.67	35	.15	.96	.99	105.67	.02	.00	.04

The final model had ostracism as the initial predictor, with exit method, commitment level and collective self-esteem as moderators. Collective self-esteem also acted as a predictor for the outcome variables which were identity transition, recovering identity, self-esteem and

CESD scores. In terms of variance the final model accounted for 10% of the variance of identity transition, 3% of recovering identity, 31% of self-esteem and 24% of CESD scores, and is summarised in figure 1 below:

Figure 1. Predictors and Moderators
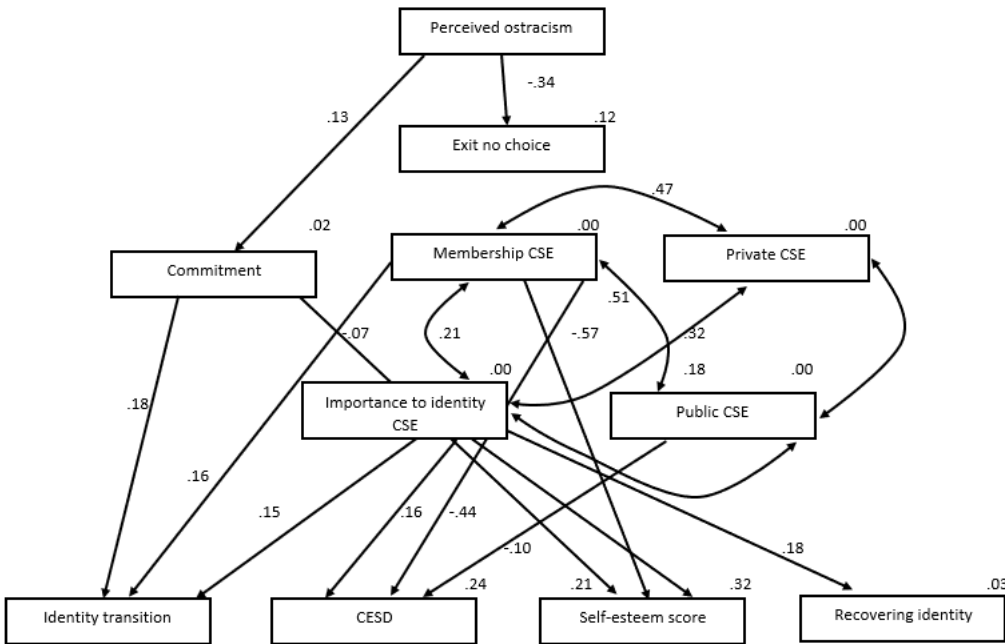
4.0: Discussion

The current study utilised a survey of purposively recruited former Jehovah's Witnesses (JWs) to examine the extent to which a forced (as opposed to voluntary) exit would be associated with heightened experiences of ostracism and diminished psychosocial outcomes. We also sought to investigate the extent to which prior religious commitment and social identification following exit may worsen or mitigate any adverse impacts. First, it was hypothesised that former members who were disfellowshipped (forced exit) from the JWs would experience more ostracism and greater deleterious effects on self-esteem and mental wellbeing than those who left more voluntarily. Second, we posited that heightened religious

commitment during JW membership would be associated with more difficulty in establishing a post religious sense of self and adverse outcomes. Finally, it was hypothesised that identification with other (supportive) groups post exit would be associated with progress towards identity reformulation and benefit psychosocial outcomes.

Beginning with a discussion of findings relating to type of exit and experiences of ostracism, findings were not in line with the hypothesis that JWs whose exit could be construed as 'forced' would experience higher levels of ostracism. On the contrary, while shunning seemed to be a relatively widespread phenomenon among our respondents, regardless of exit methods, those who left voluntarily appeared to report more experiences of shunning and ostracism. While existing research into leaving high-control religions consistently relates ostracism to leaving (Hookway & Habibis, 2015; Lalich & McLaren, 2010; Testoni et al., 2019), it had not to date been examined whether type of exit may aggravate experiences thereof. We expected that being disfellowshipped would result in more ostracism because of mandated shunning which could result in reduced 'control', according to Williams (2009) model of ostracism, which has been derived primarily from experimental work indicating that a lack of perceived control is implicated in elevated experiences of ostracism (Williams & Jarvis, 2006; Hühnel, Kuszynski, Asendorpf, & Hess, 2018). Current findings, however, do not unequivocally support this notion in the real world setting that was the focus of this study. This may be because being forced to leave the JWs may not necessarily be equitable with a relative lack of control. It is also possible that this response pattern may, to an extent, reflect respondents attempts to retrospectively make sense of their experiences in relation to expectations. In other words, respondents who left voluntarily may not have expected to be subjected to the same degree of discipline (through mandated ostracism) than those who were forced to leave. As such, the possibly unanticipated outcome of experiencing more shunning than might have been expected, may have resulted in stronger

perceived levels of ostracism. This is clearly speculative and future research in this area is required.

In line with our second hypothesis, we found that respondent levels of commitment towards the JWs during their membership of the religious organisation were associated with increased ostracism post exit. Findings suggest that prior commitment levels moderated the extent to which ostracism is experienced. Specifically, it appeared that respondents who reported being relatively more devoted during their membership experienced higher levels of self-reported ostracism. It was also found that commitment to the religion pre-leaving was associated with lower self-esteem post exit. These findings extend previous work which has already found that commitment levels can be an important predictor of exiting a religion (Albrecht & Bahr, 1990; Fazzino, 2014). As such the current study may provide an initial indication that motivations for exit, as a function of commitment, may shape post-exit paths. It is, for example, possible that individuals who are more committed to the JW religion in the first place, benefit from religious membership to a greater degree and therefore have more to lose. Future research could examine this further and fruitfully ascertain the extent to which members of religions with lower levels of commitment may, conversely, already have significant social support networks outside of the organisation. While these findings may suggest that consideration of commitment and motivation for leaving might usefully help tailor support to those exiting high-control religions, other findings potentially paint a more nuanced picture.

In the context of considering our findings in relation to prior religious commitment impacting post exit functioning, in this way, our unexpected finding that respondents with higher commitment levels during JW membership report being more successful at transitioning their identity away from the religion is noteworthy. As such, while prior commitment appeared to be associated with higher levels of ostracism and diminished post-

leaving self-esteem, as outlined, it also appeared to be linked with better outcomes regarding identity transition. This was not in line with our hypothesis that former highly committed members may remain 'fused' (Swan et al., 2010; Swann et al., 2012) to their previous religious identity to a greater degree than those with lesser commitment. Previous smaller scale qualitative work considering religious identity transition had provided some evidence that those who were more committed to the religion reported greater problems transitioning out of the JWs and were, what might be described as, self-condemnatory (Lalich & McLaren, 2010). Other research, however, has indicated that the exiting process can represent an emancipatory experience helping to construct a perceptually more 'authentic' identity (Testoni, et al., 2019). Consideration of these somewhat discrepant findings in relation to current ones may indicate that individual differences have a bearing on how people adjust their identity following a religious exit. Results may, for example, suggest that those more devoted to the religion may be better at commitment *per se*.

In an initial assessment of the extent to which desistance models in other domains that are rooted in the social identity approach (Best, et al., 2016; Kay & Monaghan, 2019) may apply to religious exit, our study also examined the extent to which collective self-esteem (CSE) would mitigate adverse effects of ostracism. Specifically, we expected that identification with social groups after exiting the JWs to be associated with positive benefits. Our findings in that regard are complex and provide only partial support for the utility of applying this theoretical approach to understanding the religious exit process. In support of the model, findings indicate that membership CSE was positively correlated to identity transition/recovery and decreased self-reported dysphoria. Similarly, we found public CSE to be associated with decreased levels of dysphoria. Importance to identity CSE was further found to be positively associated with identity transition/recovery and self-esteem. These findings extend other recovery-focussed work and theory (Beckwith et al, 2019; Kay &

Monaghan, 2019; Best, et al., 2016) to a new domain and provide an initial indication that identity alignment with new supportive groups may help in the reformulation of identity that supports a post-exit lifestyle. As such, the current work aligns with, and possibly begins to bridge theoretically, previous findings indicating that religious exiters often experience, and respond to, losses of social support by seeking out new (virtual) groups to facilitate coping (Cheung & Lee, 2010; Jacobs, 1989; Nica 2019; Ridout, Campbell & Ellis, 2012; Smith, 2011).

However, other findings were not consistent with the proposed model. Contrary to expectations, higher scores on the membership CSE subscale (i.e., the extent to which individuals value their contribution to a group) appeared to be associated with decreased self-esteem. It appears worth considering these unexpected findings in light of previous work indicating that one of the best predictors of self-esteem is the degree in which people perceive to be approved from the groups they are members of (Richman, Smart, & Leary, 2009). Seen in this light and considering that identity CSE (i.e., how important group membership is to the self-concept) was positively related to self-esteem, it is possible that different aspects of collective identification impact the construct independently and in different ways. In other words, while respondents may derive self-esteem from attaching importance to group membership, the perceived value of their contribution may harm self-perceptions, especially in relation to their former JW group identity conflicting with their current non-JW group identity, which could provoke feelings of guilt.

Similarly, the finding, in direct contrast with public CSE, that importance to identity CSE (i.e., the importance of group membership is to self-concept) was associated with elevated subclinical depression levels may indicate that distinct aspects of social identification can exert differential effects on psychological outcomes. For example, it is conceivable that aspects of people's self-concept which would be considered 'forbidden' and

'apostate' by individuals previously important to respondents, impacts the identity reformulation process. Also in light of consistent previous findings indicating that leaving JWs impacts self-esteem and mental wellbeing adversely (Friedson, 2014; Lalich & McLaren, 2010; Sheitle & Adamczyk, 2010) and that, during their previous membership, an important source of self-esteem derived from working towards fulfilling the organisation's aims and goals (Holden, 2002; Hookway & Habibis, 2015), more research is clearly required to understand fully how transitioning away from the religious organisation interacts with distinct identity processes to shape perceptions of self-worth.

Several limitations need to be borne in mind when considering findings. First, the cross-sectional 'snapshot' design prevents drawing conclusions regarding causality, and longitudinal inquiries in this area are urgently needed. Second, the purposive nature of the sampling methodology needs to be borne in mind as there is a possibility of sampling biases. Third, findings are also restricted by reliance on self-report data and the implications of this for shared method variance.

In conclusion, a cross-sectional online survey of former JWs examined the extent to which experiences of ostracism and adverse wellbeing outcomes were impacted by method of leaving, prior commitment to the religion and post exit identification with others. In partial support of the social identity approach utilised previously in unrelated recovery/desistance research, results indicate that while some aspects of identification aid identity transition and enhance wellbeing, others may exert paradoxical effects. In view of possible implications for supporting individuals seeking to leave high control religions, future research in this area appears warranted to aid further development of an evidence-derived theoretical understanding of religious exit.

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