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Ph.D.

Leaving the Jehovah’s Witnesses: Identity, Transition and Recovery

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This thesis is submitted to the Department of Psychology, Edge Hill University, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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I. Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work carried out under the normal terms of supervision. I confirm that this work has not been submitted for any comparable academic award.

Signed: H Ranson

II. Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Edge Hill University for providing the funding for this thesis and making this research possible.

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III. Abstract

By theoretically framing religious exit from the Jehovah's Witness religion with a social identity approach, an important purpose of this thesis focused on identity transition in the face of religious ostracism. By adopting this approach, this thesis reinforces how social identity processes impact personal and social identities that can become threatened when leaving the JWs. This thesis utilised quantitative and qualitative methods in finding that group membership is a useful intervention to ameliorate social loss and a source of influence that can positively influence identity recovery and transition. Overall, findings add to our understanding of what happens to the personal and social identities of former JWs when they leave or are cast out of their religion. Study 1 examined cross-sectionally the psychosocial impacts of leaving the JWs, exit method, and whether post-exit membership of online support groups was associated with increased self-esteem and identity reformulation. Results indicated partial support of the utilisation of social identity models of recovery. Study 2 examined longitudinally, theories of personal identification to understand the extent to which identity reformulation may proceed. Results indicated that challenges to identity were experienced irrespective of exit method and that respondents generally appeared to retain an embedded JW identity. Study 3 explored the impact of ostracism on wellbeing. Findings indicated that disfellowship from the JWs could elicit more serious detriments to wellbeing than voluntary exit. Study 4 explored longitudinally, the impact of terminated religious group membership on respondents' social identification, and the extent to which online support groups facilitated the establishment of new social networks. Results indicated that respondents who were disfellowshipped experienced strong attachments to the JWs which inhibited ability to manage (social/family) loss. Overall, this thesis outlines the central role of group membership in identity reformulation. Its contributions highlight how social identity processes may be drawn upon to address identity reformulation after leaving the JW religion.

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Chapter 1: Introduction – A Review of the Literature

1.1 Background

Founded in 1879 in the USA by Charles Taze Russel, the Jehovah's Witnesses (JWs) are a world rejecting fundamentalist Christian religion (Nica, 2019; Wallis, 1984). JWs are often classed as a new religious movement (NRM), an organisation that has arisen in the last 150 years (Ellwood & Partin, 1987; Wilson & Cresswell, 1999). Followers of the religion believe that the human race is living in the 'last days' a time period which will culminate in the battle of Armageddon (Holden, 2002; Stark & Iannaccone, 1997; Weddle, 2000). Believing that Armageddon will sweep away all wickedness from earth, paving the way for a thousand-year restoration of paradise, JWs believe that they will survive this cataclysmic event as members of 'the great crowd' (Holden, 2002; Stark & Iannaccone, 1997; Weddle, 2000).

Rejecting all other religions and politics (Knox, 2011; Knox, 2017, Weddle, 2000), JWs consider themselves to be 'no part of the world' (John 15:19 - NWT), limiting social connections to others of the faith (Stark & Iannaccone, 1994; 1997, Weddle, 2000). They view themselves as Christians and are perhaps best known for their worldwide proselytising which they consider both as a warning work of 'Armageddon' and as means of spreading 'good news' (Weddle, 2000). The religion is also known for their rejection of popular customs and celebrations (e.g., Christmas, birthdays, and Easter), and their refusal of blood transfusions (Knox, 2011). JWs follow a strict moral code with non-compliance and apostasy (voicing disagreement with doctrine) typically resulting in expulsion from the faith (Holden, 2002; Knox, 2011; Stein, 2012) which is known as disfellowshipping. This often means that members who want to remain loyal to the organisation must not have contact with their parents, siblings, children, or friends who have left or have been disfellowshipped from the organisation (Stein, 2012).

Although separate from the world, membership provides converts as well as those socialised into the JWs from birth/childhood with a ready-made social and religious community (Penton, 2015). This can be a source of self-esteem and afford a sense of belonging to members, which may compensate somewhat for a relative lack of integration into mainstream society. However, while literature from the JWs (jw.org) is extensive and there is an increasing proliferation of books from defectors, there is a distinct lack of academic research on the faith (Knox, 2011; Knox, 2017; Stark & Iannaccone, 1997). There are, however, notable exceptions: first,

Penton's scholarly study which has provided the most comprehensive overview of the religion (Penton, 2015); second, Chrysside's account of the eschatology of the JWs and its continuity and change into the twenty first century (Baran, 2016; Chryssides, 2016); third, Holden's sociological ethnographic account of the world view of JWs from the perspective of a congregation in Blackburn, UK (Holden, 2002); and, finally, Beckford's scholarly work in 1975 'The Trumpet of Prophesy' (Alston, 1976; Beckford, 1976). This body of work is useful in providing an overview of the history of the JWs as well as the general structure of the organisation and its doctrinal roots and changes. It is also useful in documenting how the doctrines of the religion defy convention (e.g., non-belief in the holy trinity/hellfire), making them stand out as different to other Christian faiths. However, although, in this way, these scholarly contributions contribute valuable historical and eschatological starting points, very little empirical research has taken place (Knox, 2011; 2017). This means that little is known about the experience of being a JW, what it is like being raised from infancy according to JW doctrine, and how religious exit is experienced vis-à-vis impacts on aspects of wellbeing and identity. With a focus on seeking to rectify some of these gaps in understanding, this thesis seeks to examine empirically religious exit from the JWs by illuminating the experiences of former members.

This is important, as despite the growth of the JW faith, an increasing number of followers choose to leave while others are expelled through disfellowship (Stark & Iannaccone, 1997). Since JWs typically limit their associations to those within the faith, those who exit due to non-compliance with behavioural restrictions, or disagreement with doctrine (apostasy) risk being ostracised and isolated from their family, friends, and the wider JW community (Holden, 2002; Penton 2015, Stein, 2012). In addition, they may also face challenges to their personal and social identities as a result of shifting their sense of belonging away from JW beliefs and practices. However, while social support and sense of belonging are well-established influences on mental health and wellbeing (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Correa-Velez, Gifford, & Barnet, 2010; Siedlecki, Salthouse, Oishi, & Jeswani, 2014) there has been little research into the psychological and social effects of leaving the JWs and other high control religions. Existing work will be reviewed in the following section.

1.2 Leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses

There are typically three routes of exiting the JWs: (i) *disfellowshipping* – a JW term used to identify former members who have been expelled for either 'unrepentant' or repeated

contravention of mandated religious standards (Chryssides, 2016), or have been considered ‘apostates’ by expressing disagreement with doctrine or engaging in “apostate” celebrations such as Christmas. (ii), *disassociation* – a JW term that identifies those who have made a formal departure/resignation in writing through personal choice; and (iii), fading (described in JW terms as ‘inactive’, ‘falling away’ or ‘leaving the truth’) – a non-JW term that describes the informal cessation of church activities and attendance, while retaining official membership (Testoni, et al., 2019). In addition, in recent years, individuals have reported that they have been disassociated by the congregation for acting in a way that indicates non-compliance (e.g., celebrating Christmas), suggesting that disassociation is not necessarily through choice in more recent times (Franz, 1983; Holden, 2002). Under these circumstances, JWs are viewed as ‘disassociating themselves through their actions’. JWs are instructed to have no social contact with individuals who are disassociated or disfellowshipped (Weddle, 2000). Although in the past former members reported that they were not ostracised if they had faded, typically at the present time, irrespective of the exit mechanism, reports of loss of social contacts and breakdown of family bonds through religious shunning are commonplace (Ransom, Monk & Heim, 2021; Testoni et al., 2019). This is significant, as psychological research and theory suggest that ostracism can lead to reduced self-esteem and wellbeing, dysphoria, suicidal ideation, and identity crisis (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Case & Williams, 2004; Forgas, Hippel & Williams, 2013; Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, & Stucke, 2001; Wesselmann, Cardoso, Slater, & Williams, 2012; Williams, 2008). As such, leaving the JWs, whether as a result of eviction or through choice, may be associated with significant psychological challenges for the individuals affected. The following is an extract from the JW publication “shepherd the flock of God”, a handbook for JW elders.

Table 1: List of Disfellowshipping Offences

List of Offences That May Result in Disfellowshipping - How JWs Determine Whether a Judicial Committee Should be Formed The elder’s handbook (The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 2019) provides a list of ‘offences’, for which members may be subject to disfellowshipping. The handbook states that this list is not comprehensive. **Evidence Establishing Wrongdoing:** A judicial committee should not be formed unless the wrongdoing has been established by sufficient evidence:

1 Confession – Admission of wrongdoing, either written or oral, may be accepted as conclusive proof without other corroborating evidence. There must be two witnesses to a confession, which must be clear and unambiguous. 2 Eyewitnesses – there must be two or three eyewitnesses. No action can be taken if there is only one witness
Sexual Immorality (Pornei'a) **–** immoral use of the genitals, whether in a natural or perverted way. There must be another party to the immorality – a human of either sex or a beast. Willing participation incurs guilt and requires judicial action. It includes oral sex, anal sex, and manipulation of the genitals between individuals not married to each other. Pornei'a does not require skin-to-skin contact, copulation or sexual climax.
Strong circumstantial Evidence of Sexual Immorality (Pornei'a) **–** if at least two eyewitnesses report that the accused stayed all night in the same house with a person of the opposite sex (or with a known homosexual) under improper circumstances, judicial action may be warranted.
Adulterous Marriage **–** If a divorced person remarries and he was not scripturally free to do so and has entered into an adulterous marriage which calls for judicial action.
Child Abuse **–** sexual or physical abuse of a minor. Includes extreme neglect of a minor by her parent.
Gross Uncleanness, Uncleanness with Greediness **–** Momentary Touching of Intimate Body Parts or Caressing of Breasts; Immoral Conversations Over the Telephone or Internet (e.g., sexting); Viewing Abhorrent Forms of Pornography; Misuse of Tobacco, or Marijuana and Abuse of Medical, Illicit, or Addictive Drugs; Extreme Physical Uncleanness.
Brazen Conduct **–** Unnecessary Association with Disfellowshipped or Disassociated Individuals; Dating Though Not Scripturally Free to Marry.
Drunkenness.
Gluttony.
Stealing, Thievery
Deliberate, Malicious Lying; Bearing False Witness
Fraud; Slander
Reviling **–** insulting speech.
Obscene Speech **–** sexually explicit filthy expressions.
Greed, Gambling, Extortion.
Refusal to Provide For Family.

Fits of anger, Violence, Domestic Abuse – includes professional boxing.
Manslaughter – Aside from deliberate murder, bloodguilt may be incurred if a person causes loss of life through carelessness or violating a traffic law or some other safety law of Caesar.
Apostacy – Celebrating False Religious Holidays (e.g., Christmas); Participation in Interfaith Activities; Deliberately Spreading Teachings Contrary to Bible Truth; Causing Divisions, Promoting Sects; Employment Promoting False religion; Spiritism; Idolatry.

Although scant, previous research has begun to explore the psychosocial consequences of leaving the JWs. Several qualitative studies highlight adverse psychological and psychosocial implications after exit. For example, Hookway and Habibis (2015) document the difficulties encountered by 'born-in' adolescent JWs undergoing identity transition away from the only way of life they had ever known. Although this study focuses exclusively on young people and does not include accounts of disfellowshipped former members of the religion, these respondents describe a challenging process of forging a new moral code away from their predominantly JW identity where proscribed and prescribed rules of behaviour were clearly defined. In contrast, work by Lalich and McLaren (2010) predominantly includes accounts of disfellowshipped individuals, and this study outlines confusion and anguish experienced by gay and lesbian former 'born-in' JWs who recollect difficulties in trying to unify two essentially incompatible identities – their identity as a homosexual and their JW identity where homosexual thoughts and feelings are forbidden – while simultaneously being ostracised from their communities (Lalich & McLaren, 2010). More recent research of voluntary exit describes bittersweet outcomes of former JWs who, despite successfully transitioning their identity away from the JW religion after a voluntary exit, lament as 'mourning' the loss of significant relationships along the way (Testoni et al., 2019). Other recent qualitative work (Ransom et al., 2021) found that individuals who were disfellowshipped experienced more deleterious effects to their identity, self-esteem, and well-being than those who left voluntarily, or those who had converted as adults. Hence, preliminary explorations indicate that an important aspect of membership of the JW faith is its effect on individuals' self-concept, which guides normative ways of living and behaviour, and that exiting, whether forced or voluntary, may result in ostracism and personal struggles to develop a new sense of self away from the strict life of the JWs.

While the insular social structure (Weddle, 2000) of the JW faith may explain the dearth of studies, insights may be drawn from experiences of those leaving similar high-control faiths

who also use ostracism to separate 'faithful' members from those who have left. Indeed, although religious tenets may differ from those of the JWs, many high-control religious groups appear to exert influence over lifestyle choices, with the removal of social contact through religious ostracism as a consequence for defection/noncompliance. For example, research documents how those leaving the Jewish Orthodox faith can struggle to develop a new social identity outside of their previous insular regulated community (Berger, 2015). Although focusing on voluntary exit, and subsequently not exploring the impact of a forced exit, this study illustrates how exiting a high-cost religion can bring about social, intellectual, and financial challenges after being raised in an insular environment. In a similar vein, exiters from the Mormon (Latter Day Saints – LDS) faith describe religious exit as a loss of important relationships and normative ways of life (Hinderaker, 2015; Hinderaker & O'Connor, 2015). In this study, some exiters masked their intention to leave for quite some time before exiting, demonstrating how members of stricter style religions may, at times, must use concealment strategies to avoid being ostracised. Although not focusing on the impacts to identity, nor methods of exiting (voluntary or forced), these studies highlight how disaffiliation from religious groups may cause significant losses to a social and personal identity, and the necessity to rebuild, often from scratch, a new social identity in an unfamiliar environment.

Other high-cost religions use practices of religious shunning for contravening social barriers with the outside world. These social restrictions typically mean that members understand very little about life in mainstream society, which, when exiting, can leave them naïve as regards to social norms in an unfamiliar world. These boundaries highlight the insular nature of these groups and explain, in part, why religious exit can be so challenging. The Amish practice of *meidung* (shunning), for example, typically results in cessation of all social interactions and trading contracts within the community for any who transgress the Amish lifestyle (Clark, 2013; Gruter & Masters, 1986; Miller, 2007), and illustrates how non-compliance with strict regulations may even threaten individuals' livelihood and financial security. This work illustrates how the decision to leave a religion (or experience expulsion) may have far reaching effects beyond religious and social considerations for individuals socialised into these strict religious environments from birth (as is often the case). In the same vein, other religions that employ ostracism as a form of control include Plymouth Brethren who, when contravening strict social boundaries with the secular world, are *"withdrawn from"* (removed) and/or *"shut up",* or shunned by their community, and must seek ways to adapt in an unfamiliar world without social support (Aebi-Mytton, 2018; Dyason & Doherty, 2015). Aebi-Mytton's (2018)

work for example, surveyed 264 former Brethren, some who had been "withdrawn from" and others who left voluntarily, finding that exiters endured severe emotional trauma for many years post-exit, describing themselves as "the living dead" in respect to their families who remained in the faith. Similarly, in a phenomenological study of former evangelicals, while exit was described as a liberating experience that evoked feelings of freedom, relief, and happiness, it also triggered "religious exile" (Fazzino, 2014). Although not distinguishing between exit methods, nor the impact of childhood socialisation on individuals' social identities, this study further highlights potential benefits of establishing a congruent supportive social identity post-exit. Finally, Muslim exiters, who are viewed as "apostates" because of their disconnection from the faith, may also experience significant isolation resultant from shunning practices (Cottee, 2015; Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001). Although these existing reports provide only a "snapshot" of these faiths, by painting stories of isolation and apprehension, it is possible to garner a sense of the difficulties individuals encounter when leaving high-cost religions. For example, the studies illustrate how the tendency to require separateness from society means that integration into the 'world' and establishing a post-exit identity is challenging. In particular, naivety as regards to societal norms and behaviours means that significant shifts in lifestyle behaviours must take place that can lead to intellectual, emotional and logistical challenges. Berger (2015), for example, illustrates how transitioning out of an insular community, and learning to assimilate into mainstream society involves learning new behaviours and lifestyles that are in direct contrast to previous religious norms. These studies also highlight how the transition from strictly defined religions may also involve intellectual changes where individuals must learn how to make moral decisions rather than those that were defined by their religion (ibid). Thus, an emerging body of literature examining religious exit from high-cost religions indicates that although varying in doctrine, exit produces manifold challenges that converge to make religious exit difficult. Although the above studies highlight the challenges of religious exit, little is known about the social identity processes involved in transitioning identity out of religion and what may facilitate this process. In addition, the impacts of exit method, and the influence of childhood religious socialisation remain relatively unexplored avenues of research in such religions.

In sum, the existing body of literature indicates that JWs and other stricter style religions often use the removal of social contact as a consequence of contravening religious requirements, and that resultant losses typically necessitate the reconfiguration of personal and social identity. However, little is known about how former JWs go about the process of establishing a new

identity outside of their previous religious community, which in many cases is the only community they have ever known. In addition, little is known about the consequences of religious ostracism and how this affects psychosocial outcomes, sense of belonging, self-esteem, and wellbeing. Similarly, most existing JW studies have not explored contextual differences which may have a bearing on post-exit paths and wellbeing, such as forced versus voluntary exit, childhood indoctrination versus adult conversion, and the implications of retaining belief in JW doctrine post-exit. Further, due to the prevalence of ostracism when exiting the JWs it is important to examine the means by which former JWs may garner a new network of social support after exit.

1.3 Paying the Price: the cost of religious exit

In areas of research that explore religious exit, Scheitle and Adamczyk (2010), using secondary self-reported data (survey data from 1972-2006 – General Social Surveys), suggest that remaining in high-cost religions, especially those who practice exclusivity (socially, culturally, and doctrinally) such as JWs and LDS (Mormons), leads to better (self-reported) health than staying in more mainstream religions. The authors attribute this, in part, to psychosocial support available in tight-knit religious communities, a shared worldview (Ellison & Levin, 1998), and the propensity of stricter religions to prohibit behaviours potentially harmful to health (e.g., smoking tobacco). Scheitle and Adamczyk (2010) also posit that exiting high-cost religious groups is associated with worse health than those who leave more mainstream religious groups. Thus, this work is helpful in illustrating how leaving the JWs may be associated with adverse consequences for the health and wellbeing of those who depart high control religions. Nevertheless, in order to explore impacts to mental health, it is necessary to find out what *costs* are associated with membership and exit, and how these relate to post-exit paths such as identity and wellbeing. According to Iannaccone (1992), costs include *proscribed and prescribed* social boundaries which are postulated to build tighter knit, more united religious communities, while reinforcing separation from the outside world. Although this may be posited to benefit individuals *during* membership, it also implies that post-exit, individuals have few, if any, social bonds either inside or outside of the religion. This aligns with research that indicates garnered social bonds secured during membership of religions may be an important factor in why most people remain in the religious groups in which they were raised (Hadaway & Marler, 1993; Loveland, 2003; Stark & Finke, 2000). In light of this, the detrimental health effects reported in Sheitle and Adamczyk's (2010) research appear to be

related, in part, to the breakdown of significant social bonds which can often be a result of leaving the JWs. This work indicates that although religion can positively foster tight-knit supportive communities, exit thereof can result in significant losses to individuals' sense of who they are and, taken together with other literature that describes the insular nature of tight-knit religious communities such as the JWs (Iannaccone, 1992), may result in isolation and loneliness.

Notwithstanding the above associations, Iannaccone and colleagues (1995), in their work exploring growth and decline in church membership, suggest that membership and growth in strict churches such as the JWs, is partly due to significant relationships that are built and strengthened over time through *shared* sacrifices of time/participation religious activities, all the while weakening ties outside of the group (ibid). This finding, and the indication that proscribed and prescribed social boundaries limit social ties (Iannaccone, 1992), suggests that an individual's identity is inexorably intertwined with their religious identity, and that the breakdown of the religious identity (through religious exit) may instigate breakdown of the social identity. This effect is postulated to be more apparent in religious groups such as JWs that tend to be demanding and exclusive (theologically, socially, and culturally), with beliefs, requirements, and religious activities distinct from mainstream Christianity (Finke & Stark, 2005; Iannaccone, Daniel, Olson, & Stark, 1995; Sherkat, 1991). For example, JWs are expected to provide high levels of participation in religious activities such as public proselytising, while also complying with strict behavioural and social restrictions (Cummings, 2000). Consequently, when these strict requirements and religious activities are discarded, social, and oftentimes family bonds tend to become lost (Hookway & Habibis, 2015; Lalich &McLaren, 2010). Research suggests that whether exit is voluntary (Hookway & Habibis; Testoni, et al., 2019) or forced through disfellowship (Lalich & McLaren, 2010), religious shunning is typically employed. Although these studies do not distinguish between these two experiences, nor do they explicitly focus on the impact of childhood socialisation, they highlight the cost of religious exit and how this typically results in the breakdown of familial and social support structure for the individual concerned (Stein, 2012). Nevertheless, there remains a need to explore the impact of religious exit more fully to elucidate how factors such as voluntary versus forced exit, childhood inculcation and social support post-exit, may ameliorate leaving and readjustment processes.

Other work that has explored religious exit from high-cost religions including the JWs, focuses on the social implications of exit on wellbeing (Nica, 2019). Here, and aligning with work by

Iannaccone (1992; 1994), it was found that social relationships fostered during religious membership were intertwined with religious relationships, with losses to high quality perceived relationships associated with greater negative impacts on wellbeing. As religious activities (e.g., preaching publicly) form a significant component of JW membership, this may be an indication of the extent to which social bonds garnered during years of mutual religious activities, when lost, may significantly reduce post-exit wellbeing and social opportunities. Nica (2019) further describes social consequences as 'losses' resultant from leaving strict religions generally, evidenced by loss of supportive ties, challenges to self-perceptions, stigma and psychological distress (see also Fazzino, 2014). Other work similarly indicates that this is due, in part, to the tendency of fundamentalist style faiths to limit contact with the outside world, while promoting strong in-group participation in religious rituals (Iannaccone, 1994). In Nica's study (2019), exiters described family estrangement as painful, oftentimes requiring psychological support for suicidal ideation and dysphoria. Therefore, previous work paves the way for further investigations into the leaving processes of religious exit from the JWs and how this evolves over time.

While the losses from leaving fundamentalist style religions are significant, Nica (2019) also examines the perceived gains. Developing new social relationships, for example, within employment and/or educational settings, joining (non-religious) organisations, or developing new romantic relationships allowed former members to develop new social support structures that were beneficial to wellbeing. Although not explicitly focusing on the experiences of former JWs, respondents in this study noted that without religious constraints, social ties were established more authentically, rather than through a shared religious ideology. In addition, online communities were a valuable source of support (Nica, 2019). The notion of online support communities post-religious exit has also been explored in other faiths. Berger (2014; 2015), for example, noted that when exiting the ultra-Orthodox community, online support groups and websites were an important means of helping individuals to cope with stress (see also Davidman & Greil, 2007). More generally, online groups are an accepted platform in which to share stories and connect with others (Cheung & Lee, 2010), and although not explored explicitly within the exJW community, the notion of online support communities in the above preliminary research, indicates that this may be an important aspect of identity reconfiguration and beneficial in ameliorating distress.

Taken together, although previous research suggests that exiting strict fundamentalist religions such as the JWs extorts a high price in the form of significant social losses, other research

illustrates how gains, in the form of personal freedom can compensate somewhat, albeit after a time period of isolation and transition. Consistent with this notion, this thesis will seek to explore how support structures available to former JWs may be beneficial in the quest to forge a new life outside of the JWs. By adding insights to the literature this research will elucidate the experiences of an under-researched population, where factors such as forced versus voluntary exit and childhood inculcation will be explored and how these mediate the effects of religious ostracism post-exit.

1.4. Ostracism

> *A man's Social Self is the recognition which he gets from his mates. We are not only gregarious animals, liking to be in the sight of our fellows, but we have an innate propensity to get ourselves noticed, and noticed favourable by our kind. No more fiendish punishment could be devised, were such a thing physically possible, that one should be turned loose in society and remain absolutely unnoticed by all the members thereof. If no one turned round when we entered, answered when we spoke, or minded what we did, but if every person we met "cut us dead" and acted as if we were nonexisting things, a kind of rage and impotent despair would ere long well up in us, from which the cruelest bodily tortures would be a relief; for these would make us feel that, however bad might be our plight, we had not sunk to such a depth as to be unworthy of attention at all.*
>
> *William James, 1890, (pp. 294)*

In the above quote, William James, American Philosopher and Psychologist (1842-1910) captures the essence of ostracism (James, 1890). Indeed, few life experiences are more distressing than to be ignored, treated as invisible or non-existent, by people we love and respect (Case & Williams, 2004; Williams, 2001; 2008; Williams, Forgas & Hippel, 2005).

As social creatures, interaction with family, friends, colleagues, and even strangers, provides many opportunities for positive communications (Williams, 2001). Conversely, ostracism can also exist in many forms; whether the silent treatment / cold shoulder in dyadic relationships, solitary confinement in prisons (Wesselmann, Williams, Ren, & Hales, 2021), ostracism in the workplace (Ferris, Brown, Berry, & Lian, 2008) or the schoolyard (Arslan, 2021), cyberostracism via social media (Williams, Cheung & Choi, 2000), a time-out in school (Williams, 1997), or in the context of this thesis, religious ostracism (Hales, Ren & Williams, 2017; Hales, Wesselmann, & Williams, 2020). In short, although most people have experienced, or indeed have been the perpetrator of various forms of ostracism during their lifetime, fewer people have experienced religious ostracism, making it a relatively unexplored phenomenon (Hales, Wesselmann, & Williams, 2020; Knox, 2011; 2017). When considering the adverse consequences of ostracism, and highlighted by consideration of its wider use, this thesis is dedicated to exploring a lesser-known form of ostracism, one that occurs in a religious context, specifically, when leaving the JWs.

In recent decades ostracism has received considerable empirical attention (Case & Williams, 2004; Ren, Wesselmann, & Williams, 2018; Williams, 2001; 2008; Williams, Forgas, & Hippel, 2005), due, in part, to the effect it has on people's sense of belonging which has been identified as a fundamental aspect of human behaviour (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Individuals and groups can be targets and perpetrators of ostracism, which typically uses silences and averted eye contact, especially in close interpersonal relations (Williams, 2001; 2007; 2008; Williams et al., 2005). Ostracism is an effortless, efficient, effective, and powerful form of non-behaviour, quickly detected as an almost hardwired response (Williams, 2001), often used as a form of control to induce conformity, or exact punishment (Carter-Sowell, Chen, & Williams, 2008; Wesselmann, Nairne & Williams, 2012). Despite these explorations, and the postulated detriment ostracism has on sense of belonging, little research has attempted to elucidate how religious ostracism impacts belonging. Indeed, although religious membership is posited to increase feelings of belonging (Saroglou, 2011; Iannaccone, 1994), more research is warranted to explore what happens to an individual's sense of belonging and wellbeing when religion becomes a source of ostracism.

When considering the impact of ostracism, Baumeister and Leary (1995) suggest that depriving individuals of the basic human need for affiliation and closeness has considerable psychological detriments, such as depression, anxiety, stress, and dysphoria, whereas establishing, maintaining, and nurturing close bonds with others promotes positive wellbeing

and happiness (ibid). Indicated as a feared human behaviour (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), it is perhaps helpful in explaining why religious ostracism, such as experienced by former JWs elicits such distress. Indeed, because research indicates that membership of tight-knit religions fosters wellbeing (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010), it follows that terminating membership can result in the psychological detriments mentioned by Baumeister and Leary (1995). In this respect, preliminary work exploring exit from the JWs indicates that ostracism can cause isolation, loneliness, anxiety, depression and even suicide (Lalich & McLaren, 2010; Testoni et al., 2019). As such, since JWs are a tight-knit community who view themselves as 'no part of the world' (Chryssides, 2016; Holden, 2002, Weddle, 2000), exit, whether forced (Lalich & McLaren, 2010) or voluntary (Testoni et al., 2019) typically results in ostracism from what may be the only community individuals have ever known.

Further exploring how religious ostracism may be harmful to wellbeing is its impact on self-esteem, which has been implicated as a means to gauge self-worth (Leary, 1999; Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Smart Richman & Leary, 2009; Steele, Kidd, & Castano, 2015), and a significant determinant of mental health and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Hiçdurmaz, İnci, & Karahan, 2017; Leary, 1999; Leary, Twenge, & Quinlivan, 2006; Smart Richman &, Leary, 2009). Although self-esteem has not been explicitly explored within JW membership, members of religious communities more generally, advocate that religion positively impacts self-esteem (Aydin, Fischer, & Frey, 2010), and therefore it is possible that religious ostracism, perceived as a punishment (Leary, Terdal, Tambor, & Downs, 1995), may have the reverse effect, by reducing self-esteem. Taken together, existing work illustrates how leaving strict religious groups like the JWs may cause reduced self-worth, since social losses are perceived to be out of the control of the individual being ostracised. Indeed, because control, or agency, is also considered a fundamental human emotion (Langer & Rodin, 1976), and lack thereof associated with helplessness (Bandura, 1997) it follows that former JWs may experience a sense of helplessness and reduced self-esteem when ostracism is prolonged. This finds commonality with the third stage of Williams temporal needs threat model of ostracism (2009), where repeated, failed attempts at reconciliation are postulated to cause depression, helplessness, and suicide.

In sum, although the above studies suggest that ostracism results in threats to self-esteem, control and belonging, being a feared human behaviour, more research is warranted to explore how ostracism threatens identity. In particular how ostracism in religious groups may deprive individuals of social support and their sense of who they are. The following section

will narrow the lens on ostracism further, by providing an indication of the current state of the literature in regard to religious ostracism.

1.5. Religious Ostracism

> *There is something about religion that makes for prejudice, and*
> *something about it that unmakes prejudice.*
> *Gordon Allport, 1966 (pp. 447)*

In the above quote, Gordon Allport, American Psychologist (1897-1967), who dedicated his life and career to studying human personality, prejudice, and discrimination, captures the fundamental self-contradictory nature of religion (1966). On the one hand, playing the role of comforter for individuals experiencing ostracism and discrimination (Aydin et al., 2010), and, on the other hand, often playing the antagonist as a source of discrimination (ibid). In consideration of why ostracism occurs in religious groups, researchers posit that it serves to: (i) *protect* from outside threats - for example, a religious parent disapproving of a child marrying an atheist (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006), (ii) *correct* (errant behaviour) and (iii) *eject* problematic members (Hales, Ren & Williams, 2017). Used by religions such as the JWs in an escalating fashion, it is likely that less severe forms are used initially, with more severe forms such as ejection, or disfellowship typically being reserved for those not responding appropriately to correction (Hales, et al., 2017). Although a relatively under researched domain, there is a growing body of literature exploring ostracism and its impacts on wellbeing as experienced within religion, which will hereafter be explored.

Whether used to protect, correct, or eject (Hales et al., 2017), evidence suggests that religions other than the JWs use ostracism to promote groups norms. For example, Catholics (Zamperini, Menegatto, Mostacchi, Barbagallo, & Testoni, 2020), Evangelicals (Fazzino, 2014), and Muslims (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001), all use forms of ostracism as a tool to promote religious conformity. Similar dynamics occurred in Jim Jones's People's temple Full Gospel Church (Scheeres, 2011), where ostracism was used to control people who questioned the leaders' directives. Correspondingly, and aligning with the impact of disfellowship (Lalich & McLaren, 2010), research on the *black sheep effect* indicates that people tend to socially reject even members of their own group when their behaviour reflects negatively on the group as a whole (Marques & Paez, 1994). However, although the literature indicates that ostracism often serves

as a deterrent for disobedience and promotes cooperation with religious norms (Feinberg, Willer, & Schultz, 2014; Riva, Williams, Torstrick, & Montali, 2014), an increasing number of individuals leave religions such as the JWs (Testoni et al. 2019), suggesting that ostracism is not always powerful enough of a deterrent to maintain membership. In view of the potentially harmful psychological effects of ostracism (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, Williams, 2001; 2009), it is important to further consider the leaving experiences of religious exiters to help cast light on this domain of real-world ostracism, and its longer-term effects to wellbeing and identity.

Although research indicates that the withdrawal of all spiritual and social contact with former believers can detrimentally impact the post-exit paths of religious exiters, including ultra-Orthodox Jews (Berger, 2015), Muslims (Khalil & Bilici, 2007), Mormons (Bahr & Albrecht, 1989), Amish (Faulkner, 2017) and evangelicals (Fazzino, 2014), this treatment does not always motivate a return to the religion (Gutgsell, 2017; Holden, 2002). Thus, although often used as a tool to promote compliance when leaving stricter fundamentalist religions such as the JWs, ostracism, or religious shunning as it is more understood by its targets, may not always serve to "correct" errant members (Hales et al, 2017). However, although disfellowshipped JWs are subject to immediate mandated shunning (ibid), other research indicates that those who have left voluntarily also commonly report being ostracised by their family and friends in the religion (Hookway & Habibis, 2015; Testoni et al., 2019), indicating that leaving the group typically results in religious ostracism irrespective of the exit mechanism. However, little is understood about why voluntary exit incurs the same punishment as disfellowship, which is typically used as a consequence of infringement of behaviour or doctrine. From a theoretical perspective, it may be that former members may pose a threat to in-group uniformity of beliefs, thus providing a rationale for (defensive) ostracism (Festinger, 1950). By now it has become apparent that religious shunning may be associated with a range of deleterious effects, for example, social, intellectual, logistical, and even legal challenges that impact people's lives long-term (Berger, 2015; Fazzino, 2014; Gutgsell, 2017; Iannaccone, 1994). In addition, shunning can have deleterious impacts to wellbeing, including health and psychological challenges (Faulkner, 2017; Friedson, 2015; Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010). Thus, the growing body of research that explores religious exit, which tends to be qualitative in nature, has included accounts of religious ostracism, and therefore played a role in giving a voice to individuals experiencing social and religious shunning from their families and communities.

Narrowing the scope further, research has also considered the impact of ostracism explicitly within the JW religion. Although scant (Knox, 2011; 2017), preliminary qualitative

investigations indicate that leaving the religion typically involves a general collapsing of social supports. For example, Hookway and Habibis, in exploring exit from the perspective of young former JWs who left the JW organisation voluntarily, describe how building a life outside of the JWs was painful and lonely experience that necessitated the construction of a new social identity, belief system, and moral code (Hookway & Habibis, 2015). Similarly, Lalich and McLaren's (2010) in-depth study of former JWs who left the JWs because they were gay, experienced forms of self-loathing, depression, suicidal ideation, and suicide as a consequence of distressing religious exit due to irreconcilable identity (JW versus homosexual). In contrast to Hookway and Habibis' study, the majority of respondents in Lalich and McLaren's study were disfellowshipped, and this appeared to elicit more deleterious consequences to mental wellbeing than those who exited through choice, although exit method was not explicitly explored in the study, and therefore warrants further attention. Other qualitative research, such as Gutgsell's (2017) unpublished work, Testoni and colleagues' (2019), and Aboud's (2020) research, all support wider research into the impact of social ostracism, and the deleterious effects of rejection and alienation on wellbeing, providing an indication of the extent to which religious ostracism may impact individuals who leave high control religions.

Thus, the current state of knowledge regarding exit from the JWs indicates that religious shunning is a typical experience, and that associated loss of social identity has harmful consequences on the wellbeing of individuals. However, because researchers have thus far not distinguished between the experiences of disfellowshipped JWs and those who left voluntarily, it remains unclear what role exit method plays in this experience. Since voluntary exit implies a maintained sense of agency, and disfellowship implies loss of control, more research is warranted in order to assess how these differing exit methods may impact the post-exit paths of former JWs in terms of their identity reformulation and wellbeing. Additionally, it remains unclear what role childhood socialisation plays in religious exit. Specifically, whether the journey out of the religion is different for converts as opposed to individuals born and raised according to JW doctrine.

1.6. Ostracism - Methodological and Theoretical Considerations

The experiences of former JWs may add insights into what is known about the effects of ostracism. This is because much existing research does not consider effects of ostracism in a real-world setting. Earlier studies have provided indications concerning limits to human tolerance (Schachter, 1959) and have attempted to measure ostracism using *manipulated*

settings such as a conversation (e.g., the train ride paradigm) or a Cyberball (virtual) ball tossing paradigm with strangers (Hartgerink, van Beest, Wicherts, & Williams, 2015; Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000). Other experimental settings have included longer-term paradigms including simulations (using role play in a weeklong study – see Williams, Bernieri, Faulkner, Grahe & Geda-Jain, 2000; Hartgerink et al., 2015), event-contingent methods (e.g., the Scarlet Letter Study, five days of ostracism – Williams et al., 2008), in an attempt to create a more realistic perception of the experience of ostracism. Here, it was found that despite foreknowledge and consent, attributional uncertainty occurred, and powerful reactions were experienced (Williams et al., 2008). Although a significant step forward, these manipulated settings cannot be realistically compared to the experience of being ostracised by a religious community of friends and family longer-term. In addition, since JWs have the propensity to preserve social interactions exclusively within their religious group (Iannaccone, 1992; 1994), former members typically hold no friendships outside the organisation upon leaving, and tend to report isolation and loneliness post-exit, having significant impacts to wellbeing and social identity (Iannaccone, 1992; Hookway & Habibis, 2015; Lalich & McLaren, 2010; Nica, 2019). It therefore remains necessary to explore these impacts contextually, in order to gain a clearer understanding of the effects of real-world ostracism - and how challenges associated with it may be overcome - in former members of socially exclusive religious communities like the JWs.

Despite the paucity of studies exploring the impact of real-world religious ostracism, attempts to explore the effects of real-world social ostracism through qualitative studies may help to illuminate how religious ostracism may be experienced by former JWs. For example, Williams (2001) conducted interviews with respondents experiencing long-term ostracism from single- or multiple-sources (e.g., family members, friends, co-workers, church or community), and found that although being ostracised by a single source (especially an important individual in the targets life) is painful, being ostracised by multiple sources is suggested to be a more detrimental experience, because it makes dispositional self-attributions to an individual's character become more plausible and consequently more distressing (Williams, 2001). Since former JWs tend to be ostracised by their family, friends, and the wider religious community, in the context of Williams (2001) research, this could reasonably lead to increased susceptibility to negative dispositional attributions regarding former JW's self-concept. Additionally, Williams (2001) postulates that long-term ostracism may incur more serious consequences to individuals, such as self-destructive behaviour, suicidal ideation, alcoholism,

and deleterious implications to mental and physical health (Case & Williams, 2004; Wesselmann et al., 2012; Wesselmann & Williams, 2017; Williams, 2001; 2007; 2008, Williams et al., 2005). This aligns with findings in the limited body of research exploring leaving the JWs, which indicates that negative self-concept, reduced wellbeing, suicide, and suicidal ideation are associated with longer-term social losses (Lalich & McLaren, 2010; Testoni, et al., 2019). Although these initial insights are important in illuminating what happens when individuals leave the JWs and similar religions, important aspects warrant further explorations. For example, although being disfellowshipped involves a forced exit from the JWs that is often out of the individuals' control, and associated with a mandated response of ostracism, little is known about how this experience affects post-exit identity paths, self-esteem, and wellbeing in either the short or the long term (Lalich & McLaren, 2010). Similarly, although *voluntary* exit from the JWs may reasonably be associated with retaining a sense of agency (Hookway & Habibis, 2015), preliminary research (Testoni et al., 2019) indicates that this exit method can also be associated with ostracism, which, considering no specific religious infringement has taken place, may be perceived as an unjustifiable action. Nevertheless, little is known about the impacts of voluntary exit on individuals' sense of identity, self-esteem, and wellbeing (short and long-term). In addition, it is unknown what impact religious ostracism has on converts to the JWs who subsequently leave, as opposed to ostracism from a community that an individual may have socialised into from infancy, and importantly, may be the only source of social identification of these individuals.

Consequently, it remains important to further explore the effects of real-world religious ostracism by distinguishing between the experiences of forced versus voluntary exit, and the experiences of converts versus individuals born and raised in the JWs from infancy. Thus, this thesis will examine quantitatively and qualitatively experiences of religious ostracism. With this in mind, the following section will consider how the body of research and theory regarding personal and social identity may potentially be utilised to add understanding to overcoming religious ostracism as a result of exiting the JW religion.

1.7. "Who am I?" - The Pre and post JW Personal Self

When considering the impact of religious exit, the above research indicates that ostracism can trigger threats to both a personal and social identity. Since high-cost religions (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010) frequently use ostracism as a means of separating defectors from the 'faithful' (Hales, Ren, & Williams, 2017), this form of social ostracism typically necessitates

establishing a new identity outside of the religion. Identity can be conceptualised in different ways. For example, *Personal* identities are postulated to be partly derived from the roles people play in society (Stryker, 1968), and this view posits that the self consists of a collection of identities that are arranged as a hierarchy of importance/salience (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Personal identity can therefore essentially be construed of as an individual's responses to the question "who am I?", with the most salient role indicated (e.g., "I am a father"). Thus, identity, from this perspective, is composed of the meanings attached to the roles that individuals perform in society (ibid). This builds on the earlier symbolic interactionist conceptualisation by Mead (1934), which asserts that the self is socially constructed and created through human interactions, thus illustrating an interplay between the personal and social self. This view of how individuals and society dialectically shape each other illustrates how individuals understand themselves according to their social context and may facilitate an understanding of what happens when people need to transition their identity away from religious sources thereof. When applying this approach to religious exit from the JWs, for example, it is possible to see how disaffiliation and subsequent ostracism, may disrupt an individual's concept of their personal and social self. For example, since JWs limit their associations to those within the religion, it follows that their socially constructed self (Mead, 1934) is tied to their personal identity through their religious membership. Indeed, the propensity of JWs to distance themselves socially from society generally, originates with their beliefs that they should be 'no part of the world' (Chryssides, 2016; Holden, 2002; Weddle, 2000). Although the notion of (personal) identity loss has not been explored within the JWs, existing studies indicate that through losing their identity as a JW, former members may struggle to conceptualise who they are as individuals when they no longer derive a sense of self from being part of an insular religious organisation (Hookway & Habibis, 2015; Weddle, 2000). In Hookway and Habibis' (2015) study, young (born-in) JWs, in this way, describe a dynamic struggle for self, with the attractions of the outside world competing with their identity defining religious upbringing (ibid). This is an indication of the extent to which being born-into the JWs and socialised from infancy into that religious lifestyle may powerfully influence personal identity formation and powerfully impact individuals upon exiting.

Notwithstanding this association between exit from the JWs and its impact on a personal identity, Stryker (1968) further suggests that salience can vary significantly between individuals. This means that commitment levels (e.g., participation in religious rituals, church attendance, compliance with behavioural restrictions) during membership of the JWs, may

have a bearing on identity salience, or how an individual would respond with "I am a JW" when asked "who am I" during their membership. Post-exit, salience of a JW identity may influence the ability to transition identity out of the religion, with the suggestion that JWs whose commitment was strong during membership, may find religious exit more challenging (due to a salient JW identity) in comparison to those whose membership was less intrinsic to their identity. Although this concept of salient identities and their connection with religious exit from the JWs has not been explicitly explored, initial indications reveal that leaving the JWs is particularly challenging in respect of identity due, in part, to the social costs of exit (Nica, 2019), thus further illustrating the aforementioned interplay between personal and social identities (Stryker, 1968; Stryker & Burke, 2000). As social relationships in strict religious such as the JWs are associated with participation in mutual religious rituals (Iannaccone, 1992; 1995), it follows that identity salience may be tied to attitude and commitment to rituals of membership, such as proselytization, attendance and participation at church services and bible study. This facet of religious exit remains unexplored and, therefore, research is warranted in order to explore associations between pre- and post-exit identity and what may mediate/ameliorate these transitions.

1.8. A Social Identity Approach to Reformulating Identity in the Face of Ostracism

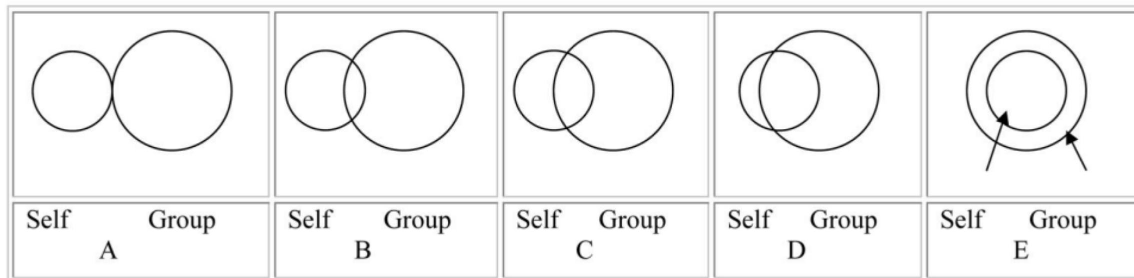
As indicated, identity comprises an interplay between the personal and social self (Mead, 1934; Stryker, 1968; Stryker & Burke, 2000). Whereas a personal identity refers to the individual roles people play in society (Stryker & Burke, 2000), a *social* identity refers to the multiple social groups to which people categorise themselves, enabling individuals to compare themselves with other "ingroup" or "outgroup" members (Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994). Consequently, social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and social categorisation theory (SCT; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), forming the theoretical bedrock of the social identity approach (Brown, 2020), posit that individuals have two sources of identity; a personal identity as an individual, and a social identity which is derived from group membership (Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990). Social identity relates to knowledge that the groups' members to which individuals belong have significance and value which, from the perspective of the JWs, indicates that membership of the religion is likely to play a significant part of an individuals' self-concept pre-exit. In consideration of the social identity approach, which focuses on how behaviour (of the self and others) is a consequence of group membership, it may be possible to see how religious exit could be perceived as

undesirable behaviour by other JWs as it implies a "stepping away" from the norms of the ingroup (Turner et al., 1994). Because SCT postulates that behaviour has consequences for (dis)continued group membership, it may be feasible to assume that ostracising defectors may be viewed as a justifiable action by JWs who remain within the organisation (Hales, Ren, & Williams, 2017). SIT asserts that the self is fundamentally social, imbuing individuals with a sense of who they are and where they fit in their social groups, bestowing self-esteem and belonging (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Additionally, as humans have a natural propensity to favour their own groups and, at times, derogate others (Turner et al., 1987), this may partially explain the propensity of stricter religions such as JWs to reject not only other religions, but also former members of their own religion (Bahr & Albrecht, 1989, Faulkner, 2017; Testoni et al., 2019). Considering the social nature of the self, religious exit may therefore have considerable impacts on an individual's social status (Nica, 2019), thus it may be possible to see how applying the theoretical tools of the social identity approach may further our understanding of the consequences of exiting strict religious groups such as the JWs.

In addition to the social identity approach being a potentially useful tool to better our understanding of religious exit, a further theoretical framework, identity fusion (IF; Swann & Buhrmester, 2015) may fruitfully be drawn upon to improve our understanding of how identity is impacted when individuals leave strict religious groups such as the JWs. IF postulates that alignment of self-concept with the group may cause a visceral sense of 'oneness' with the group due to the fusion of the personal and social self (ibid). Research indicates that this can be associated with extreme pro-group behaviours. In this way, American's whose identity was strongly fused with their country, altruistically provided copious supplies and support to bombing victims, who they viewed as psychological 'kin' (Buhrmester, Fraser, Lanman, Whitehouse, & Swann, 2015; Gomez et al., 2011), and, instances of the ultimate sacrifice (during times of war) where individuals have given their lives for their comrades, whom they have regarded as kindred spirits (Fredman, et al., 2015), have also been documented. With this in mind, such examples of personal sacrifice may help to explain how tactics such as social ostracism, even directed at close family members, are considered acceptable responses to behaviour that does not support the group (JW religion). Theoretically aligning with the social identity approach (Brown, 2020; Tajfel, 1978, Tajfel & Turner, 1979, Turner et al., 2016), IF postulates that there is a distinction between the personal and social self and that the personal and social self both remain salient *simultaneously* (see graphic below – E typically chosen by individuals strongly fused to the group).

Figure 1: Measure of Identity Fusion (Swann et al., 2009)

Measure of identity Fusion from “Identity Fusion: The Interplay of Personal and Social Identities in Extreme Group Behaviour” (Swann et al., 2009)



In brief, the principles of IF theory include: (i) *Agentic-personal* principle, (ii) *identity synergy* principle, (iii) *relational ties* principle, and (iv) *irrevocability* principle. The agentic-personal principle postulates a strong sense of self and has accounted for more extreme pro-group measures in support of, for example, demonstrations of nationalistic pride (Swann, Gomez, Huici, Morales, & Hixon, 2010; Swann et al., 2014). In the context of JWs, the agentic-personal principle may shed light on how individuals may steadfastly ostracise personal friends and even close family members as an endorsement of a form of pro-group behaviour, even though this may be felt as a significant personal loss. Second, the identity-synergy principle implies that interaction between the personal and social self may lead to engaging in more powerful group behaviour (Gómez, Morales, Hart, Vázquez, & Swann, 2011). IF maintains that both personal and social identities support group-related behaviours, and these work synergistically to produce self-sacrificing actions when required (ibid). Seen this way, engagement in ostracism may be, from a JW perspective, both a group and personal action; a group decision against an individual, supported by a personal action by individuals strongly fused to the JW religion, implying that ostracism may vary as a function of commitment to the group.

Third, the relational-ties principle assumes that relationships forged within highly fused groups may be felt akin to family relationships, and powerful enough to motivate self-sacrifice. For example, Swann and colleagues (2009), in commenting on the attacks on the World Trade Towers (Swann, Gómez, Seyle, Morales, & Huici, 2009), posit that this form of extreme group behaviour was resultant from individuals becoming so fused with their identities as “terrorist” group members, that they were prepared to die for their group cause (ibid). In a similar vein, within the JW religion, the tendency of members to refer to each other as “brother” and “sister” may be indicative of the visceral closeness that exists in the JWs (Holden, 2012), and may

partially explain why JWs tend to sacrifice relationships even with close family members and friends who leave, because they perceive that their ties to the religion are stronger than relational ties (Lalich & McLaren, 2010; Testoni, et al. 2019). Fourth, the irrevocability principle, which assumes that IF remains largely stable over time (due to powerful emotional attachments, beliefs, and relationships), which may explain, to some extent, why individuals who leave religions such as the JWs often struggle to forge a new identity (personal and social) outside of their previously strictly defined religious group (Hookway & Habibis, 2015). Indeed, the challenges of severing attachment to a group to which one was 'fused' may take some time and could be postulated to be exacerbated in individuals who were socialised into the JWs from infancy (ibid), although this notion has not previously been explored. Aligning with this thought, IF research has found that even when ostracised, strongly fused individuals maintain devotion to the group to some extent (Gómez, Morales, Hart, Vázquez, & Swann, 2011). The idea of remaining fused despite opposition and ostracism from the group has not been explored within the body of research concerning disaffiliation from the JWs, however, it affords an indication that religious exit may not necessarily end emotional attachments to the group, and therefore is a concept that warrants further exploration. Specifically, it may be posited that individuals can find themselves outside of the religion, either through being disfellowshipped or through voluntary exit, yet continue to remain aligned to some extent with the group's ideals and principles, which could conceivably inhibit post-exit identity reformulation and adversely impact wellbeing.

In sum, by comparing principles of IF with the existing literature that explores religious exit from the JWs, it appears that this theoretical framework may usefully help explain features of behaviour exhibited by JWs towards former members who exit. Specifically, ostracism, from this perspective, may be an example of pro-group behaviour that could be considered more extreme, involving the sacrifice of previous close and family relationships despite personal detriment. This framework could also explain why former JWs may struggle to navigate life outside of the JW religion, because their identities can remain fused to some extent to their former beliefs. Although IF has not been explored in relation to the JW religion, in view of the impact ostracism has on the individuals' identity and wellbeing, research is warranted to explore how applying this lens may aid our understanding of the challenges faced by those exiting religions such as the JWs.

This concept of remaining fused to a group post-exit is also reminiscent of work exploring "role exit" (Ebaugh, 1988), which postulates that when an individual disengages from a role

previously key to their identity and begins the process of establishing a new identity, a "holdover" identity often exists which continues to influence life paths (Ebaugh, 1988). Although Ebaugh (1988) typically relates this to situations such as long-time occupational and institutional roles, other research has indicated that in some religious groups, especially where ethnicity and religion overlap, a "holdover identity", which continues to shape life choices post-exit can remain intact. For example, studies of ex-Jewish, Mormon, and Amish ethno-religious groups (Bahr & Albrecht, 1989; Faulkner, 2017) (see also - Davidman, 2014) indicate that ethno-religious identities may persist for a while after exit, making the establishment of a post-religious identity challenging (Iannaccone, 1990). In the context of the JWs, it could be postulated that due to the strict norms entailed with membership, such as the insular and exclusive "separate from the world" social structure, shared rituals, and childhood inculcation, a form of holdover identity may exist despite JWs not being considered an ethno-religious group (Holden, 2002; Hookway & Habibis, 2015; Knox, 2017; Stark & Iannaccone, 1997). In addition, although holdover identities have not explicitly been explored within the exJW community, preliminary work suggests that JW identities can persist despite being disfellowshipped from the religious community (Ransom, et al., 2021). In this small-scale qualitative study, respondents described remaining mentally 'hardwired' to the JWs and described difficulties in establishing a post-exit identity. Although studies such as these are useful in indicating how reformulating identity is a challenging experience for individuals raised in what could be termed as identity defining stricter style religions (Iannaccone, 1992; 1995; Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010), there remains a scarcity of research specifically exploring religious exit from the JWs. Therefore, further explorations are warranted, to investigate what factors may ameliorate or impede identity reformulation. For example, although preliminary research indicates that the experience of leaving the JWs voluntarily may impact identity differentially than being disfellowshipped (Hookway & Habibis, 2015; Lalich & McLaren, 2010; Testoni, et al., 2019), studies have not explicitly dichotomised between exit method in relation to post-exit identity reformulation. Therefore, considerations such as childhood inculcation and how this may influence identity reformulation appear warranted.

Other work exploring the application of a theoretical social identity approach in real-world research has included explorations into addiction/offending and subsequent efforts at rehabilitation through social identity reformulation. Work by Best and colleagues, for example, using the social identity model of recovery (Best, et al., 2016 - SIMOR), Frings and Albery (2014), using the social identity model of cessation maintenance (SIMCM), and Kay and

Monaghan (2016), using the social identity model of transition (SIMOT), postulate that membership of groups that support positive change vis-á-vis a lifestyle away from addiction and offending may favourably affect outcomes. Here, researchers describe a process of "transitioning out" of former groups and suggest that providing individuals with new supportive groups may increase likelihood of recovery, while decreasing incidences of relapse (Best et al., 2016; Best, Irving, & Albertson, 2017; Buckingham, Frings, & Albery, 2013). Although the experience of transitioning out of a religion is not the same as transitioning away from groups engaged in potentially harmful health behaviours, there appear to be similarities. For example, both groups tend to face social losses, and must necessarily reformulate their social identities in support of new life paths. However, differences are also apparent in that those reinventing their social identities away from crime or addiction do so in support of positive life changes, and often have family support, whereas former JWs tend to lose both family and social support and must necessarily reinvent their social/personal identity to avoid isolation (Aboud, 2020; Hookway & Habibis, 2015; Lalich & McLaren, 2010; Testoni et al., 2019). As highlighted, this is owing to the propensity of JWs to form attachments exclusively with other members of the religion (Nica, 2019), whilst socially isolating former members. Therefore, the apparent significant role of social support in these studies means that it is conceivable that the concept of establishing a new social identity via supportive groups specifically created for former JWs, may be an important means to support identity change and, to some extent, ameliorate the isolating effects of ostracism. Although this has not been explored previously within the ex-JW community, it appears that this concept of supportive groups, and indeed the proliferation of online support groups for former addicts, and former members of religious communities (Avance, 2013; Best, Bluic, Iqbal, Upton, & Hodgkins, 2018; Scharp & Beck, 2017) may provide indications of how these platforms may facilitate and support identity reformulation. Therefore, research is merited to examine how this provision may fruitfully support post-exit paths and wellbeing when leaving the JW religion.

Other research that takes a social identity approach explores the *reciprocity* between social identity and social support, as affiliative identity (AI-belonging to groups) and "self-as-doer" identity (Walsh, Muldoon, Gallagher, & Fortune, 2015). Here, Walsh and colleagues found evidence of emotional improvements via the application of a model which supported the notion of *reciprocity* between social support and self-as-doer identification after experiencing acquired brain injury (ABI). In simple terms, this research indicates that AI, or group belonging, makes support possible, and social support drives self-as-doer identity (ibid). This,

in keeping with other research and theoretical contributions concerning "the social cure" (Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009; Jetten, Haslam, & Haslam, 2009) which can be applied to better understand how social support and coping with negative life events such as stroke can be interrelated (Haslam, et al., 2008). In consideration of this framework, and its potential utility in helping explain how individuals overcome negative life events, it can be postulated that this approach could fruitfully be applied to understanding the life experiences of members of the exJW community. This is important because previous research indicates that in the aftermath of leaving, individuals may experience anxiety, dysphoria, and identity loss which may be alleviated to some extent by new connections to new social groups (Lalich & McLaren 2010). Here, Lalich and McLaren found that finding commonalities in social groups specifically created for gay exJWs (e.g., gayxjw.org) positively impacted wellbeing post exit and aided in the establishing of new supportive networks. Nevertheless, the impact of support groups created more generally for former JWs, and akin to social identity models such as SIMOR (Best, et al., 2016), in support of positive change, has not been explored within the context of religious exit from the JWs and warrants exploration. Therefore, this aspect of post-exit reformulation will be addressed as part of this thesis.

Providing further support for the potential utility of this perspective to understand psychosocial impacts of religious exit, research in other domains also highlights the efficacy of a social identity approach in helping explain how individuals overcome adverse life events. Ethnic identity theory (Phinney, 1989; 1990), which focuses on the power of groups to counteract negative experiences such as racial abuse that is known to threaten identity and reduce self-esteem (Berry, Phinney, Kwak, & Sam, 2006; Phinney, 1989;1990), is a good case in point. Ethnic identity, a component of the self-concept, is said to develop over time through social comparisons, and helps protect against identity-threats brought about through experiences of racism and perceived discrimination (Phinney, 1990, 1996). In identifying how this approach may be a useful framework from which to explore religious exit and associated identity reformulation, it could reasonably be proposed that the experience of religious ostracism may be perceived by former JWs as a form of (religious) discrimination that causes threats to identity with negative ramifications for affected individuals' self-esteem and wellbeing. Although a different experience to racial abuse, both forms of discrimination have a negative impact on wellbeing and may be said to threaten self-concept through negative (self) attributions and maltreatment by others. Although transitioning identity out of religion is not the same as coping with incidents of racism, commonalities may apply. For example, both

groups necessarily need to bolster self-esteem in an to attempt to counteract negative mistreatment from others, with supportive group membership offering an ostensibly beneficial way to do so. However, differences may also be observed in that although ethnic identity involves building a sense of pride associated with one's own ethnic group (Phinney, 1989; 1990; 1992), former JWs tend to be ostracised by their former group (Lalich & McLaren, 2010, Nica, 2019), which means that for many JWs, especially if they were born-in, this is the only community and culture they have ever known. Consequently, the process of establishing connections with new groups and finding affinity with others experiencing similar social and familial losses may increase self-esteem and boost positive self-concept as an exJW and serve to counteract the negative effects associated with being outcast from their community. Thus, although unexplored within the community of former JWs, ethnic identity may be a further theoretical framework by which to increase understanding of religious exit, its impact on social identity, and the efficacy of social groups to increase social capital in a trustworthy environment (Putnam, 2007). This is important because social capital has been linked to wellbeing and health in religion (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010), therefore, losses to social capital and subsequent impacts on wellbeing and identity are important considerations.

In sum, by using a social identity approach (Brown, 2020; Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel and Turner, 1979) to understand group processes, and how these impact self-concept, and, having an understanding of the theoretical models that have been used in recovery based environments (e.g., see Best et al., 2016; Walsh et al., 2015; Haslam et al., 2008; Phinney, 1989), it is possible to envisage how these theoretical models may be utilised in an attempt to understand the psychological and social processes involved in leaving the JWs. Indeed, although previous research appears to suggest that adopting a new social identity vis-à-vis supportive groups in support of change may be beneficial for wellbeing, these theoretical frameworks have yet to be applied to religious disaffiliation. Therefore, this thesis will take a social identity approach to examine the extent to which membership of supportive groups may be fruitful in ameliorating identity losses resultant from religious ostracism. It will also consider whether online social groups, specifically established for former JWs, may support the formation of a new social identity, and may also provide practical and emotional help for individuals suffering the effects of social and family ostracism. In addition, this thesis will seek to distinguish between the experiences of disfellowshipped former members, and individuals who left voluntarily, in order to ascertain whether having agency in the leaving process ameliorates the effects of ostracism. Finally, this thesis will compare the post-exit experiences of those born into the JWs, with those

who converted as adults, to explore the impact of childhood inculcation into the religion, and how this may have a bearing on ability to forge a new identity away from JW eschatology.

1.9. Overview of Thesis

The following chapter (Chapter 2) presents a justification of the mixed-method methodology chosen for the thesis, and outlines why using a combination of Path analysis (to test the mediating and moderating functions of exit method, commitment levels and post-exit group identification on outcomes of identity transition, recovery identity, self-esteem and wellbeing), and Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was chosen in order to explore identity reformulation (personal and social) and wellbeing in the face of religious ostracism. Chapter 2 also contains the full methods section for qualitative studies 2,3 and 4 (so as not to repeat this information within each chapter). Chapter 3 is the first empirical study of its kind to explore quantitatively, religious exit from the JWs. By use of an extensive questionnaire specifically constructed for this thesis, informed by the social identity approach, this study explores how wellbeing, and post-exit identity paths may proceed as a function of religious ostracism, exit method (forced or voluntary) and commitment to the JWs during religious membership. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 are empirical studies that examine religious exit, identity and wellbeing using a qualitative methodology. Chapter 4 explores how individuals' personal identities are impacted by ostracism, specifically exploring how a salient (personal) identity as a JW may influence identity reformulation post exit. It further considers (i) how exit method (forced versus voluntary) may have a bearing on ability to reformulate identity, (ii), whether childhood inculcation into JW eschatology impact's identity transition, and (iii), the impact that retained belief may have on leavers wellbeing and post-exit identity. Chapter 5 examines impacts to wellbeing as a result of long and short-term ostracism from family members and the JW community. This chapter also considers situations that arose during membership of the JWs that were detrimental to wellbeing, such as childhood sexual abuse, child rape, domestic violence, and homophobia. Chapter 6 specifically focuses on social identity, and how ostracism impacted respondent's social structures and support networks. This chapter further considers the utility of (online) social support groups specifically created for former JWs to offer practical and emotional support to individuals leaving the JWs. By adding a longitudinal aspect, the further consideration of contextual factors such as exit method (forced or voluntary), childhood socialisation and retained belief post-exit are explored. Chapters 4 and 6 also contain longitudinal follow-up interview data in respect to individuals' sense of evolving identity and

wellbeing over time. Here, by re-interviewing a subset of the original respondents, changes over time are evaluated in respect to identity reformulation and what ameliorated these effects. Chapter 7 consolidates the empirical research and provides an overall appraisal of the impact of exiting the JWs and the contextual factors that may mediate this process. It also highlights some limitations of the current thesis and discusses potential areas that warrant future research.

Chapter 2: Methodology

2.1 Methodological Considerations

The empirical studies in this thesis are presented using research designs which aim to systematically apply a social identity approach to religious exit from the Jehovah's Witnesses. This chapter will offer a brief justification of a two stranded approach, which combines quantitative and qualitative methods (Reichardt & Rallis, 1994). While avoiding the 'paradigm wars', a term used by Gage to characterise methodological debates within research (Gage, 1989), this thesis offers a practical, pragmatic and philosophical base from which to explore and better understand the leaving experiences of former JWs and identity transition.

2.2 An Interrogatory Approach to Research – A Tale of two Paradigms

Research methods and design are an important aspect in the pursuit to understand human behaviour. The epistemological nature of research is such that it seeks to generate knowledge, typically through use of research questions which are interrogative in nature. Erotetics – the logic of questions and answers, is therefore a vital aspect of research (Punch, 2013). Different questions may require different methods (McFee, 2009, Punch, 2013). To illustrate, and aligning with the aims of this thesis, a questionnaire may be advantageous to measure ostracism levels across a greater number of participants and allows generalisations to be made, but in order to understand what ostracism *feels* like, as well as its wider effects, a qualitative approach that yields rich, detailed and heavily contextualised data from each respondent could be argued to work best. Therefore, epistemology, or the philosophy of knowledge via research may take two forms: qualitative and quantitative. Good research seeks to ostensibly select and implement whatever method is best to answer the research question (Yardley & Bishop, 2017), and as this thesis seeks to better understand an avenue of human experience a mixed methods approach is deemed appropriate.

In understanding the distinctions between qualitative and quantitative research, and why this has been contentious in the past, it is necessary to consider the theoretical perspectives of both. Qualitative research, with its interpretive, social constructivist epistemology and pluralistic methodology (Creswell, 2013; Frost & Shaw, 2015), stands in contrast to the more 'scientific' or positivist paradigm of quantitative work. Nevertheless, it is necessary to acknowledge the differences in these approaches, and take care taken not to violate assumptions, or fail to realise the aims of either (Yardley & Bishop, 2017). From a positivist epistemological standpoint, the belief is that knowledge is a knowable reality that can be measured objectively (Smith, 1983). In contrast, qualitative methods avoid verification of hypotheses, and are instead associated with constructivist beliefs and open-ended discovery (Creswell, 2013). Here, the argument is that knowledge is *constructed* over time through life experience and mediated by different people and cultures (ibid). As such, the scientific (positivist) and the relativist (constructivist) perspectives of knowledge (epistemology) and reality (ontology) and their diverse epistemological stances have centred on whether it is wise, or even possible, to use these approaches interchangeably (Hammersley, 1996; Sale, Lohfeld, & Brazil, 2002). It must also be acknowledged however, that there is as at least as much diversity *within* these methods as there is between them (Hammersley, 1996).

In consideration of the strengths and weaknesses of both quantitative and qualitative methods, it seems appropriate to contrast these paradigms. Positivism (quantitative) describes a set of beliefs about how 'legitimate' knowledge about the world may be attained. Positivist methods are argued to give the most accurate observations in a controlled environment (Yardley & Bishop, 2017), with precise measures designed to avoid the inaccuracy that has been levelled against more subjective impressions (Harré, 2004). The strengths of quantitative methods as a useful tool for analysing physical processes have meant that tremendous strides have been made in terms of understanding the physical world. In the same vein, these same measures have

successfully been utilised to help understand human behaviour (Yardley & Bishop, 2017). When considering reality/truth, the ontological perspective of positivism postulates that truth can be discovered using objective measurements and generalised to other situations (ibid). This deductive form of analysis uses theory to generate and test hypotheses, in the pursuit of 'truth'.

However, this pursuit of 'objective knowledge' has been challenged because of its propensity to overlook nuance and context. Thus, from a constructivist standpoint, statistical methods appear 'reductionist' because they are unable to deal with nuance of being human, nor make sense of the human experience, and how people operate in a social world (Shaw, Bishop, Horwood, Chilcot & Arden, 2019). For this reason, the constructivist perspective, now fully in the 'canon' of psychological methods (Levitt, 2019), means that each person's view of the world is formed according to their own pre-existing knowledge, shared assumptions, and cultural perspectives. In this way, then, knowledge of the world is subjective and mediated by socio-cultural experiences of individuals (Gergen, 1990; 1992). Consequently, it is not possible to overlook the effect of context and expect an accurate measurement of human behaviour. In fact, the revival of qualitative methods in recent years has been due, in part, to the recognition of its unique ability to analyse data of 'natural language' (words and expressions), by narrating stories of human experiences (Morse, 1991; Sandelowski, 1996). This inductive, iterative, and evolving process searches for meanings within narratives as a legitimate form of data (Wertz, 2010), identifying patterns that emerge, to better understand the phenomenon being studied. In this way, the process may be viewed as self-correcting, as patterns emerge over time with each new piece of data. (Levitt et al., 2018). From this perspective it is possible to see how patterns may enable an overview of a phenomenon (such as religious ostracism) to be achieved.

In view of the above it may be easy to argue that the aims and methods of these contrasting approaches may seem incompatible. From the perspective of a constructivist methodology, positivist 'scientific' methods may be perceived to 'strip' participants of their individuality and

social context through use of artificial laboratory environments or 'sterile' quantitative measures (Yardley & Bishop, 2017). Often, positivist methods may not be able to allow participants to express contradictory views, thus constraining the range of responses. Due to ethical constraints, some aspects of human behaviour (such as ostracism) are difficult to measure, and positivist researchers often have to use unnatural and contrived situations to measure behaviour and responses. This may have the effect of ignoring important socio-cultural influences on the ways in which participants think, talk and act (Gergen, 1992). Conversely however, those advocating a positivist methodology may assert that in rejecting objective measurements, constructivism lacks scientific validity and is liable to partisan advocacy on the part of the investigator or the participants. From the positivist viewpoint qualitative research fails to provide rigorous way of eliminating possible sources of bias.

2.3 A Pragmatic Response – Using Qualitative and Quantitative Methods as Complimentary Forms of Inquiry

It may be argued that both qualitative and quantitative methods are essential in informing human inquiry, in order to gain a rounded understanding of human behaviour (House & McDonald, 1998). Indeed, a qualitative project may share its epistemological viewpoint with another project using quantitative methods (Shaw, et al., 2018). This means that hitherto conceived barriers to mixed methods may be overcome so as to accomplish high quality research (Frost & Shaw, 2015; Yardley & Bishop, 2017). In respect to an *erotetic* approach to inquiry it makes sense that a variety of methods are needed to answer a variety of questions. For example, the internal validity demonstrated by quantitative methods are important because they enable conclusions and correlational inferences to be observed (McGrath & Johnson, 2003). However, internal validity often comes at the cost of external validity, or the extent to which findings correspond to real-world conditions / environments (Yardley & Bishop, 2017). In contrast, qualitative research sacrifices accuracy and control to situate data collection more

contextually. When examining ‘phenomena’ in context, rich meanings can be extracted that may not be possible to acquire in a controlled experiment (Yardley & Bishop, 2017). Consequently, a pragmatic approach may be to combine the internal validity of quantitative methods with the external validity of qualitative methods (Pope & Mays, 1995; Hawe et al., 2003).

In this vein, quantitative methods are ideal for *deductive* (theory based) hypothesis testing. Here, a great many factors may be tested simultaneously, and conclusions can be drawn about how they relate to each other (Camic, Rhodes, & Yardley, 2003). That being said, the requirements of statistical testing mean that only a limited number of variables can be measured at a limited number of time-points, or the number of participants and procedures needed for reliability becomes unfeasible. On the other hand, because qualitative research data tends to be considerable, multiple analyses are possible, and so is ideal for *inductive* hypothesis generation. This is dependent on what factors emerge from the data. This open approach means that qualitative work can be used for theory building – which often precedes hypothesis testing (quantitative) and illustrates the symbiotic relationship that can exist between quantitative and qualitative methods.

A side-by-side comparison of quantitative and qualitative data reveals the complimentary nature of these two methods. Quantitative data, which have been referred to as ‘thin data’ (Yardley & Bishop, 2017) must eliminate variability and inconsistency between and within people’s experiences to achieve statistical reliability (reductionist). These data can be compared to data from different populations. Conversely, qualitative data, which have been referred to as ‘thick data’ (ibid) tend to embrace and explore individual experiences and can explicitly include an exploration of unusual experiences. This iterative process of evolving (self-correcting) findings is driven by induction (Wertz, 2010) and works to analyse patterns to the phenomenon being studied. This, in turn, gives a sense of the whole phenomenon, as

informed by those patterns. The flexible nature of qualitative research is such that patterns can alter the way the phenomenon is viewed as a whole, by correcting and refining existing findings, and is a fundamental part of the hermeneutic process (see Levitt Motulsky, Wertz, Morrow & Ponterro, 2017; Osbeck, 2014; Rennie, 2012; Wertz et al., 2011). To illustrate, a questionnaire can usefully indicate or measure the experience of anxiety among a group of people, whereas qualitative work can capture the *essence* of the experience and how it feels, including complex meanings of the subjective experiences in context (social situations). Therefore, in creating, for example, an intervention for anxiety, a qualitative approach may provide the most useful way for practitioners to explore how interventions work with different clients (Fishman, 1999). However, policy makers tend to insist on objective statistical quantitative data to be convinced of the utility of an intervention (Griffin & Phoenix, 1994). Therefore, choice of methodology will be guided by the question at hand, and its purpose. If the purpose of the inquiry is to elucidate subjective meanings in their socio-cultural context, then qualitative methods are best suited. If the purpose is to provide 'objective' data that, for example, include a biological dimension it may be best to use quantitative data collection. In sum, by mixing methods it is possible to paint a wider picture of the phenomenon at hand. At times, results may not converge (Reichaedt & Rallis (1994), nor should it be assumed that they will. Rather than regarding this as a disadvantage, it may be regarded as indicative of how these complementing strategies of these methodologies serve to critique the other.

2.4 How can a social identity approach frame the experiences of former Jehovah's Witnesses, and what is its utility?

As discussed, and in consideration of the erotetic approach to research; that of answering questions, methods must be 'fit for purpose' by providing empirical observations that have an overall commonality with the overall purpose of the inquiry (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie,2004; Sechrest & Sidani, 1995). Thus, this thesis utilises both standardised 'closed' measures as well

as open-ended questioning to examine people's experiences of leaving the JWs, religious ostracism, and how this impacts their identity and wellbeing. This combination of theory-driven statistical modelling and qualitative analysis, in this way, enables a systematic and detailed examination of post religious-exit paths and wellbeing. By embracing the advantages of quantitative and qualitative paradigms, this thesis therefore contributes to the generation of knowledge, while avoiding debates about 'methodolatry' (Chamberlain, 2000; Yardley & Bishop, 2017).

In addition, it is also important to recognise the philosophical platform of the researcher conducting the research. Creswell (2013) suggests that researchers should reflect on their *philosophical worldview* assumptions brought to the study that inform the research design and how it will be accomplished. By identifying the worldviews, or the epistemological stance of the researcher, an understanding can be achieved about why specific strategies were chosen to provide a contribution to knowledge (Creswell, 2013). In view of the above, the ontological (reality/truth) and epistemological (knowledge) worldview of the present researcher falls into a pragmatist camp. Pragmatism seeks to find practical solutions to the construction of knowledge (Dewey, 1931; James, 1907; Pierce, 1878). Pragmatism demands that researchers should choose methods appropriate to the question to be explored (Creswell, 2013; Rossman & Wilson, 1985), and therefore does not orient completely towards one method. Accordingly, this research opts for a pragmatic mixed-methods approach (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007), appropriate for the real-world approach of this research (Cherryholmes, 1992; Creswell, 2013; Morgan, 2007). Mixed methods research utilises appropriate forms of data collection in order to answer problem-related research questions (Creswell & Clark, 2007), again using an erotetic approach to providing answers to research questions and aligning with the philosophical and pragmatic stance of mixed methods.

In summary, and in consideration of the objectives of this thesis, and how this supports a claim to knowledge, individuals who are former members of the Jehovah's Witness religion are an under-researched population whose experiences are not well-represented in the research literature. Due to the nuanced nature of individual experiences and methods/implications of exiting the religion, qualitative research methods are well-suited to gain an understanding of this less explored area (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This thesis utilises both quantitative and qualitative methods systematically, to examine identity transition out of the JW religion, guided by a social identity approach and sought to identify themes relating to the lived experiences (constructivist) of former JWs, as they navigated a new social reality. The pragmatic intent of the thesis is to inform mental health practitioners as to the nature and impacts of religious ostracism, allowing tailored interventions to be created. Specifically, this thesis elucidates what happens when individuals simultaneously lose their group, personal, and often their family identity resultant from religious ostracism. In addition, this thesis seeks to elucidate the impacts of exit method, and how this affects outcomes and wellbeing.

2.5 This section provides the methodology for studies two, three and four of this thesis.

2.5.1 Participants

26 former JWs were recruited using purposeful sampling by (i) contacting acquaintances of the interviewer ($n = 2$) and (ii) seeking participants via Facebook through posts on relevant forums ($n = 24$). Participants were pre-dominantly British (one participant was Austrian, and one from the United States) and aged between 20 and 76 years ($M = 44.10$, $SD = 12.6$). 21 had either been born-in to the JWs or had been socialised into the JWs from infancy, four converted to the JWs as young adults, and one as a 16-year-old adolescent (without her family). All participants were experiencing some form of religious shunning from family and/or friends at the time of the interviews. (See Table 2 for summary, using pseudonyms).

2.5.2 Materials

All participants were interviewed using the same in-depth semi-structured interview schedule. To facilitate a flexible inquiry, interviews started with open ended questions, with prompts/probes to elicit in-depth accounts. Questions such as "Can you tell me how you came to leave the Jehovah's Witness religion" were designed to explore the experience of leaving the JW faith. The interview schedule was designed to explore how identity, self-esteem, belonging, and wellbeing were impacted after leaving the JWs. Respondents were invited to elaborate on these issues through open-ended prompts such as "Can you tell me a little more about that", to obtain rich accounts. These accounts were then transcribed for analysis of detailed verbatim transcripts.

2.5.3 Demographics

Table 2

Demographic Details of Respondents

Participant Identifier	Gender	Age at Time of Interview	Age on Exit	Years since exit	Born-in or converted	Method of Exit	Religious Affiliation
Ezra	Male	24 (int. 1) 25 (int. 2)	21	4	Born-In	DF	Non-Religious
Diane	Female	48	40	8	Born-In	DF	Non-Religious
Mark	Male	34 (int. 1) 35 (int. 2)	31	4	Born-In	DA/DF	Atheist
John	Male	26 (Int. 1) 27 (Int. 2)	21	6	Born-In	Faded	Non-Religious
Laura	Female	20	14	6	Born-In	Faded	Non-Religious

Marie	Female	58	42	16	Born-In	Faded/DF	Born-again Christian
Lisa	Female	48 (int. 1) 49 (int. 2)	47	2	Fostered into JW family aged 6	Faded	Non-Religious
Janet	Female	43	37	6	Converted	Faded	Non-Religious
Katie	Female	39	37	2	Born-In	DA	Spiritual/Non-Religious
Beth	Female	40	27	13	Raised JW from age 6	DF (age 16) Faded (age27)	Non-Religious
Joel	Male	39	29	10	Born-In	Faded	Agnostic
Harry	Male	54	23	31	Born-In	Faded	Atheist
Nick	Male	45	40	5	Born-In	DA	Non-Religious
Marie	Female	46	26	20	Born-In	DF age 15 DF age 26	Non-Religious
Craig	Male	53	33	20	Born-In	Faded	Atheist
Rachel	Female	48	32	16	Born-In	DF	Spiritual/Non-Religious
Sarah	Female	43	39	4	Born-In	Faded then DF	Non-Religious
Marius	Male	42 (int. 1) 43 (int. 2)	41	2	Converted age 21	DA	Non-Religious
Sonia	Female	46	40	6	Converted age 20	DF age 22 DF age 38	Agnostic
Julie	Female	37 (int. 1) 38 (int 2)	35	3	Born-In	Faded	Non-Religious
Pat	Female	76	49	27	Converted age	Faded	Non-Religious
Beatrice	Female	53	21	32	Born-In	Faded	Atheist

George	Male	26	18	8	Born-In	Faded	Agnostic
Gail	Female	70	45	25		DF age 15 DF age 41 Faded age	Non-Religious
Janice	Female	50	37	13	Converted age 17	DF age 21 DA age 37	Non-Religious
Alice	Female	38	28	10	Born-In	DF	Non-Religious

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Note:

DF = Disfellowshipped (forced exit)

DA = Disassociated (formal voluntary exit)

Faded = (informal voluntary exit)

Int. = Interview Number (2 indicates a longitudinal interview)

2.5.4 Respondent Characteristics

Table 3

Respondent Characteristics and exit stories at the time of interviews

Respondent Characteristics	Reasons for leaving	Exit Process	Current ties with JW friends and family
Ezra, 25-year-old black male born into the JWs. DF 4 years prior to interview. Had limited social support post-exit from work mates and his disfellowshipped mother.	Ezra was DF from the JWs for sexual activity outside of marriage. Although initially intending to return, he decided to remain outside of the JWs, concluding that the religion was too restrictive	Ezra was DF at age 21 after his 'confession' to JW elders. This ended his relationship with his JW father and impacted his relationship with his JW sister. His Mother was also DF.	Ezra has not seen his JW father in the four years since his DF. His sister has since left the JWs and he has a good relationship her, his brother, and his mother who is also DF. He has limited relationships with his JW grandparents. He lost all his JW friends when he was DF

Diane 48-year-old black female, raised from infancy in the JWs. DF eight years ago. No support on exit	Diane was DF from the JWs after being 'reproved' twice for sexual activity outside of marriage. Although initially attending meetings and desirous of reinstatement, after some months she decided not to return to the religion.	Diane found the exit process traumatic because she still believed the doctrine when she was DF. Having no friends outside the organisation, it took some years to build new social networks.	Diane laments the lost relationship with her JW mother whom she has not had a relationship with since being DF eight years ago. Her children have since left the JWs, and she enjoys a good relationship with them all. Diane lost all friendships garnered over a 40-year JW membership
Mark. 35-year-old white male born into the JWs. Left the JWs with no support four years ago.	Mark decided he no longer believed aspects of JW doctrine and decided to resign from the religion.	Although Mark chose to leave the JWs through choice, he was tricked into attending a judicial committee. Here, he was interviewed by three elders who tore up his disassociation letter and DF him for apostasy.	From a large JW family, Mark lost all his relationships with siblings and parent. His Mother reports him as dead to non-JW family. Since exit, his brothers have stopped attending, however, his sisters remain JWs. He lost all his JW friends although some have since left the JWs, and he has re-established relationships with them
John. 27-year-old white male born into the JWs. Leaving through choice with limited social support, he has been an inactive JW for six years.	John left the JWs voluntarily due to the restrictions that he felt the religion placed over his life paths.	Exit meant that John ceased attending JW meetings six years ago.	John laments the lost relationship with his sister whom he has not seen for six years. He has a strictly limited relationship with his JW father and paternal Grandmother. His maternal Grandmother, whom he had not seen for four years died during the Covid pandemic. John lost all his JW friends upon exit.
Laura. 20-year-old female raised from infancy in the JWs. Stopped attending JW	Laura stopped attending the JW meetings because she no longer believed the doctrine. Having	Laura ceased attending JW meetings six years ago. Her mother left the JWs soon after	Laura's mother had converted to the JWs when Laura was an infant. Leaving the JWs in adolescence, she received a lot of support from her

meetings six years ago, aged 14. Had support on exit from her mother and her non JW family.	been subject to significant ostracism within the JWs, she found that the unfriendly nature of the congregants was affecting her mental health.		grandparents who were happy that she had left the JWs. Although losing all the JW friends, she has no family members in the JWs and therefore does not experience ostracism
Marie. 58-year-old white female. Left through choice 16 years ago but pursued by elders who DF her for celebrating Christmas. Receives support from her JW mother who refused to shun her and her two sons.	Marie was in a domestic abuse situation. She decided to leave the JWs and her marriage to escape the abuse. She no longer believed the doctrine.	Exiting through choice, Marie ceased attending JW meetings. Elders visited her home and caught her celebrating Christmas. She was then DF for apostasy	Marie lost no family relationships as her mother refused to shun her. Her adult son had already left the JWs, and her younger son was a child. Marie lost all her friendships garnered in the JWs which she found very distressing.
Lisa. 51-year-old white female who was fostered into a JW family in 1975, aged six, by Social Services. Left the JWs through choice two years ago to escape DV. CSA victim who recently won a court case against her local council for being placed in a foster home where she was sexually abused as a child for many years.	Lisa left the JWs through choice because she had suffered CSA in a JW family as a child, and DV in her marriage to a JW. Feels anger at being raised JW by foster parents who later adopted her. Her JW husband has been arrested three times, but she felt the elders ignored her pleas for help.	Lisa's exit involved fleeing her hometown two years ago with her 12-year-old daughter. This was the fourth time fleeing DV. Initially staying in a women's refuge, she was eventually housed by social services.	None of Lisa's 'natural' family are JWs and she enjoys a good relationship with her sister. Her adoptive mother remains a JW, and she is shunned by her ex-husband's family, and by her older daughter who chose to remain a JW

Janet, 43-year-old white female. Converted to the JWs when she was 24. Stopped attending JW meetings six years ago. Had support on exit	Janet left the JWs because she felt bullied by the elders due to her ill health. Felt 'picked on' as a single mum who had converted into the JWs. Did not believe all the doctrine	Janet stopped attending JW meetings six years ago and has not regretted her decision to leave the religion.	As a convert, Janet has no family in the JWs and does not get shunned. She does walk past JWs she knows every morning on her way to work and is shunned by them as she walks by.
Katie. 39-year-old white female born into the JWs. DA herself formerly from the JWs two years ago. Had formerly left the JWs at 17 after a suicide attempt.	Katie DA herself due to the CSA problems in the JWs after watching the Australian Royal Commission (2015). She felt the JW religion did not fit her core values and struggled to believe the doctrine.	After two years 'fading out' of the JWs, Katie officially DA.	Katie is shunned by her JW father and sister but does enjoy a relationship with her JW mother who she describes as a 'rebel'. She has lost all her friends in the JWs, who actively shun her in her hometown.
Beth, 40-year-old white female raised in the JWs from age 6. DF when she was 16, reinstated aged 24, and left again aged 27. Limited social support on exit.	Beth perceived the JW lifestyle as too restrictive and as a result took her first overdose at aged 14. After reinstatement (to get her family back) she left the JWs again because she could not accept the doctrine.	After she was DF aged 16, Beth spent three nights on a psych ward with. extreme anxiety. Since that time, she has been sectioned under the Mental Health Act three times and has overdosed three times.	Beth has no relationship with her JW parents or her JW sister. She lost all her JW friends.
Joel. 39-year-old white male born into the JWs. Stopped attending JW meetings at age 29. No support on exit	Joel said that he had never believed the JW doctrine. He viewed the organisation as hypocritical in that they said one thing but did another.	Joel ceased attending meetings	Despite not being DF Joel is shunned by his JW family, including his mother, and all the friends he had in the religion. His mother refuses to acknowledge Joel's youngest daughter. Joel is semi-shunned by his older three daughters.

Harry. 54-year-old white male born into the JWs. Left he JWs 31 years ago when he was 23. Had support on exit from his 'worldly' friends.	Harry said he had never believed the doctrine and once he had children, decided he didn't want to raise them according to the JW lifestyle.	Harry ceased attending JW meetings (as did his wife at the time).	Harry lost his JW friends, but his family did not shun him.
Nick, 45-year-old white male born into the JWs. He DA himself five years ago because he could not reconcile the CSA he had experienced from his JW stepfather, who was imprisoned after Nick left the JWs and reported the sexual abuse to the police.	Nick decided to report his CSA to the authorities, and this resulted in a court case and subsequent imprisonment of his stepfather. He DA from the JWs due to perceived injustice.	Nick resigned from being a JW elder and ceased attending JW meetings. Researching CSA within the JWs motivated him to disassociate himself from the religion two years later.	Once Nick DA himself and reported his CSA to the police, who took it to the CPS, he was shunned by his JW mother, brother and sister. His two daughters have now also left the JWs. Nick lost all of his JW friends when he left the religion and hasn't seen his JW family now for five years.
Dawn. 46-year-old white female born into the JWs. Tried to relocate and fade from the JWs 20 years ago. However, the JW elders found her, and she was DF. She was also DF aged 15, while still at school (although not baptised)	Marie still believed the JWs were the true religion and was desperate to return after both cases of DF. At age 40 she 'mentally' left the JWs by finally unpicking the doctrine.	Marie was DF at age 15 for what the elders perceived as fornication with a 36-year-old JW. The police however recognised it as child abuse, and he was arrested. Marie was also DF at 26 and stopped attending JW meetings.	Dawns parents have died but she experiences shunning from other family members. She has a brother who was never JW whom she remains close to. Although being initially shunned by her adult daughter, she has since left the JWs, and they are now working at re-building their relationship. She lost all her JW friends
Craig. 53-year-old white male born into the	Craig resigned from being an elder. Did not wish	Craig ceased attending meetings in part due to	Despite leaving the JWs and coming out as gay his parents did not shun him

JWs. Left 20 years ago aged 33 with limited support.	to disassociate so ceased attending meetings and faded from the JWs. Chris experienced child rape at ten years old by a member of his JW congregation	debilitating illness. However, he also knew he was gay and understood the incompatibility with the JW faith. He believed but 'rejected' the JW faith.	(because he wasn't DF). None of his (4) siblings remain JWs, so his family relationships are intact. He lost all of his JW friends.
Rachel. 48-year-old white female born into the JWs. DF 16 years ago aged 32. No support on exit and subsequently suffered a mental breakdown. She was sectioned under the mental Health Act.	Rachel was in an unhappy JW marriage and had been planning her exit for quite some years. She separated from her husband. Rachel disagreed with certain doctrines especially the attitude towards homosexuality.	Rachel was DF for adultery, and sporadically attended JW meetings. Soon after DF Rachel went into Psychosis and was sectioned for nine months. Her three children were taken from her.	Rachel is shunned by her three children who were subsequently raised as JWs by their father after she went into psychosis. An only child, she is also shunned by her JW parents. Rachel lost her entire network of friendships in the organisation.
Sarah. 43-year-old white female who left the JWs by choice when she was 39. She was DF two years later. Had no support on exit.	Sarah wanted to escape an unhappy marriage so faded from the JW religion. Two years later she was DF. She still believed the JWs were the only true religion	Sarah decided to stop attending religious meetings and fade out of the faith as she did not want to be ostracised. Despite doing this for two years she was still DF.	Sarah lost all of her family relationships in the religion, including her nephew who she was very close to. She lost all of her friends. Sarah had no children and was now living alone and felt very isolated.
Marius. 43-year-old white male who converted to the JWs aged 21 so that he could marry a JW he had fallen in love with. DA himself from the JWs two years ago.	Marius had known about the JWs through his JW grandparents and other family members but admitted that he never fully believed the doctrine. He joined the faith for love	Marius describes his exit as a slow liberation. He stopped attending religious meetings and activities associated with the religion.	Marius left the JWs alone, without the support of his wife and young children. He lost his friends in the congregation

Sonia. 46-year-old white female who had been raised in the Jewish faith. DF six years ago when she was 40. Still believed the religion was true when she was DF.	Sophie was DF for exposing DV in her home. She did not initially want to exit the JWs and tried for some years to be reinstated. Finally, she decided to research the religion and 'mentally exited' the faith	Sophie found ostracism resultant from the exit process very disturbing and experienced psychosis following her DF. She was hospitalised and is still under a mental health care team.	Sophie's two children were JWs when she was DF. They refused to shun their mother and instead, also decided to stop their membership of the JWs. Sophie's family are Jewish, so she experienced no family ostracism, but she did lose all of her JW friends.
Julie. 38-year-old white female born into the JWs. Did not want to be shunned so she faded from the JWs.	Julie's parents and grandparents died over a five-year period, so she seized this opportunity to leave the religion. She had been pioneering for ten years and was a highly regarded JW but was finding no satisfaction in the religion.	After leading a 'double life' for a few years, building relationships outside the religion, Julie quit pioneering and stopped attending JW meetings. She finally confessed wrongdoing to elders but was not DF. She started researching and found the ARC. At this point she decided the religion was not 'the truth'	Julie had no support on exit. Her parents had died, and a close family who had been like parents to her shunned her when she left the JWs. She lost all but one JW friend, who was also researching the JWs and had decided to leave. They supported each other.
Pat. 76-year-old white female who converted to the JWs. She faded from the JWs 27 years ago when she was 49.	Pat joined the JWs as a doorstep convert. Believing that the world was going to end in 1975 (according to JW eschatology) she was baptised to save herself and her children. She became disillusioned when Armageddon still had not transpired 26 years later.	Pat decided to stop attending JW meetings and to fade out of the religion. Exit was not challenging as she no longer believed the doctrine and had few friends in the organisation.	Pat is shunned by her JW son (an elder in the congregation) his wife, and their children. She has two daughters that she has a good relationship with.
Beatrice. 53-year-old white female born into	Beatrice had no strong motivations for leaving the	Although the exit process was straightforward	Beatrice moved away from her hometown and therefore experienced no ostracism.

the JWs. Left the JWs when she was 21.	JWs. She was 21 and wanted to leave home. She reasoned that God is going to kill people who don't deserve it, and she felt that was unjust.	Beatrice suffered with poor mental health, which she attests to her JW upbringing by her mentally unstable mother.	She retained one JW friend who refused to shun her and who has since left the JWs.
George. 26-year-old white male who left the JWs with his family eight years ago.	George left because his parents had separated and left the JWs. He found the religion very strict and had few friends, so it was quite easy to leave.	The exit process was straightforward as George left the JWs with his family	George did not find his congregation friendly, so had few friends in the JWs. His cousins remained JWs but did not shun him. Other JW family members however, kept their distance
Gail. 70-year-old female raised in the JWs from childhood. DF twice from the JWs. First time age 15. Second time aged 41. Reinstated twice but decided to fade a few years later. Had no support for either DF occasions.	The first time she was DF, she was rebelling against the strict nature of the JWs. The second time was to escape an unhappy and abusive marriage. After the second reinstatement she decided she no longer wanted to be a JW. Her DF son committed suicide, and this provided another motivation for Gail to exit.	Gail experienced significant trauma associated with the DF process, and still experiences significant anxiety and related effects from her JW membership. During her DF period she attended JW meetings, being shunned by all in attendance until her reinstatement. She finally decided to fade and stopped attending JW meetings.	Gail experienced significant shunning from the JW community and from her JW family which caused significant mental health effects and anxiety. She is still shunned by some of her children who remain in the JWs. She lost all of her JW friendships.
Janice. 50-year-old white female Converted to the JWs aged 16. DF aged 21. DA at 37. No support on exit	Janice DA from the JWs because she was in a violent (JW) marriage, including fractured bones, hospitalisation. Receiving no help from the elders,	Janice found the first exit process difficult as she was DF, pregnant, and had no friends outside the JWs. When she DA aged 37, she also had no friends outside the JWs and suffered significant isolation	Janice is semi-shunned by one of her children who has chosen to remain in the JWs. The other two left with her. She lost all of her JW friends but has re-established good relationships with her parents who were relieved that she had left the religion.

	she was told to 'pray more'.		
Alice. 38-year-old white female born in to the JWs. DF aged 28. Had non-JW friends who were supportive on exit	Alice still believed the religion was 'the truth', but no longer wished to be married. She invented a ruse in order to be DF and divorced. She intended to return to the JWs but sought help online and came to the decision that JWs are a cult.	Alice was DF and stopped attending JW meetings. She found the exit process relatively straightforward.	Alice is an only child and is not shunned by her parents. Her best friend left the JWs at the same time, so they supported each other. She lost all her JW friends but had friendships outside of the organisation

Note:

DF = Disfellowshipped (forced exit)

DA = Disassociated (formal voluntary exit)

Faded = (informal voluntary exit

Int. = Interview Number

ARC = Australian royal Commission (ARC link)

2.5.5 Procedure

The primary researcher was a former born-in JW who voluntarily left the organisation six years prior to this research. As an "insider researcher" (Merton, 1972), this furnished a cultural literacy that may not be shared by those unacquainted with the JW faith (Trowler, 2011), and facilitated the collection of naturalistic data.

Guided by the semi-structured interview schedule, interviews lasted between one and two hours and predominantly took place in participants' own homes to increase participant comfort. Participants who lived afar who could not be met in person (living in United States, Austria, Spain, and London) were interviewed using Skype. Ethical approval from Edge

Hill University's ethics panel was obtained prior to commencing this research. As discussions of shunning can evoke painful memories, care was taken with each participant to remind them that the interview could be halted at any time. Some participants exhibited emotional distress at times, particularly when retelling events associated with being disfellowshipped from the JWs. However, when reminded that the interview could be stopped immediately, this was declined on every occasion. Instead, respondents exhibited a determination to "tell their story", describing the experience as cathartic.

Longitudinal follow up interviews were carried out amongst a subsample of $n = 7$ former JWs who had left the faith in the past 5 years (see int. 2, table 2). These commenced between 12 and 18 months after the initial interviews, and due to Covid-19 restrictions, were carried out exclusively via Skype.

2.5.6 Analysis

The methodology chosen to analyse the transcripts was a synergistic blend of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), and narrative analysis (NA). IPA is an idiographic method that is well established in Psychology (Smith & Eatough, 2019) because it centres on how individuals make sense of, and give meaning to, major life events of personal significance (Smith, Larkin, & Flowers, 2008), taking accounts directly from participants' own perspectives (Patton, 2002; Smith et al., 2008). IPA was therefore deemed suitable for the present research as it aims to understand what a given experience of ostracism feels like (phenomenology), and how individuals make sense of it (interpretation). In addition, IPA seeks to understand *how* the world is experienced, and not just that people are "tellers of stories" (Willig & Stainton Rogers, 2007). With origins in hermeneutics (meaning making) and phenomenology (the study of phenomena or experience), IPA combines psychological, interpretive, and idiographic processes to gain insights into the experiences of each individual, in their given context, to

make sense of a given or shared phenomenon (Gill, 2014). This aligns with the aims of NA and how it operates in the construction of a person's reality (Bruner, 1991). IPA's hermeneutic position is one of inquiry and meaning making (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006), and so the researcher seeks to make sense of the participants' attempts to make sense of their experiences, creating a double hermeneutic.

Although IPA retains a non-prescriptive position, sample sizes typically range from one to thirty (Brocki & Wearden, 2006), which may include longitudinal interviewing techniques (Longitudinal Interpretive phenomenological analysis - LIPA – see Smith and Eatough, 2019), designed to maximise the strengths of IPA's ideographic stance, while simultaneously embedding themes that emerge during multiple interviews (Farr & Nizza, 2019; Smith & Eatough, 2019). LIPA is therefore well-positioned to explore the temporal experience of the life transitions of former JWs (McCoy, 2017) in this study. In sum, using eidetic reduction via multiple readings and note taking, essential components were identified through an in-depth analysis of each transcript. The analysis focused on how respondents perceived their own individual experiences, and, in this sense, the analysis was idiographic in nature, as opposed to attempting to conform narratives to a categorical system. Aided by discussions within the research team, notes were transformed into emergent themes, following which, relationships between narratives were established by searching for connections and clusters, so allowing the emergence of cluster themes to develop according to conceptual similarities.

Chapter 3: Study 1: Life After Social Death: Leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses: Identity Transition and Recovery – A quantitative Study

3.1 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.

3.2 Introduction

Religious affiliation can be associated with a range of psychological and social outcomes. Members of religious community's 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 Charles 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.

3.3 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.

3.4 Method

3.4.1 Design

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

3.4.2 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%).

3.4.3 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.

3.4.4 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.

3.5 Results

3.5.1 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 females.

Final variables were computed using SPSS and summary descriptive statistics are shown in table 4

Table 4. 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	

An initial correlation matrix between the variables was then carried out using SPSS, summary shown in Table 5.

[1] Split-half reliabilities

Table 5. Correlation matrix between variables for final model

	Ostracism	Exit n/c	Commitment	Membership CSE	Importance Identity CSE	Public CSE	Private CSE	Recovering Identity	Identity Transition	CESD	Self-esteem
Ostracism											
Exit no choice	-.34***										
Commitment	.13***	-.06									
Member CSE	-.04	-.02	.03								
Importance Identity CSE	-.03	-.04	.02	.22***							
Public CSE	.04	-.05	.05	.51***	.21***						
Private CSE	-.02	.02	.00	.05	.34***	.46***					
Recovering Identity	.05	.02	.05	-.02	.21***	-.03	-.05				
Identity Transition	-.06	-.08	.17***	.14***	.15***	.01	.04	.09			
CESD	.02	.01	-.04	-.43***	.13***	-.15***	-.17***	.17***	-.16***		
Self-esteem	.03	.01	-.09	-.52***	.20***	-.05	-.52***	.09	-.16***	.63***	

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

There was a significant and negative correlation between ostracism and exit no choice. From a theoretical perspective, it was hypothesised that mandated ostracism following (forced) disfellowship (as opposed to voluntary where JWs choose to leave) may disrupt an individual's sense of control, making this a more negative experience than for those who leave the JWs through choice and thus retain a sense of control (in accordance with Williams, 2009 needs threat model of ostracism). Contrary to hypothesis however, this prediction was not upheld. The finding that voluntary exit was associated with more perceived ostracism is noteworthy and may indicate that having had agency in leaving the religion does not mitigate how the disfellowship process is experienced. Rather, it may be speculated that ostracism following voluntary exit may be perceived as somewhat unjustified and is therefore experienced more keenly. This assertion is, nevertheless, speculative and warrants more

attention, perhaps utilising a qualitative methodology that could elucidate the nuanced effects of method of exit.

The positive association between ostracism and commitment was in line with the hypothesis that those who are more committed to the JWs during their membership would find the experience of leaving more challenging owing to the heightened perception of ostracism. It could further be speculated that committed individuals are more attuned to their social ostracism because their commitment to the JWs prior to exit may have led them to cultivate a social identity which is more entrenched with the religion, with social ties that are exclusively situated therein. In contrast, less committed former JWs may have formed relationships outside of the faith prior to exit, thus ameliorating the effects of ostracism upon departure.

Other correlations with the ostracism scale, specifically identity transition, self-esteem CESD and recovering identity were found to be weak and non-significant, suggesting that the experience of religious ostracism may not be directly associated with an individual's post-exit identity reformulation, nor negatively impact wellbeing. These findings may suggest that participants who had exited the religion some time ago have successfully transitioned their identity out of the JWs and recovered from any shorter-term impacts to mental health and wellbeing. Alternatively, it may be the case that the modified form of the 'workplace ostracism' scale that was utilised for this research may not be suited to capturing the nuanced experiences of *religious* ostracism and that future research may seek to develop a religious ostracism scale.

Contrary to expectation, a positive correlation was evident between commitment and identity transition, suggesting that those who were more committed to the JWs found the experience of transitioning identity more straightforward than those who were less committed. This favourable, yet unexpected finding may suggest that these individuals were more

(dispositional) committed more generally, providing the impetus to commit to the process of identity reformulation post-exit more earnestly. Alternatively, it could be postulated that committed individuals may be more prepared to seek out disconfirming information regarding their former faith, enabling identity transition to occur more readily. The observation that there was a non-significant positive correlation between ostracism and recovering identity was also unexpected and suggests that individuals are able to transition their identity out of the religion successfully despite loss of attachments (due to ostracism). On the other hand, negative correlations between commitment levels and self-esteem, disfellowship and wellbeing may indicate that higher commitment to the faith during membership may result in lower wellbeing post-exit. This may indicate that at an individuals' sense of self-esteem and wellbeing may have been obtained by participation in religious rituals, and that the cessation of these rituals may be associated with deficits to wellbeing.

The findings in relation to the final hypothesis that identification with other (supportive) groups post-exit would be associated with progress toward identity reformulation and benefit psychosocial outcomes was complex. First, a significant positive correlation was shown between membership CSE scores (the extent to which individuals value their contributions to the group) and identity transition, and a negative correlation was seen with self-esteem and CESD scores. Regarding the former, this could suggest that from the theoretical perspective of the social identity approach, the positive effect of forming new supportive social bonds in support of identity transition appears to benefit social identification. In contrast, the negative correlation between membership CSE and Private CSE (how good one's groups are) and aspects of wellbeing and self-esteem may indicate that belonging to 'ex-JW' groups may have negative implications (as memberships of such groups would have been considered 'forbidden' and 'apostate' as a JW). Public CSE (how one believes others evaluate one's social groups) was negatively associated with depression levels, and weakly correlated with

self-esteem, recovering identity, commitment, and identity transition, indicating tentative findings in favour of using the social identity approach to evaluate the benefits of supportive group membership away from the JWs. Finally, importance to identity CSE (how important one's group is to one's self concept) was significantly positively correlated to wellbeing, self-esteem, and identity transition, with weak correlations seen with forced exit and commitment, providing an initial indication that identity alignment with new supportive groups may help in the reformulation of identity that supports a post-exit lifestyle.

Although the mixed results yielded from this survey indicate that more research needs to take place, initial indications favour the social identity approach in the establishing of new group identities. Future work could seek to uncover the nuances of exit that may add to our understanding of the complex issues arising from religious exit from the JWs.

3.5.2 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 6 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

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

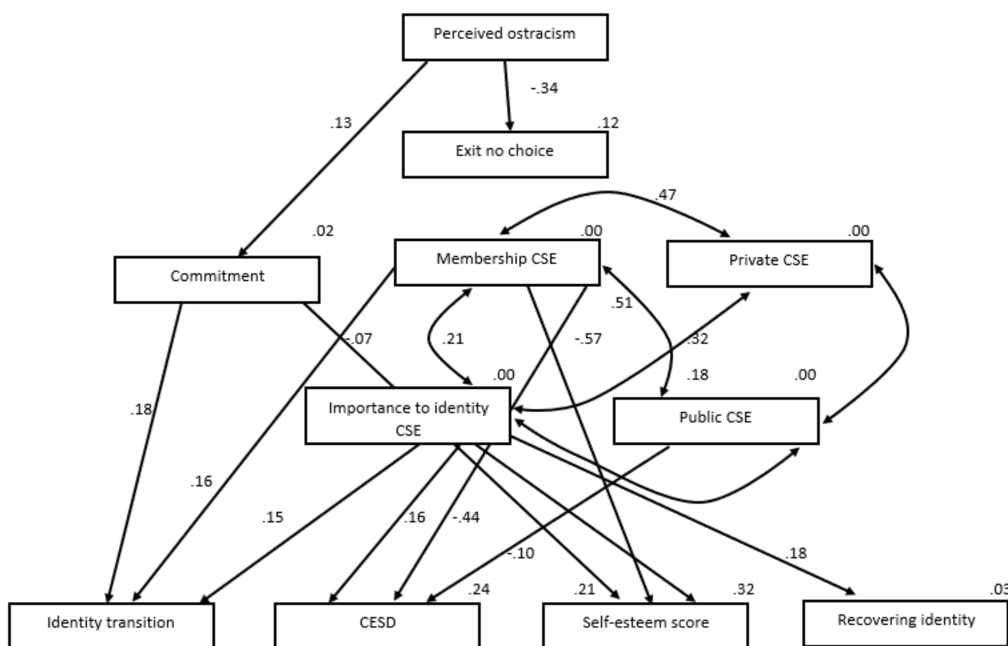
Table 7. Model fit parameters

	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

In seeking to better understand the relationships between variables, the final model indicated that exit method, commitment levels and collective self-esteem acted as mediators. Collective self-esteem also acted as a predictor for the outcome variables which were identity transition, recovering identity, self-esteem and CESD scores. Although this model is not substantially different to the picture of ostracism painted by the associations in table five, it provides further nuance to our understanding of the role of positive social groups in identity reformulation. Specifically, it suggests that importance to identity CSE mediates the relationship between commitment, and identity transition, CESD, self-esteem score and recovering identity. Commitment mediates the relationship between perceived ostracism and identity transition, and between perceived ostracism and importance to identity CSE. In terms of what this tells us above and beyond the correlation matrix in table 5 – it allows the

simultaneous evaluation of all parameters (rather than the specific/individual bivariate correlation of pairs of values in Table 5), meaning that mediation/indirect effects can be accounted for. It also allows for relationships between variables that are not directly accounted for by the model to be represented indirectly by covariances (e.g., between the individual CSE variables). 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 2 below:

Figure 2: Predictors and Moderators



3.6 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.

Chapter 4: Study 2 Leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses, Personal Identity Reformulation

4.1 Introduction

Despite research indicating that most people across the globe belong to a religion (Center, 2018), religious disaffiliates are a fast-growing group in Western society (Thiessen & Wilkins-Laflamme, 2017). The assertion that increased secularism has resulted in decreased religiosity due to values of individualism, rationalism, scientific and technological advances (Berger, 1967; Norris, & Inglehart, 2011) may be contrasted with other literature that indicates religion is still powerfully implicated in identity and belonging (Ysseldyk, McQuaid, McInnis, Anisman, & Matheson, 2018), providing social support and coping resources (Merino, 2014; Nooney & Woodrum, 2002). It is also suggested that the sense of community and solidarity provided by religious identity improves life outcomes and protects against existential dread (Aydin, Fischer, & Frey, 2010; Gebauer, Sedikides, & Neberich, 2012; Pargament, Koenig, & Perez, 2000). For example, participation in shared activities and rituals are posited to serve to fortify an individual's religious identity, while also strengthening a (religious) social identity (Pargament et al., 2000; Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2010; Ysseldyk, McQuaid, McInnis, Anisman, & Matheson, 2018b). In view of these findings, and research that indicates that many people are leaving religions (Thiessen & Wilkins-Laflamme, 2017), including those they were born into (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016), it is important to explore what effect disaffiliation from religion has on identity and wellbeing and the psychosocial effects of this transition. This chapter explores the experiences of former JWs transitioning their identity away from this insular tight-knit group. It will do this by contrasting the leaving stories of those socialised into the JWs from infancy with those who converted as adults. It will further examine possible

variation between respondents who were disfellowshipped from the JWs against their will, exploring if their experiences differ from those who left voluntarily. In doing so, this chapter will elucidate what factors may help or hinder identity transition out of high-control more fundamentalist style religious groups such as the JWs.

Identity can be conceptualised in different ways. Sometimes it is used to refer to the *cultural* identity of people (Calhoun, 1994), while other times it focuses on identification with social groups (SIT) (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel, 2010; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), or on personal identities that are partly derived from the roles people play (Stryker, 1968, Stryker & Burke, 2000). This chapter will focus on religious exit through the lens of identity theory which adopts the latter perspective and postulates that the self consists of a collection of identities that are managed and arranged via a hierarchy (Stryker, 1968; Stryker & Burke, 2000). Specifically, it is suggested that identities can essentially be conceptualised as responses to the question "who am I?" and are linked to the most salient role occupied (e.g., "I am a mother"). Building on the original symbolic interactionist conceptualisation by Mead, who essentially asserts that the self is socially constructed (Mead, 1934), identity is perceived as being composed of the meanings that people attach to the different roles they typically perform in society (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Mead's (1934) original theory posits that the self is built through dialectic relationships and illustrates an interplay between personal and social identities. This promotes an understanding of how society is maintained and established through interactions, because individuals act according to their understanding of their social context (Mead, 1934).

Since identity theory (Stryker, 1968) suggests that identity salience may vary widely between individuals, and consequently leads to differing opinions and outcomes, it may be possible to utilise this theoretical framework to explore diverse impacts of religious exit. Specifically, in the context of former JWs, it can be postulated that the salience of the JW identity during membership ("I am a JW") may dictate the extent to which this religious identity retains a sense

of importance post-exit ("Who am I?"). Consequently, it could be assumed that former JWs who's affiliation was intrinsic to their self-concept, evidenced by obedience and commitment, may find reformulating their identity away from the faith more challenging than those whose membership was more extrinsically motivated, for example, obedience motivated by a desire to avoid punishment rather than due to deeply held beliefs. Since identity theory focuses on the links between an individual's personal identity (e.g., parent, teacher) and their social groups (e.g., church), it may be reasonable to postulate that social losses resultant from ostracism may shape the identity of individuals in relation to their social identity. To clarify, since JWs tend to restrict social interactions to those within the faith, former members may experience withdrawn contact from friends, acquaintances, and family members. Thus, former JWs may undergo changes to their personal identity as a family member (e.g., a sibling) and as a member of the JW community generally (their social identity).

Previous research suggests that religious disaffiliates experience poorer health and lower wellbeing than those who are consistently affiliated or consistently unaffiliated (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016). Other explorations indicate that that the observed association between leaving high-control or high-cost religion and poor (mental) health (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010) may be, at least in part, due to the effects of the changes in social relationships which typically occurred during engagement with religious rituals (Uecker, Regnerus, & Vaaler, 2007). Transitioning out of the JWs may therefore be expected to impact personal identity via changes to one's social identity. Specifically, withdrawn or terminated membership may bring about ramifications to a person's social group due to the extrapolation that being a good person is dependent on being a good JW (living according to the requirements of JW behaviour, belief, and activities). This means that a person's status as a JW may inform a more personal family identity (e.g., mother), and may therefore threaten family relationships.

Indeed, threatened relationships are a commonly cited barrier to exiting the JWs (Testoni et al., 2019). Research among Mormons (LDS -The Church of Jesus Christ of latter day Saints) (Joseph, Joseph, & Cranney, 2017), Plymouth Brethren (Aebi-Mytton, ; Dyason & Doherty, 2015), Amish (Faulkner, 2017), Muslims (Khalil & Bilici, 2007), Evangelicals (Fazzino, 2014), Pentecostals (Jamieson, 2002), Catholic (Zamperini, Menegatto, Mostacchi, Barbagallo, & Testoni, 2020) and Ultra-Orthodox Jews (Davidman, 2014) have all identified difficulties in forging a new sense of self away from their previous religion. So too, research amongst Jehovah's Witnesses suggests challenges due to the psychosocial impacts of leaving the faith (Hookway & Habibis, 2015; Ransom et al., 2021; Testoni et al., 2019). In short, leaving high-cost religious groups results in the abandonment of lifestyle restrictions (e.g., abstaining from certain foods, clothing, entertainment), and religious practices (e.g., bible study, preaching, participation in religious rituals), alongside changes to (or the complete cessation of) social relationships. It can therefore be postulated that the combination of these circumstances may interact to shape how individuals reformulate their identity following religious exit. While there has been a paucity of research amongst those who choose to leave the JWs, research from other faiths may cast some light on these experiences

Indeed, emerging research indicates that leaving high-control religions such as the Jehovah's Witnesses may be fraught with uncertainty and associated with identity crisis (Hookway & Habibis, 2015; Lalich & McLaren, 2010; Ransom et al., 2021), poor health (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010), and ostracism (Lalich & McLaren, 2010; Ransom et al., 2020). For example, Hookway and Habibis (2015) describe exiting the JWs during adolescence as a struggle for self-identity and exploration (Hookway & Habibis, 2015), while more recent work by Testoni (2019) similarly describes efforts to preserve identity through a process of liberation (Testoni, et al., 2019). Other research details the identity struggles of gay and lesbian former members who face the difficulties of trying to merge incompatible identities; their homosexual

identity, and their identity as a JW, which condemns homosexual acts, thoughts, and feelings (Lalich & McLaren, 2010). These initial studies start to paint a picture of how identity may be implicated in the process of transitioning out of the JWs. Research exploring leaving the JWs has also begun to illuminate how identity may be implicated in the transitioning out process. For example, in Hookway and Habibis' (2015) exploration of the leaving stories of adolescent former JWs, it is evident that building a new identity away from their religion of birth was a difficult process for these young people, despite maintaining a sense of agency in their exit. Similarly, work by Testoni and colleagues (2019), which also explores the narratives of individuals who left the JWs voluntarily describes fears associated with social identity loss. Other research details the experience of being disfellowshipped (Lalich & McLaren, 2010), and, by analysing personal narratives of exit stories, the researchers reveal intense internal anguish at the expectations of their JW identity to reject their authentic internal *homosexual* identities completely (ibid). This work accompanies a growing body of literature addressing religion and homosexuality, and the turmoil people may experience in trying to reconcile 'forbidden' sexual identities with religious convictions (Henrickson, 2007; Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013; Rodriguez & Follins, 2012). Although these studies did not distinguish between the exit stories of those who were disfellowshipped and those who left voluntarily they suggest that both exit routes impact identity which may be an indication of a residual JW identity despite no longer maintaining membership.

The current research therefore aims to aid current understanding of the mechanism of religious exit from the JWs, and how this impacts an individuals' identity. By exploring both the leaving process and identity transition, it seeks to elucidate what factors impact this process. Specifically, this research will distinguish between the experiences of those who left the JWs through choice, and those who were disfellowshipped, to elucidate whether having agency in the exit process affects the ability and ease in which individuals reformulate their identity.

Further, the research will distinguish between the leaving stories of those who were raised in the JWs, and contrast these with those who were raised in more of a traditional style and who subsequently converted to the JWs as adults.

The chapter addresses the following two research questions: (i) how does method of exit impact the exit process when former JWs attempt to establish an identity outside of their former faith? (ii) does being born-into or socialised into the JWs from infancy impact an individual's ability to reformulate their identity? To elucidate changes over time, it will also incorporate longitudinal follow up interviews with a subsample of former JWs who had exited within the last five years prior to participating in the current research.

Methodology (see chapter 2)

4.2 Findings

The narratives of each respondent were coded thematically. This chapter reports on the themes of:

Theme 1. Identity – "my identity was cookie cut for me" - Self perceptions and exit methods.

Subtheme: "obeying the rules" - POMI stories (Physically out, mentally in).

Subtheme: "this double personality thing" - PIMO stories (Physically in, mentally out).

Theme 2: Identity Perceptions - "I didn't believe everything the Witnesses taught me" - Conversion stories.

Subtheme: "groomed and immersed" - Born-in stories.

Theme 3: Reconfiguring identity "Blaspheming Jehovah" - Purging the JW identity.

Subtheme: "Freeing the demon" – Accounts of young former JWs

Factors that influence identity transition were explored with attention to three potential influences (i) method of joining the JWs - born into the faith or conversion during adulthood (ii) method of exit - disfellowshipped / disassociated / faded, (iii) retention of JW beliefs post exit.

Theme 1 - Identity – "my identity was cookie cut for me" - Self perceptions and exit methods.

The extent to which respondents identified as JWs during their membership did not seem to take a linear path, but rather appeared to be determined on various issues that emerged as individuals told their stories of exit. For example, respondents who were disfellowshipped, generally maintained a strong psychological connection to the JWs after exit, which seemed to influence their identity significantly, and define to a certain extent their post-exit identity. This was characterized by expressions such as *"I was brought up as Diane the JW, it's like a title, and when you're disfellowshipped you're just Diane"* (Diane). Regarding the term 'JW' as a label, and being disfellowshipped as loss thereof, seems to reveal that JW membership may have powerful effects pertaining to self-perception, and that losing status as an exemplary JW may be associated with significant changes and challenges to self-concept through the disfellowship process. This sense of identity being impacted significantly by the disfellowshipping process was echoed by another respondent who commented, *"when you're disfellowshipped you lose your identity and all sense of who you are"* (Gail). Aligning with other respondents, this comment illustrates a general theme whereby former JWs described how loss of a religious identity impacts self-concept when members are forced out of the faith. Here, respondents talked about previous activities undertaken as part of the day-to-day rituals associated with religious membership was part of their sense of self. This was typified by comments from Sonia *"I was a student of Watchtower…I was a preacher; my identity was affected because all of a sudden I had to stop being this preacher"*. Indeed, this notion that an individuals' sense of identity had been constructed over time through participation in what

appeared to be various repetitive religious pursuits meant that the cessation of these shared activities had impacts to a personal and social identity, due to the shared nature of these activities.

Further insights into the importance of establishing an identity outside of the JWs is evident in the experiences described among former JWs once they left. Respondents reported that impacts to identity were associated with new and unfamiliar environments resultant from the insular nature of the JWs. This meant that individuals felt that they didn't know how to interact in society, as indicated by Gail who commented, *"it was strange at first because you don't know anybody or how to interact with people...you've been so supressed, you don't know what's normal or acceptable…and suddenly you're part of normal life, this has all been alien to you before…I think exJWs struggle with it for a long time"* (Gail). Here, in describing the difficulties of exiting a close knit, insular society and adjusting into what could be understood as 'mainstream society', it appears that former JWs may experience a disconnect with society generally, resultant from the propensity (of JWs) to form close relationships exclusively with other members. When no longer part of that community, respondents reported feeling isolated and somewhat naïve within wider society, lacking the social skills necessary to integrate and function in a culture that felt alien. Identity loss associated with isolation due to religious shunning seemed to emerge in the data generally and could be a further indication that identity threats to a personal identity as a result of a loss of social identity. this is illustrated by a respondent remarking that, *"I was gutted because I was still close friends with people in the JWs…my friend got disfellowshipped, all these people I'd been friends with were getting disfellowshipped so I wasn't allowed to speak to them, and then I found myself in the same boat, that people weren't allowed to speak to me, it was awful, I used to get upset and really cry"* (Beth). Indeed, this experience of losing one's personal identity, which, in turn, had ramifications for social identity was ubiquitous in the narrative, with many respondents

acknowledging not only that they were experiencing shunning but had also shunned other ex-JWs in the past as part of their JW membership. It appears that this enforced isolation in the form of withdrawn support from friends and family triggered feelings of abandonment in respondents, and that these were psychologically distressing.

Another respondent acknowledged that over time losing the JW label, and therefore to some extent the JW identity, was advantageous. However, initially, after first being disfellowshipped, feelings of identity threat were more prominent. This was characterised by expressions such as, *"today it is fantastic, I have no stamp on my forehead, but initially you're lost...it's like taking a fish out of water and throwing it on the sand and then saying - there's your new home, now you have to adapt"* (Diane). The analogy that a disfellowshipped status is conspicuous seems to imply that former members are aware of the negative connotations associated with being outcast from the JW community. Indeed, that this has a demoralising effect was indicated by the perception of ruthless treatment resultant in losses to a personal and social identity.

Contrasting the experiences of disfellowshipped individuals with those who chose to disaffiliate from the JWs, similarities in perception of identity loss emerged. Like those who had no choice in leaving, those who voluntarily exited tended to also describe significant challenges to identity reformulation. Specifically, the concept that identity is impacted notwithstanding the exit method, was illustrated with expressions such as *"I didn't know who I was when I left, I questioned everything about myself…I had to find the right religion…this is part of my identity crisis"* (Mark). In keeping with the narratives of those who had been disfellowshipped, Mark, for example, describes an experience of identity loss that caused him to question his entire self-concept. In describing the search for an alternative religion as part of his identity crisis, it could be suggested that former JWs may feel a need to maintain a religious

identity. In contrast, another respondent describes an instinctive and powerful attachment to the JWs, commenting, *"I'd never see a future where I'd not be a witness, I couldn't even imagine it, it didn't exist, it was unchangeable"* (Beatrice). This respondent seems to indicate that being a JW had been so intrinsic to her self-concept during her membership that she described it as 'unchangeable'. As such, these quotes provide an illustration of the extent to which the JW identity can be so firmly and powerfully embedded into an individual's psyche that envisaging the existence of an identity outside of this religious framework may seem impossible. Generally, comments by respondents who had left the JWs through choice, tended to indicate that identity crisis may nonetheless occur. Specifically, these statements indicate that retaining a sense of agency (rather than being disfellowshipped) may not necessarily alleviate challenges to reformulating identity away from the JWs.

Although the pursuit of an alternative religious identity was uncommon in the narratives, there was a notable exception. This respondent commented, *"I needed to find another group…I asked questions of Priests, I attended a synagogue for three months…I looked into Islam, saw an Iman…Hinduism, Buddhism even Satanism…I had to serve a God"* (Mark). The pursuit of feeling the need to belong to another religious group took this respondent on a divergent search away from Western Christian religions and more towards Eastern faiths, and even Satanic (LeVeyan) groups. In addition, the search for not only a religion, but also a deity, suggests that some former JWs may be prepared to engage in a significantly wider exploration of faiths and Gods than previously available, and is perhaps a further indication that some individuals may perceive a need to maintain a religious identity as part of their post-exit path.

Other respondents took different paths on their quest to pursue a more authentic identity. For example, one respondent attempted to trace his family roots, explaining *"I had to try figure out how I could have been duped for so many years…they get you to look at one thing while they*

do something else…it's your whole identity, you have to figure out who you are…I ended up doing a lot of research into my ancestry to try figure what DNA I've got, trying to work out what sort of person my authentic self is compared to my cult self" (Nick). The belief that this respondent felt tricked by his former faith indicates that perceptions of deception may exist post-exit in some former JWs, which may give rise to feelings of an identity lacking authenticity. Indeed, aligning with other respondents in referring to a cult self, it seemed that former JWs feel that their identity was formed according to their association with the faith rather than in a more authentic way. Without this association, there appears at times to be a necessity to embark on an alternative identity search. Another respondent similarly described his search for individuality in different ways, commenting, *"my personality was cookie cut for me…what do I think of gay marriage? What do I think of equality? my brain has to have an answer for each one…I describe it like people who go on a pilgrimage in Asia to find themselves…I pretty much did that"* (Mark). Aligning with other narratives, this respondent discussed the implications of an identity built around JW doctrine and indicates that former members may experience challenges in formulating opinions regarding various debates within society generally. Indeed, without the JW lens, it appeared that former members may struggle to evaluate societal issues and must therefore embark on the process of the construction of an individual moral compass as part of their identity transition out of the JW religion.

Although respondents generally described reformulating their identity out of the JWs as a challenging experience, notwithstanding the exit method, there were individuals who appeared to find the adjustment relatively straightforward. This may suggest that leaving the JWs, and reformulating a new identity is not a linear process, and that divergences occur. For example one participant who left the JWs voluntarily, confessed that she felt guilty to some extent, at the ease in which she transitioned out of the JWs, acknowledging that the majority of individuals faced struggles post-exit, explaining *"I tried really hard to work through it…and I*

actually feel free and empowered, but I am aware others don't have that experience…I tapped into the strengths of 'I'm going to be fine'…I felt guilt at being OK with leaving" (Julie). Although this respondent described the experience of leaving the JWs (through choice) as empowering and liberating, it was also apparent that the process of leaving nevertheless took considerable effort. Aided by favourable family circumstances she remarked that, *"I think it's to do with continued exposure in the sense that if you've got family in it…I was able to completely cut off, I have no family in, no-one literally"* (Julie). This suggests that for respondents who describe the experience of religious exit as less distressing, other considerations may come into play which may be dependent on additional circumstances (such as availability of support, occurrence of ostracism, and effects to family bonds). Unlike those who found losing their religious community distressing, another respondent acknowledged that she had never experienced the sense of belonging expressed by other former members, explaining, *"I never felt like I did belong, I think a lot of witnesses love that community, but I never liked it"* (Katie). This may be an indication that, even amongst those born into the religion, it is possible to identify differences with regards to how strongly individuals identify with the doctrine.

Longitudinal reflections seem to indicate that over time, disfellowshipped JWs are in the process of building a more authentic identity, and that initial feelings of crisis are developing into stable self-perceptions. This is indicated by a respondent remarking that it had taken four years to reach a more relaxed stage. *"I do feel different…lockdown has forced me to acknowledge some of the baggage that I have…in the past, if someone thought ill of me, I couldn't stand it, I had to justify myself…I had to stop defining myself by what other people say"* (Mark). In keeping with the narrative of other disfellowshipped respondents, Mark describes improvements to his sense of self and indicates that he is no longer feels the need to defend himself against criticism. This may suggest that the negative attributions and self-

perceptions associated with disfellowship dissipate over time. Respondents who had left the JWs voluntarily also described improvements to their identity. This was characterised by expressions such as *"I'm still working on my self-identity if I'm honest…I think it comes in waves for me, I can have a really good wave where I feel like I have found my place in the world, but then I can have waves where I feel I'm not making any progress"* (Katie). Here, the ongoing nature of identity formation is clearly seen as tentative steps forwards and backwards towards an authentic self-concept. Overall, the narrative of longitudinal respondents suggests that progress has been made by respondents notwithstanding the exit path, and as such, demonstrates that over time identity reformulation may be successful.

Sub-theme - Physically out, mentally in (POMI) Retaining a JW identity post-exit

This sub-theme introduces the notion of maintaining adherence to JW doctrine and behavioural restrictions despite terminated membership which was a theme that was evident in the narratives of disfellowshipped individuals. Recognised within the exJW community as 'POMI' (Physically Out, Mentally In), this acronym identifies individuals who are no longer JWs, but who still believe that the JW faith is what respondents referred to as 'the truth' (the only true religion), and therefore maintain obedience to behavioural standards to some extent. Narratives tend to indicate that some respondents exhibited an instinctive obedience to the doctrines of the faith that continued for some time post-exit. Typified by expressions such as *"I needed an operation and I didn't want a blood transfusion…I told them I was a JW and made my husband swear not to let them give me blood…I still believed in Jehovah and did for many, many years"* (Marie). This experience suggests that for some former JWs, the identity associated with their membership persists, and may continue to shape important decisions. Additionally, it may be an indication that childhood indoctrination can have far reaching effects that persist even after membership is terminated. This was echoed by another respondent who commented *"you're supposed to be obeying the rules* (even when disfellowshipped)*, which is not to speak with*

disfellowshipped people…it was always difficult because my mother was always loving…but it still felt wrong, it's the hold they have on you…it's engrained" (Ezra). This respondent struggled to maintain a relationship with his disfellowshipped mother (despite himself also being disfellowshipped) and indicates the extent to which a JW identity can suppress an identity as a family member. The notion of a disfellowshipped individual shunning another disfellowshipped individual seemed to demonstrate a distorted sense of obedience despite a terminated membership. A reluctance to align with societal norms due to maintained adherence to JW doctrine was indicated by Marie who commented, *"we didn't celebrate Christmas for years after we were disfellowshipped…I still acted like a witness even though I had been kicked out"* (Marie), and another commenting that *"when you haven't celebrated them, you're not very quick to adopt them…people around you get excited for birthdays…I remember it was my 21st and people at work wanted to do something for me…and I wouldn't tell them when it was"* (Ezra). Despite being severed from the JW community, these respondents maintained an attachment to the JW religion which, according to them, appeared to hinder their post-exit identity transition for some time. The quandary of rejecting a return to the JWs, yet at the same time being reluctant to accept more mainstream societal norms seems to imply that adherence to doctrine is difficult to overcome and may impact the ability to integrate into more mainstream society.

The tendency to maintain loyalty to the tenets of the JWs was not restricted to those who were disfellowshipped, however. Some respondents, who had left the JWs through choice similarly appeared to demonstrate a reluctance to celebrate customs that had been prohibited during their affiliation with the JWs. For example, one respondent commented *"I wouldn't buy* (Christmas and birthday) *cards and stuff…it took about 15 years"* (Beatrice) and *"no…no I can't do birthdays…not yet, no…and Christmas just feels scary"* (Julie). Although respondents generally over time acquiesced to celebrating customs such as Christmas and birthdays, it was

a typical finding that this took some years to develop. Indeed, despite these participants describing themselves as no longer believing in the JW doctrine, their propensity to view societal celebrations in a negative light appeared to indicate that beliefs acquired throughout childhood instruction may, in some individuals inhibit identity reformulation to some extent.

The effects of day to day living outside of the JWs while retaining a residual JW identity appeared to be associated with a significant sense of foreboding. Respondents generally spoke about the association between leaving the JWs and their perceived death at Armageddon as a constant source of anxiety, which seemed to indicate a strong residual JW identity. One participant noted *"I still mentally believed it for a long time after I left…two years I would say…I was checking the news a lot, for signs* (of Armageddon)*…it was always drummed into you as a JW to check for signs…I was going to die at Armageddon, and if I died, or if something happened to me, I wouldn't get a resurrection"* (Sarah). Here, the residual JW identity of this respondent appeared to exert a powerful influence over her ability to break free of her previous belief system and generated an apocalyptic fear associated with negative self-perceptions. This suggests that former JWs may struggle psychologically in terms of post-exit paths because of a maintained belief in the doomsday nature of JW eschatology. This effect was so strong in some respondents that they talked about being disfellowshipped as a freedom as worth dying for. One respondent explained *"if Armageddon were to come, I'd expect balls of fire to come falling from the sky...and if it came, and I was destroyed…I'd rather die happy than live miserably"* (John). Here, the respondent talked about believing the doctrine of Armageddon to such an extent that he views dying happy as more appealing than living miserably (as a JW). This seems to indicate that some former JWs may choose a life outside the religion despite a continued perceived threat for failing to live in accordance with mandated standards. The description of fire was used by another respondent who exhibited a particularly strong fear of Armageddon. She related, *"I felt that I didn't have the protection of God anymore after I left…*

and I started to have nightmares about it, about being burned…and Armageddon…pretty bad violent dreams" (Laura). The experiences from respondents generally about being '*burned*' by God at Armageddon raises concerns about the psychological consequences of a maintained POMI identity. Because these experiences seemed to be restricted to those who were raised as JWs from infancy, it may be suggested that religious childhood instruction associated with apocalyptic fear may have far reaching and disturbing psychological effects.

Longer-term identity transition observed via longitudinal interviews yielded evidence of progressive and positive changes over the past year, and the ability to discard previously maintained adherence to doctrine. Acknowledging that identity formation can be impacted by negative attributions residual from a JW identity one respondent remarked *"I think if you've still got your cult identity, you're still very much a JW… I have lost that shame of what people think of me…I'm able to be my authentic self…I no longer worry what the witnesses think of me…I was 40 recently…I told them it was my first birthday that I had ever celebrated…I'm looking forward to putting up a tree up this year, I actually bought some baubles"* (Julie). Here, this respondent captured the essence of a POMI identity, such that an individual may exit, but remain mentally aligned to the JW religion. Over time the acceptance of societal norms may indicate progress in establishing a more authentic identity.

Overall, the experience of remaining POMI, 'mentally in' to the JW religion despite being 'physically out' is indicated to stunt respondents' ability to create a more authentic identity outside of the religion. Whether being disfellowshipped or leaving voluntarily, respondents' narrative accounts indicated a delay integrating into society due to adherence to doctrinal tenets of the faith. This appeared to be the case despite respondents declaring that they no longer believed the doctrine and appeared to be an indication of the extent that a JW identity can remain salient, albeit subconsciously, influencing decision making.

Sub-theme – "this double personality thing" - Physically in, mentally out (PIMO)

This sub-theme introduces the notion of being an active, but unbelieving JW. PIMO (Physically In, Mentally Out) is a well-known acronym used in the exJW community used to describe the façade of a visible outward identity as a JW while privately rejecting the doctrine. Respondents in this study described the extent to which they were PIMO during their membership of the JW religion which was typically utilised as a means of avoiding religious shunning. Indeed, the experience of being a PIMO JW emerged as a notable theme within the narratives, generally as a result of non-agreement with certain aspects of doctrine or behavioural restrictions. Respondents tended to describe themselves as PIMO for a period of years before eventual exit as an alternative to transitioning their identity out of the faith. This was typified by comments from Marius who commented *"I was PIMO very often actually, I would find myself in this double personality thing…playing roles… but you know what kind of impact it will have when it comes to shunning…this was always something that held me back and made me realise I can't risk losing my family…the sacrifice is so huge, a large number of JWs that just can't get out"* (Marius). The concept of a dual identity or a 'double life' suggests that respondents were prepared to fake allegiance to the JWs for quite some years prior to eventual exit, so as not to risk significant family relationships. This indicates that some felt that the sacrifice associated with religious exit was too great, preferring instead to remain ostensibly a JW, despite inwardly no longer believing the religious tenets. Indeed, the notion of maintaining an outward JW identity to avoid religious shunning was a general theme among respondents and is perhaps an indication that ostracism is an effective means to keep members somewhat 'trapped' in an organisation which no longer aligns with their values.

The experience of being PIMO did not appear to be restricted to individuals born into the religion. Individuals who had converted as adults also delayed their withdrawal from the JWs. For example, a love of community was cited as a barrier to exit, with one respondent

commenting, *"it was the sense of community…there was some lovely people there and a lovely little community…a few times I stopped going… I even celebrated Christmas one time and had a judicial over that* (a JW disciplinary hearing)*, it's too strict, too controlling…if it wasn't so controlling then yeah, that is a nice thing about the religion"* (Janet). Here, it is possible to see how a personal identity may impact a social identity. This respondent talked about wanting the personal freedom to celebrate (prohibited) traditions such as Christmas, while simultaneously desirous of preserving the benefits of the JW community. This is an indication that converts may face a dilemma of incompatible personal and social identities - on the one hand they can choose to remain a JW and forgo prohibited desired celebrations, or, on the other hand can choose to leave the JWs to pursue choices more aligned to a personal identity but sacrifice the social identity associated with membership. The finding that personal and social identities may be incompatible seemed to be an indication of the extent to which the reasons and motivations for membership may vary greatly between those born into the JWs and those who convert. Converts appeared to have the ability to reminisce about their identity prior to their conversion and rationalise whether the restrictions of the faith are worth the cost to a personal identity whereas those born-in did not.

Although all converts in this study joined the JWs through choice, they spoke about the irony of having life choices removed as a consequence thereof. This was indicated by Janet who commented about what she perceived as the controlling nature of the faith this way, *"it's not your choice to stop celebrating Christmas or birthdays or stop smoking or have a boyfriend who is in the world* (a non-JW)*, it's their choice not yours and you go along with it because if you don't you have to leave, so it's not a choice really"* (Janet). Here, the association between a JW identity and a loss of control over life choices is an indication of the extent to which membership shapes a personal identity. This finding implies that the benefits of a social identity may not compensate for the losses to a personal identity

Respondents' expressions about whether they considered themselves PIMO during their membership of the JWs were not always straightforward. Indeed, individuals indicated that although they considered themselves as PIMO, at the same time they appeared to be still attached to the organisation. This was apparent by a respondent remarking that *"it was more complicated than that…so…I was physically in, and there were strong signs that I was detaching myself from it…but I couldn't admit it to myself, so I was mentally in and out as well…a complete mental block and I didn't know until I was going to leave"* (Beatrice). The experience of this respondent along with others who had been raised JWs indicated that it is possible to be PIMO and yet still maintain a visceral attachment to the JWs, nonetheless. Specifically, on the one hand respondents talked about internal conflicts they were experiencing concerning their faith, but on the other hand, found it imperceivable to consider leaving. This was characterised by expressions such as *"I can say that there were times when I'd see something dodgy happen and I didn't like the answers I was given…but you can't say, you can never say…because then you'd be an apostate…so I had to keep it to myself… I was so indoctrinated and so groomed as a child that I couldn't leave it, I always thought I was in the wrong"* (Diane). The experience of this born-in JW indicates that former members may struggle to reconcile internal conflicts with their faith due to their perception of being trained into believing that the JWs is the only true religion. Respondents indicated that over time they were no longer able to ignore inner conflicts, resulting in either leaving the faith, or being disfellowshipped.

In consideration of the longitudinal aspect of this study, respondent's transcripts revealed that being raised according to a JW lifestyle elicited specific identity challenges post-exit. For example, one respondent commented, *"if you're an adult and you converted, you already had an established identity, but if you've been raised with a JW identity, it's very difficult to find out who you are"* (Julie). Here, childhood JW training is described as identity defining and

causing challenges to reformulation post-exit. That this causes difficulties in establishing a more authentic identity was echoed by another respondent who despite insisting that she no longer believed JW doctrine acknowledged *"if I'm really honest, I have to admit to myself, oh God, what if this is the great tribulation* (Covid-19 pandemic)*, and I hate that I still have that in me, but it's so deeply embedded you know…it's deep down there still…it's fear based and an integral part of your personality…fear…fear…fear...there is damage if you're brought up in it"* (Katie). The narrative indicates how a JW identity may influence a personal identity. The notion of being fearful of Armageddon suggests that respondents were somewhat aligned psychologically to their previous belief system and remained defined by it to some extent. This is an indication that residual childhood fear associated with JW eschatology may affect individuals transitioning their identity out of the JWs for quite some time.

Theme 2 Identity perceptions – "I didn't believe everything the Witnesses taught me" - Conversion stories

This subtheme introduces the concept that not all converts fully embrace the JW identity and that this makes transition out of the JWs more straightforward. In comparing the exit stories of those who were raised JWs with those who chose to convert, an interesting dichotomy was apparent. Since 'converted' individuals appeared to have already formed their personal identities prior to conversion, their thinking processes did not always align with those who were raised as JWs. This was indicated by expressions such as *"my authentic identity would come back quicker but…when you are a JW your life is managed by JWs…what do I wish for myself? To be me!"* (Marius). Aligning with other converts, this experience illustrates a general theme whereby individuals recognise that their original identity has been overpowered by their identity as a JW, which tended to govern decisions and choices. This led to a desire to reclaim what was lost through conversion, namely an authentic sense of self. Respondents talked about their desire to maintain their identity during membership of the JW religion. This was echoed

by Janet who commented *"I always kept true to myself anyway, and didn't believe everything the witnesses taught me, I'd still have my own thoughts and feelings about stuff."* This highlights how converts retained a sense of self during their membership by rejecting doctrine that did not align with their self-concept and is an indication of the extent to which an authentic identity may remain salient.

The struggle to align an established identity with a JW identity upon conversion was typified by a respondent commenting that *"no, I felt I never belonged there…I was divorced, shop soiled…a sinner"* (Pat). Here the notion of an 'imperfect' identity that did not fit with what is perceived as the ideals of the religion was an indication of the struggle respondents faced in identifying with the JWs. On the contrary, identifying more *"with my work mates"* (Pat) characterised converts ability to identify more with those outside of the organisation than those inside. Narratives in this way appeared to indicate that converted respondents felt inoculated with regards to reformulating their identity. The extent to which a personal identity remained unchallenged post-exit was noted by responses to questions about reformulation of self-concept post-exit. Converts tended to describe these identity changes more in extrinsic rather than intrinsic terms. This was characterised by expressions such as *"I can wear shorter dresses now and go on dates"* (Janet) and seems to indicate that converts define their post-exit identity by what they are now able to do, rather than who they now are. This is an indication of the extent that an identity established before conversion remains salient to a greater extent and that lifting behavioural restrictions reaffirms an authentic identity.

Although converts generally demonstrated a retained authentic identity, there was a divergent case. This respondent converted as a 16-year-old commenting *"I was at a really vulnerable place in my life, missing a mum and dad figure, 16, and living in a dingy bedsit and whoomph I get this lovely family…I was made to feel secure instantly"* (Janice). Unlike other converts,

Janice did not appear to have a dominant identity in place prior to her conversion. Indeed, this respondent indicated that the void in her life in terms of a lack of parental figures and family bonds (her brother had committed suicide some years before), had been filled by her conversion to the JWs, which may be an indication of one of the ways the religion attracts new converts. Specifically, a dichotomy was made between feeling alone and vulnerable, and feeling secure, loved and part of a loving family. In common with the narrative of other converts however, this respondent discovered inner conflicts regarding behavioural restrictions. This was typified by, *"you're not allowed your own identity, they have to mould you into what they can keep an eye on and as soon as you hint that you might be creating your own opinion they nip it in the bud, you'd be marked* (a JW disciplinary)*, or there'd be a talk on it* (a specific congregational discourse) *...I don't believe that you're allowed your own views on things"* (Janice). In common with the narrative of other converts this reflection indicates that over time identity conflicts arose, leading to an eventual exit from the religion. Post-exit, this divergent case manifested more deleterious effects than converts generally. This was indicated by comments including *"at first* (after disassociating) *I didn't know who I was or what I was doing…I just knew I had to leave. I feel sad for the person I was…so weak and vulnerable"* (Janice). The notion of 'not knowing who she was' seems to align more with the experiences of those who were born or socialised into the JWs from a young age and may be an indication that joining the JWs in adolescence may be more challenging on exit than conversion in adulthood, and more akin to being raised a JW from a younger age.

In sum, there appeared to be a dichotomy between respondents who had converted to the JWs as adults, and those who had been born-into the JWs and/or socialised into the religion from infancy. The latter, for the most part tended to struggle with expressing viewpoints outside of the JW lens, whereas the former appeared to have little difficulty asserting opinions post exit and appeared to have a well-formed identity. This may suggest that early childhood

socialisation into the JWs may impact post-exit identity significantly more adversely than those raised in a more conventional style, and that identity transition, or deconversion, may be more straightforward in those who convert as adults.

Sub-theme - Identity perceptions - "groomed and immersed" - Born in Stories.

This subtheme introduces the exit stories of respondents who were born into the JWs or socialised from infancy. By contrasting the experiences of converts with those who were raised from childhood according to the JW lifestyle and training it is possible to explore the effect of childhood inculcation. In comparing these experiences, it was apparent that leaving the religion was not experienced the same way. Indeed, it appears that whether respondents had chosen to leave their religion of birth, or had been cast out through the disfellowship process, identity reformulation appeared to be a difficult process, nonetheless. Respondents raised in the JWs tend to describe the experience of having an in-authentic identity, and that this negatively impacts post-exit paths. To illustrate, one respondent commented, *"I didn't know where I fit in or where I belonged…I didn't know what my path was in life because I had a path mapped out for me…I don't think my identity is true to what I would want…I feel like my life has been robbed"* (Sarah). The concept of a pre-determined life, which this respondent felt as theft, suggests that some individuals born into the JWs may feel that they had little control of their life paths during childhood and adolescence. Indeed, the notion that identity can be moulded according to JW belief and behavioural restrictions, rather than a more natural path was a general finding in those raised according to a JW lifestyle, with comments generally suggesting that the JW identity becomes more salient during childhood than any emerging authentic identity. This suggests that after exit, those raised JWs may experience feelings of alienation in society generally, and perceptions of an inauthentic identity.

Along with feelings of alienation, respondents described the effects of childhood socialisation as a grooming process that was influential over their identity over time. This was characterised by expressions such as *"I was very much denied a normal life…you are conditioned…it's like grooming when you think about it really because you have it in the Watchtower and every meeting you go to"* (Gail). Aligning with earlier comments, the notion of conditioning and grooming suggests that religious instruction and training is a significant aspect of life within the JW organisation, and that repetition and inculcation of doctrine is key to the organisations methods of instilling a JW identity into the minds of its young members. This was echoed by another respondent who commented, *"that's how you're brought up from a young age, you are immersed, groomed if you like…I did not choose to be a JW, I was brought up to be a JW"* (Diane). That respondents likened their upbringing to a grooming process was noteworthy and suggests that childhood training within the JW religion may be perceived by former members as including elements of manipulation. Indeed, comments made by respondents generally, suggest that a deep level of childhood conditioning, designed to ensure conformity to the JW lifestyle. That this form of instruction may include elements of fear was introduced by a respondent who commented, *"I was told I better hurry up and get baptised, because if Armageddon comes, it's curtains for you…I was 16 getting dunked…I didn't want to get baptised, but you do it because you're groomed into that mentality of 'oh God I'll die if I don't'…it defined who I was"* (Diane). A further use of the word groomed suggested that this respondent felt manipulated into undergoing baptism into the JWs to avoid perceived death at Armageddon. The presence of an apocalyptic fear raises interesting questions into the motivations behind baptism generally and suggests that fear, rather than faith, may motivate compliance with the act of baptism as a survival tactic for some individuals, rather than a consequence of belief and a natural progression of spirituality.

In order to further explore the effect of childhood inculcation and to correctly represent respondents' use of the word 'groomed,' member checking was utilised as a tool to enhance trustworthiness. This further inquiry resulted in the notion that *"grooming"* is perceived as the systematic training of children and comprised of two juxtaposing positions. First, that promises of paradise are offered, and graphically portrayed in JW literature as a reward for compliance, (akin to offering a child sweets) while conversely, threats of destruction are also graphically portrayed in frightening imagery as a result of noncompliance. A respondent explained the idea in this way: *"as a young JW child you're taught about Armageddon, and you're shown pictures of paradise…and you're told what you have to do to get that…conversely you are also shown pictures of Armageddon with people dying and screaming...it's scary stuff and frightens you into doing what they want you to do…so in that sense you are groomed as a child…you grow up in fear"* (Diane). The experience of respondents indicates that being raised according to 'doomsday' beliefs may over time, systematically become 'hard wired' into the minds of young JWs and may indicate why born-in respondents tend to describe being raised in the JWs as identity defining.

In consideration to how this level of childhood training impacted life paths after exit from the JW religion, respondents talked about guilt associated with being disfellowshipped, and how this impacted identity as a family member. This was typified by comments from Sarah *"all the time you've got guilt... I had my Mum telling me I'd never be able to see my nephew again, all my friends won't be able to see me…I was lonely, I would cry every Sunday…so I didn't know where I fit in society, I felt very much like an outsider in a lot of social situations"* (Sarah). In line with other narrative accounts, this experience highlights the extent to which disfellowshipping may have powerful impacts regarding losses to a personal identity (loss of status as a JW), a family identity, and a social identity (loss of relationships within the JW community generally). Exacerbated by the fact that relationships formed outside of the

organisation are not encouraged within the JWs and therefore generally avoided, the indication is that losses to family and social identities expose respondents to perceptions of loneliness

Overall, analysis of narratives indicates that building a new identity outside of the JWs after being disfellowshipped is a challenging, distressing, and isolating experience due to the effects of childhood inculcation. However, one notable divergent case emerged. This respondent retained control over her exit from the JWs by manipulating the disfellowshipping process to her advantage, commenting, *"I wanted out of my marriage…I was married to an elder…I was a regular pioneer…so I made a false statement, I lied in my judicial committee…I told them I cheated on my husband when I didn't…I wanted to be sure to get disfellowshipped…and that's what happened, I got disfellowshipped in 2010…all I wanted was to 'reset and start over' and go back to being a witness* (JW)*"* (Alice). The concept of intentional disfellowship was unique in the narratives and indicates that being born into the JWs and subsequently disfellowshipped is perhaps not necessarily always a precursor to identity challenges in all individuals. However, that certain elements may appear to relieve distress associated with disfellowship were noted by this respondent who commented, *"my parents are very welcoming and say I can come over anytime, and my best friend got disfellowshipped the week before me"*. Maintaining important family and friendship ties, and consequently retaining a (family) identity as a daughter and a social identity as a friend after being disfellowshipped was novel in the narratives and may be an indication that preserved ties, for some, may act as a buffer from the negative effects to losing a personal and social identity generally, and that identity transition may be aided by social and familial support networks remaining intact to some extent.

In sum, and in consideration of this theme that explores respondents' perceptions of being 'groomed' into the JWs from birth, longitudinal interviews indicated that over the past year identity reformulation was an ongoing, yet successful journey. That a residual JW identity may

take quite some time to dissipate however, was indicated by comments from Katie, *"you walk away from the religion with your feet, and then you have to fight for your mind…that's the hardest process…it's a massive challenge"* (Katie). Remarks here indicate that leaving the JWs involves concerted effort to mentally break free from the belief system, and that efforts to do so may indicate the extent to which respondents successfully build a new identity. That fear of apostasy was a barrier to breaking free was typified by comments such as *"yeah, yeah it's like forbidden territory…once you go there…then goodness knows what might happen…like when I set the online group up, I was like 'there's no going back from this…I'm gonna get killed at Armageddon'"* (Katie). Although over time, respondents expressed that they were mentally free from JW eschatology, it also appeared that intrinsic fears of Armageddon nevertheless remained as a residual JW identity and is a further indication of the power of childhood inculcation into religions that may be perceived as more of a 'doomsday' nature.

Overall, this theme reveals how respondents born and raised according to JW eschatology faced significant challenges in reformulating an identity outside of the religion. This is an indication of the extent to which deeply held beliefs learnt from childhood make breaking free of the JW belief system particularly difficult and is a further indication of the power of childhood inculcation.

Theme 3: Reconfiguring identity– "Blaspheming Jehovah" – Purging the JW identity.

This theme provides accounts of how former JWs progressed with the process of transitioning their identity away from the JWs and highlights specific methods that respondents utilised as a means to purge their JW identity in order to build a more authentic one. Evidence of identity reformulation was manifest by deliberate acts of defiance. Respondents argued that to break free from their (childhood) training, it was necessary to purposefully indulge in proscribed beliefs and behaviours. This was evidenced by expressions such as, *"people who have left*

controlling religious groups should go out of their way to rid themselves of the guilt and negativity by deliberately doing the things that the religion would hate. For me that was openly blaspheming Jehovah (JWs believe God's name is Jehovah)*, I would openly call him some horrible things and it was very therapeutic"* (Mark). The use of blasphemy to intentionally undermine a name formerly associated with reverence was novel in the narratives and indicated a deliberate effort of attitude adjustment. Although respondents generally associated abandoning their religion with guilt, shame, and a perceived disapproval from the JW community generally, a purposeful shift of identity was also evident the narratives. This was characterised by expressions such as *"I was going along to my Buddhist centre, doing meditation, yoga, lots of things I shouldn't be doing as a JW"* (Katie). Here, it was apparent that engagement with faiths and activities that were formerly forbidden was a useful tool to help purge a JW identity. This deliberate stance toward what would be forbidden from the JW perspective, may imply that actively participating in activities contrary to the JW faith may be a useful and therapeutic tool to aid identity reconfiguration.

Other respondents appeared to begin the process of expelling their JW identity whilst still practising members of the JW faith. This may be an indication of the extent to which that some individuals attempt to lead a 'double life' prior to breaking free of the JW faith more purposefully. One respondent, for example, remarked that *"I used to go to the works Christmas parties, birthday parties and all the things you shouldn't do, so I wasn't identifying with my true inner self from being about 14…although I still went knocking on doors pestering people…and I'd get up and do one* (a presentation at the JW church) *easy, in like two minutes in front of a large congregation of people…I guess I put on a front that didn't exist deep down"* (Harry). This respondent's experience indicates that attempts to pacify a JW identity while simultaneously indulging in a more authentic identity may be associated with engagement in activities forbidden by the religion. This is an indication of the extent to which respondents

attempt to maintain two distinct identities as an alternative to exiting the faith. This was echoed by another respondent who commented *"I thought I could kind of be in it, still have all my mates…but I'll marry an unbeliever then I can have Christmas, and do all the things on that side… I'll have a foot in both worlds* (Rachel). Here again, deliberate acts of defiance against JW doctrine were evident as a means of maintaining opposing identities. This is an indication that pursuing an authentic identity while pacifying a JW identity may involve necessity to be duplicitous.

Longitudinal interviews indicated that respondents over the past year had become more relaxed in their attempts to purge their identity as a JW and were successfully reconfiguring their identity away from the faith. This was typified by comments such as *"I am completely at peace with myself…I don't give a shit anymore…I had the courage to leave the organisation and there are things you realise, have sex if you want to…jump out of a plane…get anything you couldn't do before…get a fucking tattoo! Do things you want to do, and you will start to build your personality"* (Marius). Here, the freedom gained by efforts to purge the JW identity is associated with indulgence in activities that were formerly forbidden. Indeed, overall, respondents indicated that over the past year they had won in their attempts to reformulate their identity to one more authentic by engaging in pursuits in defiance of their former religion.

Subtheme – "Freeing the Demon".

This subtheme seeks to elucidate how young people reconfigure their identity after exiting the JWs. It will do this by exploring self-perceptions prior to, and after exit in order to gain insights into the effects of being raised according to JW eschatology and behavioural restrictions.

Generally, these young respondents, who were between the ages of 20 and 27 at the time of interview, described the effect of being raised in the JWs as overwhelming of their emerging and more authentic identities. The narratives seemed to elicit stories that were described in

vivid and often metaphorical terms as a period of captivity supressing an emerging identity in adolescence. This was typified by the reflection of one respondent, *"you're constantly told that you are supposed to be this…your identity is caged and suppressed, and you are told that whatever evil or wrong thoughts that you have, don't grow them"* (Ezra). Here, being raised according to JW dogma is described as a form of incessant instruction that suppressed the formation of an authentic identity. Aligning with the sentiments of other respondents, the assumption that natural thoughts and inclinations incidental to youth are sinful or evil tends to result in unhealthy patterns of concealment and negative self-perceptions, described by one respondent as reminiscent of *"the thought police"* (John). That JW teachings mould an emerging identity during adolescence was further echoed by another respondent who described leaving the JWs in bittersweet terms *"it doesn't come easy, you still think you're doing wrong almost…because you've been told that you'll die at Armageddon if you don't do X, Y, or Z…and when you're given the opportunity to become the person that you feel you are...it's refreshing...you could breathe instead of the constant feeling of choking because you were trying to supress your personality"* (Ezra). Here, the desire to pursue an authentic identity is contrasted with the psychological threat associated with belief in the eschatology of the JWs. This aligned with comments that respondents made generally about expected outcomes of death resultant from leaving the religion.

Although the assertion could be made that these young people had chosen to embrace and reaffirm their JW identity, as evidenced by their water baptism into the faith, respondents indicated that this was due to pressure to conform. This was characterised by expressions such as *"I was around 14…there wasn't really a choice with baptism…maybe there was and I just didn't know it…but you wanted to do what was right…not what was what's right for you, it's not about yourself…it's about God and what God would want for you"* (John). Overall, data in this way seemed to indicate that the expectation to undergo baptism was powerful, and an

example of how the JW identity was dominant over any emerging authentic identity. In terms of identity transformation however, respondents indicated that exit provided a way of casting off what they felt had been an enforced JW identity and the opportunity to pursue more authentic choices. This was indicated by a respondent remarking that *"I sympathise and pity the individual from five years ago…chained to the wall and told to behave…thoughts, feelings and dreams can be pursued now, rather than supressed"* (John). Here, the transition from the restrictive JW identity, towards a more authentic freer identity is clearly seen as advantageous. Although beneficial, this appeared to be accompanied by confusion. This was typified with comments from Laura *"I know who I am now, but when I'd just come out of it, I really didn't…I had quite a tough time with that"*. In common with other young respondents, Laura talks about the dilemma of having to learn how to use this freedom to build an authentic identity. This illustrates how reconfiguring identity was challenging and somewhat distressing for young respondents' post-exit.

Allegories used by respondents to describe their identity before exiting included descriptions of being caged, chained, and immobilised, including a powerful self-depiction of a demon while struggling to maintain status as a JW: *"it feels like you're being choked or restrained…I often had this image of myself as like an evil demon, with massive wings…chained up…bound…completely immobilised"* (Ezra). Here, the metaphor seemed to indicate that the struggle for authenticity is associated with negative self-attributions of wickedness. Post-exit however, allegories indicated a sense of liberation. One respondent for example remarked that *"the guy off the chains on the wall has learned things he would never have learned if he stayed in that hell hole"* (John). Here, the notion of self-discovery aligns with the narratives of other respondents, in indicating that self-discovery is a significant feature of leaving the JWs, and an essential component to identity transformation

Longitudinal interviews with these young respondents indicated significant improvements over the past year. However, pressure to return to the JWs was also apparent as typified by comments from Ezra, *"they* (grandparents) *brought me the 'Return to Jehovah' brochure…I just full stop can't entertain the thought of it…the meetings, the oppressive level of study…the devotion…we were always encouraged to do things, even now that's something I haven't recovered from"*. Although respondents maintained their distance from the JWs, reminders from well-meaning relatives were used as an encouragement to restore a JW identity. However, determination to remain on a path towards a more authentic identity prevailed, with respondents indicating that good progress had been made. This was characterised by expressions such as *"not a lot has changed in the last 12 months, I am happy with my identity, my sense of self, goals and ambitions"* (John). Although happy with personal identity growth, respondents were fully aware of the cost of freedom as indicated by this respondent *"all I have to do is give up my entire sense of self and wellbeing and hand it all back…and I get everything back, everything I lost"* (John). The notion that pursuit of an authentic personal identity may come at the cost of a social identity was evident in all narratives, however, this did not appear to motivate a desire to return to the JWs. On the contrary, respondents tended to reminisce about their transition, for example, *"I'd probably say it took three to four years, it's left its mark, it's imprinted into your personality and is always a part of you…but I am pretty much there now…I don't have any reservations of the person that I am, I quite like who I have become"* (Ezra). Here, acknowledgement of growth tempered with the aftermaths of a JW identity indicates that successful identity transition is possible, however, respondents also indicated that long-term residual effects of an ingrained JW identity may be lifelong.

In sum, this sub theme explored respondents' experiences of reconfiguring identity in youth. Findings indicated the presence of powerful negative self-perceptions due to the incompatibility of the JW identity with an authentic adolescent emerging identity. Post-exit

paths revealed a general trend towards the successful creation of an authentic personal identity. Powerful metaphors used by respondents indicate the extent to which identity change is viewed as a liberation from what respondents viewed as captivity and suppression.

4.3 Discussion

Previous research has documented various challenges in disaffiliation from the JWs including those of establishing a post-exit identity (Hookway & Habibis, 2015; Lalich & McLaren, 2010; Ransom et al., 2021). This study further explores these challenges through the analysis of narratives of 26 former JWs, to investigate how respondents make sense of their experiences during membership and post-exit. This chapter focuses specifically on identity transition and reformulation after leaving the JWs.

Participants in this study had either been disfellowshipped or had left of their own accord. However, narratives suggested that challenges specific to identity were experienced irrespective of exit method. Many respondents appeared to retain a deeply embedded JW identity on exit, maintaining elements of behaviour and obedience to doctrine that seemed to make identity reformulation challenging. Respondents born into the JWs tended to describe their inculcation as a grooming process designed to provide a deep level of systematic doctrinal and behavioural training. Aligning with previous research that indicates how thought patterns in former members may feel 'hard wired' to JW dogma (Ransom et al., 2021), this research similarly found that respondents described a crafted or 'cookie cut' identity that was developed over time. This appeared to be resultant from involvement with the JWs, informing decision making and life choices even post-exit, resulting in what appeared to be a residual, yet salient JW identity. This finding aligns with identity theory, which focuses on how the self is made up of various roles played in society (Stryker & Burke, 2000). According to Stryker (1968), these identities exist in a hierarchy, with the most salient role associated with the most dominant self-

concept. By indicating that the role held in the JWs may shape post-exit identity, this study contributes complementary insights to previous work which has tended to focus on motivations for exit and psychological impacts (Hookway & Habibis, 2015; Lalich & McLaren, 2010). In conjunction with these previous findings, the current study adds weight to the concept of role identity when exploring exit from the JWs. Specifically, that the extent to which roles were salient during membership of the JW organisation may determine identity reformulation.

In contrast to the data in this study that indicated how respondents acted in accordance with a salient JW identity through retained adherence to doctrine, others embarked on a purposeful process of identity reformulation. Through deliberate acts of defiance and engagement in proscribed activities, respondents sought to break free from their childhood religious ideologies and attempt to purge the JW identity. Aligning with self-perception theory (Bem, 1972), which postulates how attitude change can come about through behaviour (Ito, Chiao, Devine, Lorig & Cacioppo, 2006), respondents in the present study sought to change self-perceptions through new deliberate behaviour. Although not previously explored within the body of JW literature, the concept of inferring who we are from observing what we do implies deliberate attempts at identity reconfiguration and adds important insights into how individuals may attempt such changes.

Findings from this study indicated that respondents struggled to establish a personal identity outside of the JWs because they felt alien within society. This was indicated to be resultant from the insular nature of the religion, where friendships are typically restricted to those within the organisation. This interplay between personal and social identities aligns with previous research which has similarly described how the (socially) restrictive nature of the JWs results in a tendency to feel like an outsider in society generally (Friedson, 2014). Indeed, proscriptions against interactions with those considered ‘outsiders’ mean that former JWs typically hold very few relationships outside of the religion (Holden, 2002). Adding to these findings, the current

research indicates that respondents socialised into the JWs from childhood were significantly more likely to experience challenges to establishing an authentic personal identity, whereas converts tended to retain family and personal relationships established prior to membership. This experience is an indication of the extent to which a personal identity may be impacted through changes to a social identity, and likely to occur in religions like the JWs where personal and social identities are closely linked. In contrast, respondents who had converted to the JWs as adults appeared to have the ability to revert to their pre-JW identity and did not report significant challenges to their self-concept.

Participants in the current research appeared to embark on a ‘quest’ to build an authentic identity after exiting the JW religion. Whether disfellowshipped or leaving through choice data indicated that respondents believed that their identity had been created through their relationship with the JWs, and that this was firmly embedded into their mindset. This aligns with research that has focused on voluntary departure (Hookway & Habibis, 2015; Testoni et al., 2019), or has not distinguished between the experiences of a forced or voluntary exit (Lalich & McLaren, 2010), indicating that transitioning away from an ascribed JW identity is a described as a painful and difficult experience. Findings from the present study extend previous research by distinguishing between the experiences associated with voluntary and forced exit. Indeed, this exploration found that respondents struggled to form an authentic identity away from their ascribed JW identity irrespective of the exit method. However, divergent experiences in the narratives also indicated that some respondents transitioned their identity away from the JWs in a fairly straightforward manner. Here, favourable circumstances appeared to mitigate challenges faced generally by respondents in this research. This is an indication that not all experiences are the same and therefore these findings may not generalise across the population of former JWs.

In consideration of the accounts of all respondents, whether converts or born in, disfellowshipped or not, findings suggest that individuals varied in the extent to which they aligned their personal identity with the JWs. Describing themselves as PIMO (physically in, mentally out) JWs during their membership, these respondents described how they managed a dual identity; on the one hand carrying out religious duties ascribed by their JW identity, and, on the other hand, gradually establishing an identity in the outside world. Although not previously explored within the literature, this finding with respect to a PIMO identity aligns with previous research that indicates how JWs may out of necessity, remain within the organisation despite a desire to exit (Testoni et al., 2019). The current research adds to this allegation by identifying how mental alignment during membership (PIMO) may mediate identity reformulation post-exit.

Other accounts describe experiences in direct contrast to the PIMO identity. Here, respondents described the experience of remaining mentally aligned to JW doctrine despite being disfellowshipped. This appeared to indicate a salient JW identity that hindered identity reformulation. Acknowledged within the exJW community as a POMI identity (Physically out, mentally in), respondents tended to remain obedient to tenets and behavioural restrictions of the JWs, manifest in a reluctance to celebrate traditional societal customs (e.g., Christmas/birthdays), and adhere to doctrinal restrictions (refusal of blood transfusions). Although not explicitly explored in previous research, the notion of a POMI identity may explain why previous research has indicated the extent of the struggles in building an identity away from the JWs (Hookway & Habibis, 2015; Lalich & McLaren, 2010). This study makes important contributions to previous research by highlighting important distinctions between the experiences of those 'mentally in' and those 'mentally out' of the JWs prior to their eventual exit.

The narrative accounts of respondents who exited the JWs during their adolescence/youth included accounts of disfellowshipping and voluntary exit. These accounts were notable in their use of vivid metaphors to describe the experience of being raised according to JW doctrine and behaviour. Likening formative years akin to captivity, and exit as liberation, these young respondents struggled initially to establish an identity outside of the religion due to negative self-perceptions. Respondents indicated that they had been trained to view the world outside of their insular religious environment as evil and leaving the JWs left them vulnerable to malevolent influences. Aligning with previous research exploring leaving the JWs during youth (Hookway & Habibis, 2015), the current research found evidence of bittersweet identity reformulation. Specifically, that freedom to pursue an authentic identity is associated with confusion in choosing life paths in a world they were taught was about to end. Indeed, the notion that expectation of (imminent) Armageddon remained salient in these young minds is important and suggests that leaving the JWs may be associated with existential fear of the future.

It was notable that respondents chose to remain outside of the JW organisation despite evidence of a residual JW identity. Although indicating that repetitive inculcation into the religion from infancy resulted in a dominant religious identity, results from the data indicate that the desire for more natural life choices may become more dominant over time and overpower a JW identity. This aligns with work by Hookway and Habibis (2015) that documented the exit stories of young former JWs who perceived the JW lifestyle as too restrictive. Although limited to individuals who left voluntarily, the present study includes experiences of disfellowship. Data indicates that although young respondents generally found identity reformulation challenging, disfellowshipping elicited a more deleterious response, possibly due to the enforced nature of this process. All respondents indicated that it took quite some years to accept societal norms such as Christmas and birthdays, suggesting that the JW

identity may remain salient for some years post-exit and impede identity reformulation. This finding adds to work exploring identity theory (Stryker, 1968; Stryker & Burke, 2000), which postulates that identities are arranged in hierarchies, and classified in terms of how individuals view their identity. By indicating that hierarchies can be rearranged post religious exit by altering self-perceptions, what may be perceived as undesirable identities, such as an abandoned religious (JW) identity may dissipate over time.

Findings from this study indicate that adult converts to the JW religion tend to maintain, to some extent, their identities established prior to membership, and that this has an inoculating effect against identity challenges faced by individuals born/raised JWs. Although former research on 'deconversion' (Keller, Klein, Hood & Streib, 2013) explored motivations for exit and post religious paths of converts, it did not compare these with the experiences of those socialised into the religion from infancy. The present research however, compares the exit stories of adult converts with those raised according to a JW lifestyle and finds that the ability for converts to revert to an established identity indicates the extent to which childhood socialisation and religious inculcation may be identity forming by nature.

Turning to considering the follow-up interviews with a subset of respondents, analysis revealed improvements to identity reformulation over the past year. Generally, data indicated that respondents had adopted a more relaxed approach to identity reformulation and had abandoned residual doctrinal beliefs as evidenced in reductions in 'Armageddon' anxiety. One divergent case however, indicated a residual JW identity. This respondent expressed fears that the current Covid pandemic could be a sign of end time eschatology (Armageddon) and is an indication of how JW inculcation may have long-term effects post-exit.

4.4 Conclusions

Several limitations need to be borne in mind when considering the findings of this study. Although the sample size of 26 participants is considered generous according to the principles defining IPA research, it may be that findings are not generalisable across the ex JW community. Similarly, and by way of reflexive disclosure, although the analysis of the narratives was performed with the greatest of care and integrity, it must be acknowledged that from the perspective of the lead researcher as a former Jehovah's Witness, this may have coloured the interpretation of the data.

This thesis chapter sought to add to the body of literature concerning religious exit from the JW religion. This chapter specifically focuses on identity, to explore how losses to a personal identity may be associated with losses to a social identity when experiencing ostracism. Generally, findings indicated that identity reformulation post-exit is a difficult journey notwithstanding the exit method. Results also demonstrate that childhood inculcation of JW eschatology has far reaching effects in terms of identity formation. Whether these were doctrinal (fear of Armageddon), or more behavioural (refusal of blood transfusions / Christmas and birthday celebrations), respondents appeared to maintain adherence for quite some years after exiting the religion. Nuances in narratives however, revealed divergent experiences amongst former members. Data indicated that converts to the JW religion experienced significantly fewer challenges to reconfiguring their identity post-exit. Unlike born-in respondents who typically experienced a form of identity crisis post-exit and embarked on a journey of self-discovery, converts tended to revert to their identity established before conversion. In this vein, converts did not seem to manifest a residual JW identity and were able to re-integrate into society and participate in societal norms and celebrations more straightforwardly. Finally, by adding a longitudinal aspect to this study, it may be postulated that identity reformulation improves over time. However, because more research is clearly

warranted to unpick further nuances of identity transition and what may facilitate this process, the next chapter of this thesis will explore how online support groups may ease transition.

Chapter 5: Study 3 Ostracism, Wellbeing and Experiences of Abuse Within the Jehovah's Witnesses

5.1 Introduction

> *No more fiendish punishment could be devised, were such a thing physically possible, that one should be turned loose in society and reman absolutely unnoticed by all the members thereof. If no one turned round when we entered, answered when we spoke, or minded what we did, but if every person we met "cut us dead" and acted as if we were nonexisting things, a kind of rage and impotent despair would ere long well up in us, from which the cruelest bodily tortures would be a relief; for these would make us feel that, however bad might be our plight, we had not sunk to such a depth as to be unworthy of attention at all.*
>
> William James, 1890

Despite research indicating that religious affiliation is largely associated with positive outcomes such as wellbeing (Park, Holt, Le, Christie, & Williams, 2018), good health (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010), social support (Pargament, Koenig, & Perez, 2000) and increased self-esteem (Aydin, Fischer, & Frey, 2010; Gebauer, Sedikides, & Neberich, 2012), other research indicates that membership of the JW religion may be associated with anxiety, depression (Friedson, 2015; Moyers, 1990) suicidal ideation and suicide (Lalich & McLaren, 2010; Ransom, Monk, & Heim, 2021). Since opinions vary as to whether religious belief may be more helpful (Rosenfeld, 2010) or harmful (Montague, 1977; Rosenfeld, 2010; Van Ness,

1999) to mental health, it becomes necessary to explore further the links between religion and negative outcomes.

With the aim of exploring the associations between religious exit from the JWs and of negative outcomes (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010), previous research documents a variety of motivations for exit, including incompatible sexuality (Lalich & McLaren, 2010), doubt and disagreement with beliefs (Keller, Klein, Hood, & Streib, 2013), and a perceived restrictive lifestyle (Hookway & Habibis, 2015). As well as defection (where members voluntarily disassociate with the JWs), which typically leads to ostracism, others are forcibly cast out of the community due to a failure to comply with obedience to doctrine and behavioural restrictions (Holden, 2002; Ransom et al., 2021). Known as disfellowshipping, this directive requires JWs to ostracise the offender to 'keep the congregation clean', thereby motivating repentance and subsequent reintegration into the JW community (Franz, 1983; Hookway & Habibis, 2015).

Disfellowshipping from the JWs, and its effects has received little attention in the literature. Indeed, the dearth of JW studies available tends to relate the experiences of those who leave the religion more voluntarily (Hookway & Habibis, 2015; Testoni et al., 2019). Research conducted by Lalich and McLaren (2010) however, documents the leaving stories of disfellowshipped JWs, and, although this study is focused on homosexuality as a motivation for exit, it is nevertheless found links between departure and depression, suicide, and identity crisis. Other more recent work explores exit from the JWs in a small population of former members who were disfellowshipped or who had left voluntarily, with findings indicating that disfellowship may be linked with suicide, self-destructive behaviour, depression, and identity crisis (Ransom et al., 2021). Resultantly, it is evident that further exploration, in a larger sample may be fruitful in establishing associated outcomes of ostracism in those who are disfellowshipped in comparison to voluntary exit to ascertain how any negative outcomes of transitioning out of the JWs may be assuaged.

Previous research that explores exit from the JWs aligns with what Scheitle and Adamczyk (2010) describe as 'high-cost' religion, so named due to the costs and sacrifices required by members (Iannaccone, 1994). These include prescribed and proscribed social boundaries, with stigma associated in pursuing social ties with non-members (Aten, Mangis, & Campbell, 2010) and former members (Iannaccone, 1992). A similar picture is painted by research amongst other faiths, whose members report challenging psychosocial losses (Berger, 2015; Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016; Iannaccone, 1994), negative self-perceptions, stigma and estrangement upon leaving their respective religions (Fazzino, 2014; Nica, 2019). Indeed, is has been suggested that losses of relationships may account for self-reported poor health of former JWs (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010). This assertion, nevertheless, requires further examination, by exploring further the psychological processes that are involved when individuals exit faiths that use religious ostracism as a form of coercive control.

Theoretically, attempts to understanding the negative effects of religious exit may be considered through the lens of the ostracism literature. Indeed, work by Williams (2001) has found that ostracism is associated with negative outcomes, even when the ostracism is manipulated and under laboratory conditions (Case & Williams, 2004; Williams, 2001; Williams, 2008; Williams, Forgas, & Hippel, 2005). Other (fMRI) research that explores the neural correlates of (manipulated) ostracism suggests that the neural alarm system that detects physical pain (dACC), is also activated by social pain or ostracism (Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003). This could be an indication that the expression 'hurt feelings' may be more than metaphorical (Eisenberger et al., 2003). Such accounts accord with Baumeister and Leary's work postulating how ostracism threatens the fundamental human need to belong, and that lack thereof may result in depression, anxiety, and mental illness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Other research conducted under more naturalistic conditions also includes accounts of psychological anguish when being ostracised by a loved one (Williams, 2001). In consideration

of these findings, and preliminary research that indicates that JWs are a tight-knit insular community who view themselves as “no part of the world” (Aten et al., 2010; Chryssides, 2016; Ringnes, Stålsett, Hegstad, & Danbolt, (2017), it is perhaps no surprise that former JWs find themselves isolated when they disaffiliate, or, are cast out of the community, and that these social and familial losses may have a demoralising effect (Aten, 2010; Gutgsell, 2017).

Williams (2009) Temporal Needs Threat Model may serve as a suitable lens through which to explore the phenomenon of ‘religious shunning’. This model offers a theoretical framework by which to measure the effects of ostracism (Williams, 2009), and posits that ostracism proceeds in three phases. First, the *reflexive* stage when the target first detects ostracism and experiences an immediate deleterious psychological response. This initial feeling of ‘social pain’ threatens four fundamental needs – belonging (the human need for frequent and enjoyable interactions), self-esteem (due to the implicit or explicit assumption of wrongdoing), control (by denying control over interactions with others) and meaningful existence (by experiencing how life would be should we not exist). Second, the *reflective* stage when the target starts an internal evaluation and typically acts in a way to either restore threatened needs (by acting in a prosocial manner) or acts more aggressively as way to re-establish some form of control (Ren, Wesselmann, & Williams, 2018). Finally, after all attempts at reconciliation have failed, *resignation* occurs. In this stage coping resources become depleted, and the individual may become resigned to (long-term) ostracism, along with feelings of depression, helplessness, alienation and even suicide (ibid). This stage has consequently been used as a metaphor for death (Case & Williams, 2004). Although not considered in studies of JWs previously, this model has been used to measure the effects of ostracism in a sample of Catholic respondents (Zamperini, Menegatto, Mostacchi, Barbagallo, & Testoni, 2020), with findings consistent with the model across all phases. Its application to the study of JWs may therefore serve as a useful lens through which to examine and understand the experiences of leaving the JWs.

As well as ostracism, studies also indicate that leaving the JWs may be associated with fear of the future, resultant from deep-rooted eschatological beliefs centring around 'Armageddon' (Aboud, 2020; Friedson, 2015; Gutgsell, 2017). Doctrinally, JWs believe that mankind is living in a time period referred in the Bible as the 'last days' (2 Timothy 3:1-5, New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures - NWT) and that this will culminate in the battle of Armageddon as prophesied in the Bible book of Revelation (Holden, 2002; Stark & Iannaccone, 1997). JWs preach publicly that Armageddon will cleanse the earth of wickedness, paving the way for a thousand-year restoration of earthly paradise (Penton, 2015). They believe they will survive this cataclysmic event as members of what the bible terms 'the great crowd', provided they maintain obedience to the doctrine and behavioural restrictions of the JW religion (Holden, 2002; Stark & Iannaccone, 1997). As such, JWs associate their membership with salvation, and conversely, loss of membership with destruction (Friedson, 2015; Ransom et al., 2021). Resultantly, indications in the literature suggest that disfellowship may contribute to poor mental health, suicidal ideation, suicide (Gutgsell, 2017; Lalich & McLaren, 2010; Ransom et al., 2021), and, more rarely, murder suicide (Detroit free press, 2017). To further explore how JW eschatology may affect post-exit wellbeing, an exploration of impacts of exit on different populations may be beneficial. This research will compare experiences of (i) forced and voluntary exit from the JW religion (ii) individuals socialised into the JWs from childhood with those who converted, to determine the effects of childhood indoctrination.

In summary, this chapter addresses the following two research questions (i) how is wellbeing impacted by method of exit from the JWs? and (ii) does retaining belief in JW eschatology impact wellbeing post-exit?

Methodology (See chapter 2)

5.2 Findings

The narratives of each respondent were coded thematically. This chapter reports on the themes of:

Theme 1: - "cut them off like a gangrenous leg" - Social death in the JW community.

Subtheme: - "my mother tells people I'm dead" - Social death in the family circle.

Theme 2: - "all the sinners are going to burn" - The Eschatology of Armageddon.

Theme 3: - Accounts of suicide, childhood sexual abuse and domestic violence.

Subtheme: - It's OK to be gay" – From homophobia to acceptance.

Theme 1: Social Death in the JW Community – "cut them off like a gangrenous leg".

This theme explores the impact of ostracism on the wellbeing and mental health of respondents. Starting with the accounts of those who were disfellowshipped (as opposed to leaving voluntarily), while experiences of ostracism upon leaving the JWs were near ubiquitous, the consequent experiences of negative wellbeing and self-esteem did not immediately manifest among all respondents. In the case of some, narratives, described initial feelings of relief post-exit, which appeared to be related to newly found perceptions of freedom. This was characterised by comments from Mark *"I felt relieved actually, like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders…I didn't have to look over my shoulder…I could put a bet on, hang round with anyone and had no-one to answer to…I had freedom, and I look back at that time as one of the favourite times of my life"*. This comment aligns with sentiments expressed by other respondents and illustrates how exiting the JW community may (at least initially) instil a sense of autonomy and reduced accountability resulting from the reduction of rules and the freedom

to engage in activities that were formerly forbidden, all of which were accompanied with reported improvements in wellbeing. Nevertheless, accounts from those who initially felt liberated were also typified by reports that this elation subsequently gave way to an apparent realisation that they had been ostracised socially; That while they have gained a number of freedoms, they were no longer at liberty to interact socially with members of the JWs, which appeared to negatively impact self-worth and mental health. This was echoed by this comment from Diane; *"I was upset, alone and lonely…I wanted my friends back, but then there's another side to me where I'm quite determined…a recalcitrant type of person…and I was like 'you can all fuck off, I'm not going back'…It was hard"*. That freedom came at the cost of social interactions meant that respondents experienced feelings of isolation and loneliness that were detrimental to their lives.

The former JWs status among those who remained within the faith (those from who they were now ostracised) also appeared to be a source of distress among respondents. Here, character judgements within the JW religion, that former members were sinners who needed to be shunned to preserve the faith, appeared to impact negatively on respondents. This was typified by comments such as *"they tell you to shut them off…cut them off like a gangrenous leg, get rid of it! so that they don't infect anyone else…God help you if you don't stick to the rules, they will just cut you off"* (Diane). This account typifies similar sentiments expressed within the narratives; that being strictly avoided and shunned by the JW community has the effect of making former members feel like they are 'contaminated'. This seemed to fuel negative self-perceptions and culminated in feelings of isolation and abandonment. In short, the perceived freedoms which proffered relief and elation among some respondents appeared to be relatively short lived before the negative impact of ostracism and the loss of social connectedness appeared to manifest.

For other respondents, being disfellowshipped culminated in immediate detrimental effects on wellbeing, with no short-term feelings of relief. Here, the loss of social connectedness and community were at the forefront of narratives which reflected on experiences of having left the JWs. For example, Janice remarked that *"I couldn't have felt any lower, any more worthless…it proper messes you up…I sat on my own at the back* (kingdom hall/church) *for months with everyone blanking me…everyone blanked me in the street, I had no friends and no worldly friends…and none in 'the truth'* (a JW name for the religion) *because I was disfellowshipped…I lost everybody"*. This loss of social connection following their departure from the JW community, and the natural desire for community, also appeared exacerbated, in some cases, by the sense that they could return to the faith and regain their (lost) social ties. Indeed, the ostracism experienced by a number of respondents appeared to initiate internal struggles, where former JWs consider a return, to ameliorate the negative impact of ostracism on their mental health and wellbeing.

That religious ostracism impacts self-esteem and wellbeing in a harmful way was echoed by another respondent who commented *"I had very little self-worth…it was very, very hard and they were really dark, dark days…so, so hard and incredibly cruel…when you're brought up in that religion all your friends are in that religion, so I had absolutely no friends, no family, no support so I was alone and unhappy"* (Gail). Providing insights into the JW practice of limiting associations to those within the religion, this comment indicates how disfellowship may result in pervasive loneliness. Indeed, the absence of a support structure outside of the JWs meant that many former members reported experiencing a profound sense of isolation that was long-lasting. This was indicated by the following: *"when I look back now, 30 plus years…I suffer from acute anxiety…I don't think I'll ever be free of that…I still have quite low self-esteem"* (Gail). In keeping with the narratives of other respondents, losses of social connection

after leaving the JWs, and the negative effects thereof, therefore appear have significant negative impacts to mental health and wellbeing and these can pervade long after exit.

While those who exited the JWs voluntarily also reported a loss of social community, in keeping with accounts from those who were disfellowshipped, these accounts were divergent in terms of the negative impact of said ostracism. While any initial feelings of relief were oft preceded by a sense of loss, social isolation and (long term) mental ill-health among those who were forced to leave the JWs, the perceived freedoms and agency upon leaving the JW appeared to be appeared to more long-lasting in those who chose to leave, without subsequent remorse, and with better longer-term outcomes. This was typified by comments from Katie, *"I knew it wasn't going to be an easy transition, but for me, relief… I felt that I had cut the cord, the final cord that kept me tied to the organisation…I don't regret it, absolutely not"* (Katie). Here, while these respondents were also socially ostracised from former JWs, they did not appear to exhibit distress to the same degree as observed with disfellowshipped respondents. This may be an indication that having a sense of agency in one's exit may ameliorate or protect against ostracism's negative impact on wellbeing. Indeed, chosen disaffiliation appeared to be associated with an expectation of ostracism, along with a sense of determinism, as indicated by Julie, who commented *"you have to get on with it really, people actually did say to me 'well what did you expect to happen? We have to cut you off now'…so I knew what the rules were, I have to go with it…it's like a contract isn't it"*. Amongst these narratives, it appeared that the expectation of ostracism culminated in an acceptance of their treatment which was routed in their understanding that although they had left by choice, as opposed to being forced to leave for rule contravention, members would still view their exit as a form of disloyalty. Indeed, although ostracism is traditionally associated with the 'sin' of contravening behavioural restrictions, the notion that voluntary could elicit variable treatment was noteworthy, and echoed by John who commented *"I know some people who were ok and would say if you're*

not disfellowshipped they could still technically talk to you…others did not share those views and were very much 'he's not going to the hall, he's not a friend of Jehovah'…that kind of deal". This comment illustrates that while there is an expectation of ostracism, the degree to which this is experienced may not be uniform, owing to the fact that those who remain within the JW make their own judgments as to the level of ostracism that is appropriate. As such, as well as having a heightened sense of agency that may protect against the negative effects of ostracism, it is also apparent that those who chose to leave the JW may not experience the same degree of loss as those who are disfellowshipped. Combined, it therefore appears that both the nature and degree of loss of social connection, and how this is experienced personally, may be somewhat different for those who leave the JWs, and therefore the relationship between ostracism and mental wellbeing may differ.

In sum, narratives surrounding the loss of social connections with members of the JW community, owing to ostracism, were near ubiquitous, regardless of exit method. Nevertheless, the data indicate that although exit method does not appear to determine the level of ostracism, it does seem that it may moderate some of its negative effects on wellbeing. Retaining a sense of agency in the leaving process looks to alleviate the distress associated with the forced nature of the disfellowship process. Disfellowship appears to prompt immediate and mandated shunning, whereas voluntary exit seems to initiate sporadic ostracism. Although over time this culminated in levels of ostracism typically experienced by disfellowshipped individuals, it is understood as an almost expected and accepted consequence of disaffiliation. Former members, whether disfellowshipped or not, consistently report that they understand that returning to the religion would enable restoration of relationships and religious status, but that they are reluctant to do so.

Subtheme: "my mother tells people I'm dead" - Social Death in the Family Circle

This subtheme explores fractured family relationships and experiences of those who became estranged from close family members, especially parents, siblings, or children. This form of ostracism was typically described as the most psychologically distressing aspect of leaving or being disfellowshipped from the JW religion.

Disfellowshipped respondents experienced an immediate and mandated loss of contact with close family members, a rupture that was described in psychologically painful terms. This sense of alienation from once-close social bonds was characterised by mournful expressions such as *"I wish I had a mother…I don't have a parent to turn to because my mother tells people I'm dead…there's moments I get down…sometimes it hits me that I'm in a situation no-one else is under"* (Mark). Such quotes typify narratives from former JWs who denote that current JWs often refer to them or see them as (metaphorically) dead, reflecting that they are no longer seen by their family. So too, former JWs described a form of grief for their 'lost' family member(s). Here, JWs described an apparent form of mourning that is more traditionally associated with death, where they lamented the loss of their (in this case living) close relatives and friends and reported that this had a negative impact on their lives. Indeed, it is for this reason that some respondents also described a pull to return to the JWs, in order to resurrect these lost social bonds and remove this sense of grief, while also weighing up the consequences of such a decision. This process of internal contemplation is typified by this comment from Beth; *"it felt like I was being blackmailed… I wanted my family back; I have a sister who's still in the witnesses and a mum and dad...I tried to come back to get my mum and dad and sister back, but I couldn't do it"*. Among those who are forced to leave the JW, the anguish caused by the loss of close family/social bonds therefore appears to be exacerbated further by the realisation that, unlike in death, these relationships could be reinstated, were they to be willing (and permitted) to return to the JWs.

The complexity of the psychological distress created by loss of social contact from close family members was particularly evident in the narratives of those who have been actively ostracised. Here, accounts lamented the fact that they were excluded from day-to-day activities and important family events. Furthermore, narratives exhibited apparent conflicts between former JWs sadness at the situation and an awareness that such ostracism is mandated, with possible negative consequences for failure to comply This was typified by Rachel, who comments *"my children cut me off one by one…my JW ex-husband told me 'they will not be allowed to get baptised until they have cut you off'…there's one married now, I wasn't invited to that"* (Rachel). This comment exemplifies how leaving the JWs may be associated with the anguish at being ignored and excluded from important events such as weddings as well as the wider day to day lives of family living. Likewise, another respondent remarked that *"it really upset me that he* (her son) *blanked me…but I don't want to put him in a situation where he feels he has got to say something back because I know what he's going to say - 'you know I'm doing the right thing'… in shunning me, but it's not the right thing".* (Janice). As such, as well as the immediately painful effects of ostracism from close social bonds, wellbeing appeared to be further compromised by the process of navigating this new reality and by complexity of mourning the loss of close ties while understanding the dogma which mandates this form of ostracism.

In contrast with the experiences of those who were disfellowshipped, accounts from those who chose to leave suggested more gradual or sporadic processes of ostracism from close friends and family. This was typified by Joel, who said; *"I saw my mum, she cut me off in 2010 and saw me in 2012…I'd see her one day a week, I'd take her out to dinner so we had a normal relationship…and then about 2015, she stopped seeing me again…my sister said that there'd been a change at one of the conventions* (a large regional meeting of JWs) *saying that if you rejected Jehovah then you were to be treated like a bad influence"*. This comment exemplified

similar accounts among these JWs, who noted that the nature of ostracism they were subject to was inconsistent, echoing a sense of uncertainty regarding the level of social relatedness that they could expect to retain among close family. Nevertheless, regardless of the timeframe over which ostracism was experienced, and consistency in which this was enacted, accounts among those who disaffiliated voluntarily reported a similar degree of distress at having lost contact with those within their close circle. Akin to those who were disfellowshipped, these accounts were also similarly described in terms of 'losses' that are akin to death, with resultant negative impacts on mental health. This was characterised by expressions such as *"you lose your family…I go through terrible phases of depression; it will be nine years in December since my son talked to me…my own son! it splits up families"* (Pat). Also paralleling those who had been disfellowshipped, these former JWs had anticipated ostracism from their close family circle, though this did not appear to ameliorate the distress that this created. Indeed, respondents indicated that although they had not been 'formally' disciplined by the congregation (disfellowshipped), they had expected to be ostracised, as denoted by John, who commented; *"uncles, cousins…people I've known for years…what can you say?…having been in it I know how you speak to people from that point on…I know that even if I did try to speak to my sister, she would not bother, so I don't bother…I would rather not risk the disappointment."* This acceptance was echoed by Joel who commented *"you should always know that your family will be there for you no matter what, but I knew she'd* (respondent's mother) *cut me off…because if the governing body told her to jump off a cliff, she'd do it."* Such accounts were common amongst those who had been ostracised having disaffiliated from the JWs, and reflected an expressed sense of discomfort, sadness, and even betrayal, that close family members had chosen unwavering obedience to the JW religion over their relationship.

Although accounts of isolation resultant from family estrangement and ostracism dominated the narratives, divergences occurred. There were individuals who did not experience ostracism

from family members. One respondent who left the JWs remarked; "my *mum was the glue that kept it all together…if my dad would have had his way, he would have done the whole cutting off thing, Dad's a bit more hard core…but Mum could never do that to one of her kids…I relied on that…that safety net was there"* (Harry). This experience indicates that despite disaffiliating (voluntarily) from the JWs, some former members do maintain family bonds. In the same vein, a disfellowshipped respondent also commented *"it was better than I expected…I lost all my witness friends, but my parents say I can come over any time…we just don't go out in public…I'm glad I have them but it's like in secret …at least in secret we are good…I'll take it"* (Alice). Therefore, while commonplace, ostracism from close family and friends was not universally evident among those who leave the JWs. Further, while the maintenance of these close social bonds necessitated some compromise, this appeared to benefit wellbeing.

Overall, the data indicate that exiting the JWs generally results in family alienation. Although estrangement is described as a painful and distressing experience, respondents would not contemplate returning to the religion, although some had (briefly) attempted this in the past. The data indicate divergence in experiences of ostracism; disfellowshipped respondents experienced immediate mandated shunning, whereas those who left voluntarily experienced sporadic ostracism which culminated over time, to ostracism to the same extent as those who were disfellowshipped. Disfellowshipped respondents appeared to expect and anticipate ostracism resultant from their perceived 'sin', whereas respondents who had chosen to leave the JWs also appeared to anticipate and accept ostracism, however, this was as a consequence of their personal choice to leave.

Theme 2. "All the sinners are going to die" - The eschatology of Armageddon

This theme introduces the notion that the eschatology of the JWs may trigger powerful negative self-perceptions in those who leave the religion, and that these can negatively impact mental

health. Indeed, some respondents described how their beliefs in 'Armageddon' continued to pervade their thinking having left. Specifically, the mooted consequences of being a non/former JW member at the time of 'Armageddon' appeared to be a source of distressing rumination. This was exemplified by Diane, who said; *"all the sinners are going to die, and I'd be like, that's me! I'm going to die!…when I got disfellowshipped, I still believed, I was convinced that I was going to die at Armageddon and that it could come at any minute… I accepted it…I still believed it"* (Diane). Here, narratives described that the maintenance of belief strictures, particularly those surrounding death and judgment appeared to be a source of distress. Specifically, when viewed through JW doctrine in this area, many JWs felt that their departure from the faith had powerful connotations for their own death. As Beth illustratively remarked, "*if you don't do this* (return to the JWs) *then you're going to die…it was like a dark cloud that followed me wherever I went and whatever I did"* This remark also typified similar narratives, which centred around finding solutions to this sense of anxiety. Here, evaluations undertaken in light of the apparent maintenance of eschatological beliefs created anxieties which often culminated in serious mental ill-health for those who did not re-join the JWs to avoid 'final judgment'. As Beth highlights: "*some still totally believe it* (Armageddon) *and they're trying to claw their way back…but they often end up going through the mental health system…most of them, the ones that I know, have ended up committing suicide because it's destroyed them"* (Beth). As such, fear of judgment as a former JW, and attempts to restore JW membership in order to avoid (perceived) death at Armageddon may culminate in feelings of desperation, suicidal ideation and suicide requiring assistance from mental health professionals.

However, such accounts were not universal amongst the narratives of former JWs, and the reason for this appeared to emanate from the differences in the method of exiting the religion, and associative practices following departure. Accounts from disfellowshipped individuals

suggested a largely strict avoidance of accounts or research that could discredit elements of JW's beliefs such as Armageddon, owing to their negative connotations with 'apostasy'. This was typified by one respondent remarking; *"they say 'don't talk to anyone who isn't a witness, don't read anything that isn't from us…don't go on the internet and do research about us…you can't do that because God is watching you'...so they stop you from questioning your own faith…you can't be critical like you're taught in education, you're not allowed".* (Diane). Aligning with expressions made by other respondents, this comment may elucidate how a reluctance to question JW doctrine, even following departure, may account for (at least) some of the deleterious effects to wellbeing post-exit. Indeed, most disfellowshipped respondents disclosed that they maintained their belief that the world was about to end for some time post-exit, and that this impacted their mental health adversely. This was characterised by this comment from Sarah; *"I thought I was going to die at Armageddon…you're checking the news a lot for signs and stuff like that…when I was a JW it was always on the news about earthquakes and pestilence and food shortages…it was always drummed into you".* As such, an attentional bias for information on, for example, world disasters in news reports (as signs of the start of Armageddon) appeared to be evident in the narratives of these JWs. Alongside an avoidance of potentially disconfirming information, it therefore appeared that disfellowshipped JWs were particularly susceptible to continued sense of foreboding which had harmful consequences for respondents' wellbeing, and that longer term outcomes could be improved by transitioning away from/changing their beliefs.

In contrast, those who left the religion voluntarily appeared to engage in a process of 'unpicking' eschatological beliefs such as those related with the Armageddon doctrine. In this way, those who had agency in the leaving process appeared to translate this sense of freedom further, into a prerogative to engage with challenges to the religion. Taking this first step was a disturbing experience however, described by one respondent as *"like I was playing with the*

devil" (Beatrice). While this process did not result in immediate nor universal changes to all the respondents' previously held beliefs, accounts suggest that challenging some of the JW doctrine was psychologically beneficial. This was characterised by expressions such as *"some things were immediate, the move toward thinking independently and making my own moral decisions…but the move away from belief to non-belief, to atheism, was more steady…we have to overcome our fear of things like Armageddon…they're irrational fears".* (Craig). This comment typifies what many respondents described as a positive first step, moving away from the belief system which, if maintained may lead to anxiety, rumination, and negative mental health outcomes.

In sum, this theme illustrates how a maintained belief in the eschatology of the JWs may result in harmful impacts to mental health. Indeed, the continued expectation of Armageddon in the mindset of former JWs appeared to incite significant threats to wellbeing. As this finding was restricted to disfellowshipped respondents, the indication is that those who leave voluntarily seem to be prepared to embark on an investigation of their religion, whereas disfellowshipped ones appeared afraid to do so.

Theme 3: "I took my first overdose when I was 14" - Accounts of Suicide, Suicidal Ideation and Experiences of Abuse

This theme explores accounts of suicidal ideation and self-destructive behaviour. It also explores respondents' reactions to various forms of abuse evidenced in the narratives of former JWs and how these interacted with ostracism post-exit.

Experiences of reduced self-esteem, dysphoria, and suicidal ideation resultant from the effects of cumulative ostracism within the family circle and from the community of JWs were recurring narratives. Common within accounts were descriptions whereby continued ostracism, oft despite attempt to reconcile, appeared to elicit feelings of despair which precipitated

suicidal ideation, as this comment from Nick exemplifies; *"I just don't have any family…I have written to my* (JW) *brother and I get no response…my mum sent an email saying 'this will be the last communication that we have'…I did come to a suicidal point, I was about to commit suicide and managed to realise what I was doing and went to A&E and thereafter I was referred for counselling"* (Nick). Here, the more insidious effects of cumulative ostracism elicited thoughts toward suicidal ideation and typifies accounts from numerous former JWs, where long-term family alienation may give rise to feelings of hopelessness and despair. Accounts of suicide attempts were also commonplace and resulted in prolonged interactions with mental health services. This was indicated by Beatrice who commented *"a guy in my congregation was sectioned as well recently…three dead* (suicide)*…another two mentally sectioned...these are all people I knew as I was growing up"* and Beth who commented, *"I've tried a few times…I've done it* (overdosed) *three times… I've been sectioned a few times…When speaking to the psychiatrist and the psychologist…it's always brought back to the religion…they dissect it piece by piece, session by session…they told me they've seen it over and over again with the JWs".* Indeed, support from mental health professionals post-exit appeared to positively impact respondents', though such support was only accessible post-exit. During membership however, this was generally avoided. This was demonstrated by Beth; *"I took my first overdose when I was 14…they wanted me to see a Psychologist but my mum wouldn't let me because she said they don't like JWs"* To the perceived detriment of many respondents' mental health, reluctance to seek Psychological help was typical and was associated with the mistrust of professionals whom respondents described as 'worldly', which conflicted with their JW teachings that they were to be 'no part of the world'. As such, while mental ill-health was not confined strictly to life post-religious exit, engagement with mental health services was described almost exclusively as something that was only accessible after departure and was

often precipitated after a serious worsening of their mental health, or a direct attempt on their life.

Adding weight to the ubiquity of serious mental-ill health among former JWs, as well as personal experiences of suicide and suicidal ideation, common within the narratives were accounts of friends and family who had committed suicide in the past. Indeed, although this was not part of the interview schedule, suicide (following disfellowship) arose as a theme repeatedly in the stories told by interviewees. Joel, for example spoke about the death of his twenty-one year old cousin commenting; *"He got a girlfriend, so was disfellowshipped and shunned, he went to the elders and said 'look I can't cope with this, I've lost everything'…the elders said 'well it's going to be six months before we think you have proved you are truly repentant'…a couple of weeks later he went missing, he was on an ITV missing persons programme…five years later they found a body, it was Donny…I'll never forgive them for that, it is utterly heartless and cruel"* (Joel). Aligning with other narratives, this respondent's account attributes a link between disfellowship, subsequent isolation and spiralling poor mental health. As well as drawing explanatory links for family/friend's (attempted) suicide, narratives also expressed an apparent understanding (if not empathy) for these actions, as the only feasible alternative for mental suffering. This was echoed by Ezra who commented *"it's dangerous to stay in that place too long…I know of a few who have committed suicide…you can't linger because the darkness takes hold of you…you have been branded…it's not worth the mental destruction to yourself"*. This analogy that being disfellowshipped and ostracised by the JW congregation made people feel conspicuously marked or 'branded' aligns with comments made more generally about the 'public shaming' nature of the disfellowship process, and how the associated indignity and humiliation exacerbate the struggles of former JWs. When viewed alongside the narratives of other respondents, these expressions indicate the far reaching and

negative effects of ostracism following religious exit, and the self-destructive actions that may be taken when seeking to alleviate such mental suffering.

Other forms of self-destructive behaviour were also described within narratives, manifesting in the over-consumption of substances, as well as unhealthy eating habits. For example, respondents indicated that alcohol was used as a tool to numb the psychological pain resultant from losses of close family relationships. Whether this was spirits, as typified by Pat's comment *"get a bottle of brandy and drink it",* or wine, as illustrated by Diane *"I went down to a stupid size…lost loads of weight, drank like a fish, absolute proper drinking to cope with it all…to numb it…it was like a numbing experience, just drink it away so you can't feel anything…then you can go to sleep"*, respondents appeared to use alcohol as a crutch to alleviate the effects of loneliness and isolation, and induce sleep. This tendency among interviewees to engage in unhealthy patterns of eating and/or excessive alcohol consumption appeared to result in poorer health, and when viewed in conjunction with accounts relating to suicide, is an indication of the extent to which being disfellowshipped may have potentially serious implications.

As well as narratives of internal struggling and trauma, accounts also included references to inter-personal violence, including intimate partner violence, childhood sexual abuse and rape, which had deleterious effects on self-esteem and wellbeing. For example, Nick commented; *"my mum became a JW, remarried, and he was a paedophile…yeah…so there was a good number of years suffering there…I never had any counselling, the police were never contacted at the time…I went online and looked up Jehovah's Witnesses and child abuse, and my world came crashing down".* In a similar vein, Craig recounted: *when I was ten I was raped by someone in the congregation, there were two of them…I thought they were going to kill me…a few years ago I started having therapy to help me deal with the child rape…I found that very difficult…flashbacks and stuff… there are times you have to be prepared to face some very*

dark places where you are at the lowest you can be psychologically…the religion and its structures bears some responsibility for what happened". As well as the physical and mental short and long-term suffering caused by this violence directly, accounts from respondents who had been subject to interpersonal violence were also typified by themes of self-blame, as well as feeling let down by the JW religion for failing to offer protection or take action. For example, in describing the effects of domestic violence within her marriage, Janice demonstrably noted; *"violent to the point of being hospitalised once, having fractures of bones three times…going to the elders* (church leaders) *four times with these injuries…they told me 'maybe if you prayed a little bit harder?'…so I left the meeting feeling like a shit wife and a shit sister* (sister - term used to describe a female JW within a congregation)*…was I being beaten because my faith wasn't strong enough? My head was so messed up…I still feel messed up 13 years later"*. Here, perceptions that deficits in spirituality may have resulted in victimisation were notable and may indicate a form of repeat (or secondary) victimisation. Specifically, respondents who had experienced abusive situations in this way, appeared to exhibit multiple traumas, the initial trauma from abuse and trauma from the attribution of blame. Furthermore, for some, this trauma was compounded further by ostracism post-exit. In this way, some respondents' narratives also revealed an apparent cycle of abuse, trauma, and repeated victimisation within those who left (and sometimes returned) to the faith. This was demonstrated by Lisa who comments; *"he* (husband) *became abusive toward me, ripped the telephone out of the wall and threw it at me…I was shunned so I went back to him…I left him again and ended up in three women's refuges…I was able to get support from my new GP…he told me that every form of abuse that I've gone through has led up to it* (PTSD diagnosis)*"*. This quote aptly demonstrates the dilemma described by a number of respondents; While exit may reduce risk of physical harm, the distress caused by resultant social ostracism may force a return to the religion,

precipitating a further cycle of violence, blame and repeat victimisation, with yet more damage to self-esteem and mental wellbeing.

Subtheme: "it's OK to be gay" – From homophobia to acceptance

Generally, experiences of trauma and ostracism were associated with reductions in self-esteem and appeared to be determinants of poor mental health. Similarly, described accounts of dysphoria, mental ill-health and suicide were associated with sexuality, and perceptions of/reactions to homosexuality. Here respondents appeared to struggle with acceptance of their own sexuality, owing to their JW background and associated beliefs.

Accounts denoted an implicit understanding that homosexuality is incompatible with JW beliefs, creating a choice between rejecting their religion or their sexuality. That this disconnect had a damaging impact to mental health was indicated by Craig who comments, *"knowing I was gay made me suicidal…you don't see a way out…there is no light at the end of the tunnel…you start thinking about it…what would be the easiest way to do it? You even think of doing it but making it look like it's not suicide"* Here, narratives indicate that gay JWs who cannot their resolve internal conflicts between their sexuality and internalised JW beliefs about sexuality may view suicide as a viable option to remove this suffering. Respondents also understood the death by suicide of homosexual friends/family in similar ways. As illustrated by Beatrice who recollected; *"one of my friends was gay and he killed himself… another guy killed himself, it was all part of the gay thing…they were brought up as witnesses and I don't think it's a coincidence".* In keeping with other accounts of suicide within the data, it seems that the taking of one's own life or the suicide of another is often viewed as a deliberate attempt to abate distress. These experiences illustrate the deleterious mental health effects of what appear to be competing personal (sexual) and religious identities.

As well as the distress caused by this apparent internal conflict, disclosure of homosexuality to JW family members were also commonly recounted as negative and upsetting experiences. This was typified by Beatrice who comments about how revealing her sexuality impacted her relationship with her JW mother; *"now I have come out as gay…we've had screaming rows…she's called me a freak"* and comments from Craig; *"my mum was very distressed about me leaving* (the JWs) *and then me coming out as gay… I was the golden boy, the pioneer and elder".* Comments such as these tended to underscore how the families of respondents perceived homosexuality as a perversion and a sin, leading to rejection and even ostracism. Fear of negative familial reactions may also explain why other respondents chose not to disclose while they remained in the religion, hiding their identities, and engaging in heterosexual relationships, in apparent efforts to "fit in" and/or deny their true selves. Indeed, some interviewees described waiting to disclose their sexual identity for extended periods of time even after they had left the JWs. As Craig exemplifies; *"I knew I was gay, I tried to live as a straight JW man* (married) *for 13 years…it took me another six months* (after exiting the JWs) *that I decided it was ok to be gay".* Here, efforts to conceal or intentionally redefine a gay identity motivated over-compensation in religious activities. That this added to feelings of dysphoria was indicated by Craig; *I tried to pioneer, be an elder, and be a shepherd to other people but feeling terribly hypocritical because of the feelings I had towards my sexual orientation…hating myself and feeling I was perverted."* Here, attempts to assuage guilt through religious pursuits and rituals, combined with a deliberate attempt to realign sexuality led to self-loathing. These comments indicate that homosexual JWs may face significant challenges to their mental health, owing to fear associated with forbidden sexuality. Thus, homosexual JWs face an untenable position. Either remain a JW and conceal sexuality (to avoid ostracism) or leave the JWs and experience ostracism.

In sum, this theme explored respondents' experiences of trauma during their membership of the JWs. Responses/reactions to traumatic events appeared to interact with ostracism post-exit producing secondary victimisation. Respondents indicated that they did not seek professional help during membership because of the JW belief that suffering may be relieved through religiosity. This is an indication that JWs may use spiritual pursuits and rituals such as prayer to assuage the harmful effects of abuse, rather than seeking help outside of the organisation.

5.3 Discussion

Previous work has documented various motivations for exit from the JWs including perceived restrictive lifestyle (Hookway & Habibis, 2015), doubt and disagreement with doctrine (Keller, Klein, Hood, & Streib, 2013), and sexual incompatibility (Lalich & McLaren, 2010). This study further explores these challenges through analysis of the narratives of 26 former JWs. This chapter of the thesis focuses on experiences of ostracism and how this impacted mental health post-exit. It further investigates consequences of abuse that respondents described in their narrative accounts.

Respondents in this study were either disfellowshipped or had left the JW religion voluntarily. Despite the exit method however, ostracism was a typical experience, and was reported to be psychologically painful and distressing. Although some research has suggested that an exception to shunning is made for members of disfellowshipped JWs' immediate family, and for JWs who disaffiliate voluntarily (Introvigne, 2021), the current findings support other research that ostracism is (with few exceptions) ubiquitous, irrespective of familial ties, and is experienced by those who are disfellowshipped as well as those who leave voluntarily (Lalich & McLaren, 2010; Ransom et al., 2021; Testoni et al., 2019). Accounts of the present chapter reinforce the reported distress caused by losing contact with both social community and close family/friendship and support previous suggestions that ostracism can be physiologically

painful (Kelly, McDonald, & Rushby, 2012), as well as being associated with activity in areas of the brain that are associated with the recognition of pain (Eisenberger, Lieberman & Williams, 2003). Furthermore, the current findings offer support for the well-established links between ostracism and mental health (Williams, 2009), whereby respondents recounted the negative impact that being cut-off from the JW community (including family and friends), had on their wellbeing and mental health.

Nevertheless, although the experience of ostracism was evident regardless of respondent' exit method, there was some apparent variability in the degree of distress experienced as a consequence of this social loss. Indeed, the current data indicate that the ostracism post exit elicited acute and long-term distress amongst those who were disfellowshipped, as opposed to left of their own accord (i.e., faded/disassociated). Here, those who were disfellowshipped reported particularly powerful self-perceptions of being 'sinful' for failing to uphold JW standards of belief and behaviour. Although previous research has not explicitly dichotomised between forced and voluntary exit, work by Lalich and McLaren (2010), illustrates how disfellowship from the JWs may elicit self-loathing, self-destructive behaviour, suicidal ideation, and suicide (Lalich & McLaren, 2010). Although Lalich and colleague (ibid) predominantly focused on religious exit owing to incompatible sexual identities, the present research findings may add further evidence that disfellowshipped persons are more likely to experience suicidal ideation and suicide attempts potentially owing to the fact that the disfellowship process and its common association with rule contravention or, to use JW dogma, 'sin'. This is further important when considered alongside the findings of the current chapter, whereby those who left voluntarily appeared to experience more gradual and sporadic ostracism over time. Although this slower process of enacting ostracism ultimately culminated in social exclusion to the same extent as those who were disfellowshipped, the finding is notable as it may go some way to explaining the better outcomes observed in this subgroup.

Furthermore, the accounts of those who chose to leave do not appear to accord with the first stage of Williams (2009) temporal needs threat model of ostracism that indicates an initial *reflexive* response of threat to sense of belonging. On the contrary, these respondents indicated that they had expected, accepted, and mentally prepared for ostracism, indicating an awareness that ostracism follows religious exit, notwithstanding the exit method (See also Testoni et al., 2019). This apparent mental preparedness, along with having a sense of agency in having left, appeared to ameliorate (at least partially) the negative effects of ostracism on wellbeing and may explain why outcomes are worse after disfellowship.

Respondents' accounts of the ostracism experience also add illumining insights to existent understanding. Here, being ostracised was described as being treated as (or even referred to as being) 'dead' by their JW family. Aligning with research that has described death as a metaphor for ostracism (Case & Williams, 2004; Hales, 2018), the present research also found that ostracism to this degree had a negative impact on their lives. As well as being treated as dead, respondents described mourning their (still living) 'lost' family members, in a fashion akin to descriptions of the grieving process which are traditionally ascribed to losing loved ones in death. This aligns with other research in the ex-JW community that has documented how 'grieving the living' can cause anxiety, dysphoria, self-destructive behaviour, and suicide/suicidal ideation (Ransom et al., 2021). It also finds commonalities with research that has explored the loss associated with 'missing persons', described as ambiguous loss and anticipatory mourning (see Testoni, Palazzo, Iacona, Zamperini, & Wieser, 2020). As such, this research adds nuance to this notion that loss of social contact/interaction can elicit grieving and associated psychological pain akin to the death of a loved one, although there is an added complexity caused by the ambiguity of this loss - in the sense that no one is dead and this loss *could* be rectified (by a return to the faith by the JWs, or by the finding of the missing person in the case of Testoni's work). This work therefore affords insights into the impact of ostracism,

the grieving process, and the associated mental health outcomes, complicated further by the ambiguity of the process and by different methods of exit from the JW faith.

In accordance with previous research which has documented the maintenance of JW-related belief structures post exit (Friedson, 2015), the current research also reveals belief-retention post exit, sometimes for extended periods of time. Specifically, the eschatology of the JWs appeared to trigger powerful negative self-perceptions among respondents, with seemingly negative consequences for wellbeing and mental health. Centring around the perceived consequences of being a non/former JW member ("a sinner"), particularly at the time of 'Armageddon', the rumination upon these beliefs was described as eliciting high levels of anxiety. Such findings support those from chapter 5, whereby former JWs are "physically out", having exited, but were "mentally in", as they still lived in expectation of 'end-times' doctrine (described in chapter five of this thesis as a POMI identity). Although former work has not explored the notion of retained belief among JWs, work by Hookway and Habibis' (2015) amongst young former JWs similarly found various levels of belief regarding Armageddon, and that this appeared to hinder their progress in establishing a life outside of the religion (Hookway & Habibis, 2015). The current research therefore adds to this literature, which suggests that those who leave the JWs may maintain (at least some) religious beliefs, and this may impact their lives post exit.

Adding further nuance, as well as avenues for future intervention, the current research may also provide insights into when and why these eschatological beliefs may be retained, and how this may manifest in different mental-health outcomes. In line with similar findings from this thesis (regarding differences between former JWs according to their method of exit), maintenance of beliefs was not universal amongst the narratives of former JWs. Here, those who were disfellowshipped appeared to preserve beliefs surrounding Armageddon and related constructs post-exit, sometimes for extended periods of time, and avoided disconfirmatory

evidence, while documenting close attention to world events which may, according to doctrine, indicate the nearing thereof (e.g., world disaster). In contrast, those who left the religion voluntarily appeared to engage in a process of ‘unpicking’ eschatological beliefs, searching for evidence against doctrine. That this group did not appear to report longer term anxiety (in contrast to those who were disfellowshipped) may therefore suggest that challenging JW doctrine post-exit could be psychologically beneficial and protect against some of the longer-term mental health problems that are commonly found among former JWs (Lalich & McLaren, 2010). That disfellowshipped JWs who retain JW-related beliefs report greater psychological suffering may also support the assertion of Friedson (2015) that because JWs are instructed to avoid associations with outsiders (Ringnes, et al., 2017), this may prevent them seeking psychological/professional assistance, as was similarly attested by respondents in the current research. Research among Seventh-day Adventists also suggests that social support may be important when considering the relationship between eschatological beliefs and mental health (Davis, 2006). While this has not been hitherto explored among JWs, the current research may correspondingly support this assertion and provide new insights into the potential link between ostracism from the JWs and mental health. Specifically, it suggests that method of exit and associated behaviours post exist may be important for subsequent wellbeing. Specifically, in the current research, accounts of immediate and consistent social ostracism were more common among those who were disfellowshipped, and that this group were also more likely to report retaining eschatological beliefs systems post exit, while avoiding disconformity information and focusing on “confirmatory” evidence of such (e.g., world disasters in the news). As such, low(er) social support owing to immediate and strictly enforced ostracism may be postulated to exacerbate the maintenance of anxiety-provoking beliefs which could culminate in poorer mental health and offer a potential explanation for the observation that disfellowshipped respondents reported greater levels of distress centring around beliefs about final judgment.

These findings may therefore offer important insights when considering the longer-term mental health outcomes of those who leave the JWs, pointing towards avenue for future interventions amongst this (and similarly vulnerable) groups.

Although previous work has not explored short term/long term responses to religious ostracism, Testoni and colleagues' (2009) accounts of the leaving process similarly found that this was associated with 'relief' at no longer being tied to religious rites and strict norms. While Testoni's work was restricted to respondents who left the JWs voluntarily, the present research extends these findings by including experiences of disfellowshipped respondents. By distinguishing between the experiences of voluntary versus forced exit, the present research found that respondents generally, regardless of exit, experienced an initial sense of relief at no longer performing religious obligations such as public preaching. This appears to contrast with Williams' (2009) temporal needs threat model of ostracism, which suggests that initial responses to ostracism are 'reflexive' and associated with threat to belonging. Building and extending upon this existent research, the current research suggests that, over time, disfellowshipped respondents experienced greater feelings of guilt and shame associated with their perceived 'sinfulness', whereas those who left voluntarily retained their relief at no longer being tied to membership. This noteworthy finding adds to the notion that having a sense of agency over the leaving process may ameliorate the negative effects of ostracism and may serve to avoid the 'public shaming' nature of the disfellowship process.

Experiences of poor self-esteem, depression, dysphoria, and suicide/attempted suicide/suicidal ideation were recurring narratives within the current research, echoing recent qualitative work among former JWs (Ransom et al., 2021). Specifically, accounts of depression and suicidal ideation were evident frequently and were often attributed to loss of social bonds or rejected social contact. So too, attempted suicide was described as a purposeful act to remove pain and suffering, and accounts of JW friends and family members who had killed themselves were

described, empathetically, as the only feasible alternative to mental suffering. The current research therefore echoes suggestions that being disfellowshipped may contribute to poor mental health, suicidal ideation, and suicide (Lalich & McLaren, 2010; Ransom et al., 2021). These findings also accord more generally with research linking loneliness and isolation with mental health and suicide (Calati et al., 2019) and suggest that establishing social support networks upon religious exit may be integral for mental wellbeing.

Also linked with (attempted) suicide, suicidal ideation and poor mental health were narratives surrounding interpersonal abuse and sexuality. Here, supporting research exploring childhood sexual abuse within religious contexts (e.g., the Truth Project conducted in 2019; Hurcombe et al., 2020), and independent inquiries into childhood sexual abuse (IICSA – iicsa.org.uk) abuse experiences were described by former JWs, along with poor institutional responses to disclosed childhood sexual abuse (CSA) and failures to support victims. Narratives support the notion that protection of the religious institution and individual perpetrators means that victims and survivors of CSA are often disbelieved, discredited and unsupported (ibid). It was also apparent that this abuse can have spiritually detrimental effects, particularly where the religion provided the foundation to their beliefs, social structures, and daily lives, according with previous research into CSA in religious institutions (Hurcombe et al., 2020). So too, accounts of other forms of interpersonal abuse (e.g., intimate partner violence), and of failing to receive support upon disclosure, were evident in the narratives in the current chapter and associated with poor mental health, in support of previous work with JWs by Friedson (2015). Former JWs who had been abused also shared both self-blaming narratives, as well as accounts of blame attributions from other JWs. In both cases (perceived) deficits in spirituality were ascribed as the potential cause of their victimisation. Attributions of blame within cases of sexual assault are well-established within the forensic psychology literature (Bhuptani & Messman-Moore, 2019; Filipas & Ullman, 2007; Ullman, 1996; 1997) and have an established psychological basis

(e.g., just world hypothesis - Lerner & Miller, 1978). Nevertheless, explorations of former JWs experiences, and the impact thereof, have been diminutive (see Barber, 2006 for a notable exception). The current research therefore offers unique insights. Specifically, there was evidence of repeat (or secondary) victimisation amongst former JWs who had been abused, with trauma from both the abuse itself, and from the attribution of blame. For some, this trauma was also compounded further by ostracism post-exit, and by cycles of abuse precipitated when returning to the faith to revive social connections. Echoing wider research linking past abuse with poor mental health and (attempted) suicide (Lopez-Castroman et al., 2015; Plunkett, et al., 2001), the current research also found that this abuse, and related experiences, were attributed as the cause of suicidal thoughts and attempted suicide. While the motive to avoid internal suffering is found generally in the study of (attempted) suicide (Vatne & Nåden, 2018), the current research is also the first to explore such themes amongst former JWs. Likewise, while sexual identity (Garbarski, 2021) and its links with religion (Hernandez, Mahoney & Pargament, 2014) have been explored previously, the current research also suggests that sexual identity was a cause of mental suffering for many former JWs, as well as a potential antecedent of suicide. Here, aligning with research by Lalich and McLaren (2010), (internalised) beliefs about homosexuality and fears of ostracism meant that many gay JWs struggled to come to accept their sexual identity, even post exit.

5.4 Limitations and Conclusions

Several limitations need to be borne in mind when considering the findings of this study. Although the sample size of 26 participants is considered generous according to the principles defining IPA research, it may be that findings are not generalisable across the ex JW community. Similarly, and by way of reflexive disclosure, although the analysis of the narratives was performed with the greatest of care and integrity, it must be acknowledged that

from the perspective of the lead researcher as a former Jehovah's Witness, this may have coloured the interpretation of the data.

This thesis chapter sought to add to the body of literature that explores exit from the JW religion. This chapter focuses on (i) ostracism within the JW community, (ii) ostracism experienced as a family member, and (iii) experiences of trauma associated with membership. Findings indicated that ostracism was a ubiquitous experience when exiting the JWs, notwithstanding the exit method. However, the disfellowship process appeared to elicit more harmful impacts to mental health and wellbeing than leaving through choice. This appeared to be resultant from the enforced nature of the disfellowshipping process as opposed to the sense of agency associated with voluntary disaffiliation. Disfellowshipped respondents experienced profound feelings of shame and humiliation because of the 'sin' they had been disfellowshipped for, and this seemed to interact with a retained belief in Armageddon eschatology, aligning with the POMI identity discussed in chapter five of this thesis. This elicited a sense of foreboding, depression and suicidal ideation that was not experienced to the same extent as respondents who had left voluntarily, and who tended to no longer believe the doctrine. Findings from this study provide insights and add further nuance to the processes of leaving the JWs. Future research should further explore the impact of retained belief when designing interventions for exiters of high-control religions such as the JWs.

Chapter 6: Study 4: From Social Death to a Social Resurrection: A Social Identity Approach to Overcoming the Effects of Religious Ostracism

6.1 Introduction

Identity can be conceptualised in different ways. Study two of this thesis explores how a *personal* identity may be impacted when transitioning out of stricter style religions such as the JWs (e.g., who am I?). This chapter, however, will focus on identification with *social* groups (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel, 2010; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social identity - a person's sense of 'who they are' based on their group memberships is postulated to endow a sense of pride, belonging and self-esteem. The human proclivity to divide people into groups has resulted in social categorisation and stereotyping, where similarities and differences between groups often become exaggerated. This can result in prejudiced views and has formed the basis for forms of religious intolerance in the past. On the other hand, one of the many posited benefits to (group) religious affiliation is the social support that it provides (Gebauer, Sedikides, & Neberich, 2012). The final empirical chapter of this thesis uses a social identity approach (Brown, 2020; Tajfel, Henri, 1978; Tajfel, Henry & Turner, 1979) to explore the impact of terminated group membership which typically occurs when individuals leave stricter style religious groups. It will do so by an examining the experiences of former JWs and exploring the mechanisms by which the negative social costs of leaving may potentially be alleviated, by transitioning one's social identity and building new social networks.

Membership of the JWs typically provides a substantial social network (Holden, 2002; Penton, 2015). Indeed, on its website (jw.org), the organisation describes itself as a loving worldwide brotherhood of 'brothers and sisters' (Penton, 2015), denoting an almost 'familial' closeness between members. However, the social support from JWs is conditional on remaining within

the faith and consequently, JWs are one of a number of religious groups that are considered a *high-cost* religion (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010), owing to the social costs associated with exit (and membership). Accordingly, research has found that those who disaffiliate from such religions experience loss of belonging from withdrawn social support in the form of terminated friendships and loss to family relationships, as well as intellectual, logistical and financial challenges (Berger, 2015; Fazzino, 2014; Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016; Iannaccone, 1994, Sheitle & Adamczyk, 2010), which may lead to isolation, loneliness and negative impacts to physical and mental health (Lalich & McLaren, 2010; Ransom et al., 2021; Testoni et al., 2019). Indeed, regardless of whether exit is forced (disfellowship), or voluntary (disassociation/fading), former JWs typically report being ostracised by their family, friends, and the wider religious community (Aboud, 2020; Holden, 2002; Ransom et al., 2021). Among JWs, where identity is defined by membership, and by family/friendship groups within the JWs, those who leave may therefore undergo significant changes to their social identity resultant from withdrawn social support, transitioning from belonging to a worldwide 'brotherhood' to the experience of a social death (as referred to in chapter three of this thesis).

Although scant in its scope, previous work has explored the importance of identity, group membership and the process of resolving internal conflicts by transitioning out of the JWs and forming new support networks (Lalich & McLaren, 2010). In this study of predominantly disfellowshipped individuals, homosexual former JWs described their internal conflicts between their sexual and religious identities (as being gay is contrary to the tenets of the JWs) and that establishing new support networks outside of the JWs, and 'a Common Bond' was an important process (Lalich & McLaren, 2010). Illustrating the importance of establishing a new social identity by finding support post-exit, this research therefore suggests that wellbeing in former JWs may be understood through a social identity lens. Similarly, research which has explored *voluntary* disaffiliation from the JWs (Hookway & Habibis, 2015; Testoni et al.,

2019) also highlights the struggles faced by JWs who must seek to establish a new social identity and fit into a world they had been taught to avoid (Aten et al., 2010; Ringnes, Stålsett, Hegstad, & Danbolt, 2017). Ringnes and colleagues (2017) for example, found that end-time expectations mean that JWs tend to focus on future rather than present goals, while Aten and colleagues' (2010) focus on psychotherapy highlights common therapeutic challenges resultant from an engrained suspicion of the world, making the establishing of a new social identity difficult. Resultantly, it has been found that building a new social identity post-exit is a challenging process notwithstanding the exit method. Findings further suggest however, that distinct aspects of respondents' social identity were related differentially to outcomes. As such, while maintaining a sense of agency in regard to their exit may alleviate the impact of social losses, being raised according to JW doctrine provokes challenges to transitioning identity out of the religion (Hookway & Habibis, 2015). These works combine to suggest that leaving the JWs may affect one's entire social identity and that wellbeing may be dependent on managing this by the establishment of new social groups.

The notion that establishing positive relationships within new social groups may be beneficial for individuals during life transitions is not new. Research indicates that joining social groups more consistent with positive life paths, after leaving more harmful groups may be beneficial. For example, in the substance use literature, recovery from addiction is conceptualised as a process of identity reformulation, where individuals' social identities change as they transition out of historic social spheres towards new groups that support more positive lifestyles (Best et al., 2016; Kay & Monaghan, 2019; see chapter three for full overview). As such, this social identity transition is thought to decrease the likelihood of relapse and increase chances of recovery (Buckingham, Frings, & Albery, 2013). Although transitioning away from religious membership is not the same experience as recovery from drug/alcohol dependence or desistance from crime (Best, Irving, & Albertson, 2017), commonalities have been observed.

For example, former JWs have described the process of reformulating one's identity according to new group memberships, necessitated by loss of previous social groups (Ransom et al., 2021). Thus, these works merge in providing an indication that transitioning towards new social groups consistent with new life paths may be beneficial to former JWs seeking to establish new social networks.

In a similar vein, work in the study of neurological rehabilitation also highlights the interconnection of social support and social identity and their impact on longer term health outcomes. Here, Walsh and colleagues (2015) found evidence of improvements after incidence of acquired brain injury, (which often results in identity becoming disrupted), vis-à-vis the application of a model of reciprocity between social support and self-as-doer identity (Walsh, Muldoon, Gallagher, & Fortune, 2015). Specifically, with observed benefits to emotional wellbeing, *affiliative identity* – the ascribed groups to which individuals affiliate and belong to (e.g., family,) was found to make social support possible and promoted a *self-as-doer* identity construct. This self-as doer 'achieved' identity (e.g., occupation), rather than ascribed identity (e.g., family) hinges on active participation in rehabilitation activities. The finding that individuals engaged in post-acute community neurorehabilitation by 'doing' meaningful activities (self-as-doer) is an indication of the extent to which identity can be intertwined with activity, and supports the notion of the "the social cure" (Haslam, Jetten, & Alexander, 2011; Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009; Haslam et al., 2008), where social supports is evidenced as an important factor in coping with negative life experiences such as stroke. While not previously applied to the study of JWs, the notion of building social support and affiliative, and self-as-doer identities post exit may be beneficial to the understanding of the experiences and longer-term outcomes of those who leave the JWs (and other "high-cost" religions). The current chapter therefore assessed how the notion of reciprocation may mean that former JWs who form new friendships/support groups post exit (i) receive comfort and support from those

who have experienced similar occurrences of ostracism, and (ii) in line with the principle of reciprocity, may actively give support to others. This may be postulated to be evidenced more temporally as recovery and identity reformulation progresses (longitudinally), a concept that will be explored in this study.

While the wider psychological literature and early work among former JWs suggests that the transition of one's social identity by forming new support networks is important, there are also theoretical grounds upon which to hypothesise that this process may be more complex amongst some former JWs sub-groups. For example, in order to explain distinctions noted between the leaving experiences of born-in exJWs and adult converts (Ransom et al., 2021), and divergence between leaving experiences (forced versus voluntary), it could be speculated that these contextual considerations may mediate identity transition. For example, the theoretical framework of identity fusion (IF) (Swann, Gómez, Seyle, Morales, & Huici, 2009a) may help further elucidate the challenges in withdrawing membership from tight-knit groups such as JWs. IF theory postulates that an alignment of self-concept with that of the group may cause the experience of feeling a visceral sense of oneness with the group due to the fusion of the personal and social self (Swann, William & Buhrmester, 2015). Although not explored within the context of the JWs, this theoretical construct may help to elucidate whether being 'born-in' to the JWs may exacerbate the process of identity transition out of the JWs due to a stronger identity fusion in comparison to those who chose to convert as adults. Furthermore, the principles of IF, which include the *Agentic-personal* principle where a strong sense of self is maintained (Swann, Gomez, Huici, Morales, & Hixon, 2010; Swann et al., 2014)*,* and the *identity synergy* principle which implies that synergy between the personal and social self may give rise to motivating more powerful group behaviour (Gómez, Morales, Hart, Vázquez, & Swann, 2011) may help to elucidate how JWs can endorse and engage in religious ostracism within the family circle despite this being at great personal cost. In addition, the *relational ties*

principle which assumes that relationships forged within highly fused groups may be felt akin to family relationships, powerful enough to motivate self-sacrifice (Swann, Gómez, Seyle, Morales, & Huici, 2009), may explain the proclivity of JWs to refer to each other as brother and sister (Holden, 2002; Penton, 2015), fostering strong ties sufficient to motivate social exclusion of family and friends who have defected. Finally, because the *irrevocability* principle assumes that IF remains largely stable over time (due to powerful emotional attachments, beliefs, and relationships), it may be speculated that disfellowship, as an experience of forced social loss may give rise to loss of belonging associated with loss of social identity. In addition, for individuals born into the JWs, it may be postulated that childhood inculcation may result in a stronger fusion than those who chose to convert as adults. While not previously applied to the study of religious exit, IF may offer researchers a useful tool with which to understand the experiences of those who leave the JWs. Specifically, it may elucidate why exit is associated with documented struggles to forge new identities (personal and social, e.g., Hookway & Habibis, 2015). It may also explain the differences between individuals born-in to the JWs and converts, specifically, that being born-into the JWs results in stronger identity fusion due to childhood inculcation into the faith.

In sum, the current research aims to improve current understanding of the mechanism of religious exit from the JWs and how this impacts individuals' social identities and wellbeing. By exploring contextually, the process of exiting the JWs, this research seeks to elucidate what factors mediate social identity transition from JW to non-JW. Further, this research will distinguish between exit paths by comparing forced and voluntary exit and how this impacts social identity transition. Finally, by dichotomising between circumstances of membership (born-in versus adult conversion), this research will add insights to the processes of religious exit and its implications to social identity.

The chapter addresses the following research questions: (i) how do online social media support groups aid social identity transition out of the JWs? (ii) does exit method (forced versus voluntary) impact this process? (iii) does being inculcated into JW doctrine from childhood impact the ability to establish a new social identity after leaving JW community? To elucidate changes over time, this research will also include longitudinal interviews with a subsample of seven former JWs who had exited the religion within the last five years prior to participating in this research.

Method (See chapter 4)

6.2 Findings

The narratives of respondents were coded thematically. This chapter reports on themes of

Theme 1: - "I felt like I belonged" – social identity within the JW religion.

Theme 2: - "literally overnight, they all went" - social identity loss in the JWs.

Theme 3: - From social death to a social resurrection - social identity transition and new social groups.

Theme 1: "I felt like I belonged" – Social identity and social ties in the JW religion.

This theme explores former JWs sense of social identity during their membership of the JW religion. Individuals who were disfellowshipped appeared to feel strongly attached to the religion prior to their expulsion, with their sense of self and purpose derived from membership of the faith, engagement with the church, and from the day-to-day enactment of religious practices. This was characterised by expressions such as *"I felt like I belonged…I think I felt it more when I became a regular pioneer* (a full-time public evangeliser) *…before that, it felt like I was still outside the club…once I got that title, I felt finally in… was like, I'm in now…I'm*

good". (Alice). Comments such as these serve to illustrate how participation in shared religious rituals such as public preaching appeared to reinforce feelings of commonality and belonging among respondents and formed the basis for a firmly established sense of social identity within the JWs. These shared rituals also appeared to increase self-esteem and as such, engagement in shared, faith-based activities/rituals may reinforce social identity in the religion. Involvement in the religion also extended to social activities and formed a further part of respondents' lives, as characterised by a comment from Sonia; *"I used to have friends' round for meals… every week a different set of people, it's like you've got an instant social life".* This, the notion that friendships were built upon religious commonalities rather than being forged naturally was a common sentiment among respondents and illustrates how a religious identity and a social identity converge, working to strengthen social bonds between members. This intersection of faith, identity and group membership was also commonly reflected upon in the narratives of those who had left the JWs, as typified by this comment from Beth who said; *"yeah you feel like you belong to the organisation, but it's very false when you step out of it and look in…one minute they'd be your friends and the next minute you can be out…but when you're in it you feel part of an organisation…they are your brothers and sisters".* Such sentiments indicate that close relationships formed within the organisation are described as *familial* and are important to members, although these relationships are understood as being contingent on maintained membership. Once religious bonds were broken, social bonds quickly followed resulting in isolation and a sense of social loss (as outlined in theme 2).

Further evidencing how social identities were firmly constructed around shared social interactions which took place within the JWs community, disfellowshipped respondents highlighted that they were encouraged to interact exclusively with other JWs, meaning that this was all they really knew. As such, individuals' entire social identities were intertwined with their membership, as exemplified by Sarah who said; *"you're brought up insular…all my*

friends were JWs…all of them…when you grow up as a JW, family and friends who aren't JWs, you don't associate with them…because they tell you not to associate with them", and comments from Dawn; *"if you were born in, you have no friends on the outside, so it's your entire support network".* These sentiments reiterate the exclusivity of JW membership and highlight that the JW teachings often culminate in social networks that are entirely predicated upon religious association. Although respondents described their JWs friendships in the religion as genuine, they were also aware that these relationships were contingent on approved status, meaning that religious departure would culminate in friendship termination that was seen as a normative (actively encouraged) behaviour. Viewed through this lens, leaving the JW religion therefore threatens one's social relationships and, with it, one's sense of identity and place in the world. This was indicated by comments from Diane: *"the cult demands that you do not associate with anyone else other than JWs, you can't have close relationships with anyone other than witnesses…so, I did belong, and I had some really good friends, and I was always dead happy with my friends…I've not got that anymore, that massive part, your whole life has gone, it's bizarre".* Comments such as these suggest that those who are disfellowshipped lose their established groups, and with it, their sense of belonging. As such, respondents were very aware that their social identity in the JWs was intertwined with membership and contingent on maintaining membership as an active JW.

Akin to those who were disfellowshipped, respondents who left voluntarily also reported close social ties within the JW community and that membership was associated with a sense of belonging. As such, data indicate that membership was associated with a strong sense of meaning and social identity from their JW status and their friendships/relationships with fellow JWs. This was typified by this comment; *"I had some really close relationships with people who were witnesses…all my friendships were witnesses ones"* (Beatrice), and comments from Julie *"being a witness was being part of a worldwide family, that's what I thrived on…that's*

why I pioneered, it was about the people". Also aligning with accounts of those who were disfellowshipped, these respondents indicated an awareness that their social relationships were largely exclusively among fellow members of the JW faith, built around engagement with religious practices and were dependent on continued membership making their social groups an important part of who they were.

However, unique to the accounts of those who chose to leave the JWs, respondents' accounts suggested that struggles to maintain a religious identity were often experienced prior to religious exit and ultimately informed decisions to leave the religion. Oft driven by a disagreement with facets of the JW doctrine, respondents described a process of questioning how they could remain a member of religion whilst disagreeing with some of the belief structures. This was indicated by Beatrice who recollected her motivations for leaving the JWs; *"God is going to kill people who don't deserve it…it wasn't fair and didn't make sense…I was repulsed by the whole thing to be honest."* and Mark, who commented that *"I read crisis of conscience by Ray Franz and that just dismantled any belief in the organisation that I had…I basically said that I don't believe that the religion is true".* These comments illustrate how disagreement with doctrine elicited complex thought processes where JWs internally questioned how they could maintain their membership of this religious group when they disagreed with its teachings/actions. At the same time, respondents reported weighing up this internal disagreement with the awareness that leaving would culminate in a loss of their social groups/ties as well as the cessation of their religious membership, further complicating the decision-making process

Indeed, in contrast to accounts from JWs who were disfellowshipped, those who chose to leave described a complex and sometimes lengthy process of social struggle, centring around relationships and identity, which preceded the decision to leave. Here, while those who were disfellowshipped generally reported feeling socially content within their JWs support groups,

the accounts of those who chose to leave featured periods of identity-related turmoil, and of 'faking' satisfaction with membership and relations. For example, Katie comments *"for a long time, I struggled with the doctrine…kind of felt like I was on the outside looking in…I never felt like I did belong"* and comments from George *"I always had difficulty finding interest in it because it was very forced… I couldn't associate with kids outside of school, and in the religion, kids didn't associate with us because we weren't strong enough in the religion. It felt like I didn't have anyone".* Here, the experience of fitting in neither with the 'world' nor with the congregation of JWs meant that some respondents appeared to struggle to forge a social identity in either environment, with detrimental effects to wellbeing. For some, this meant developing relationships and a social identity outside of the religion, prior to actual departure. This was indicated by comments such as *"I guess rather than a conscious decision* (to leave)*, I just kind of drifted away…for me, the catalyst was having children…I didn't mind being involved for the sake of my parents…it kept the family happy…but when I had kids of my own, I thought, I'm not going to make my kids do something just because their grandparents believe in it*" (Harry). As well as demonstrating the complexity of experiencing competing social identities, this comment also echoes the assertion that, for some, identification with the JWs was circumstantial - based on parental conviction, rather than personal religious principles. Indeed, the notion of maintaining a religious identity to pacify family members (as expressed by Harry) was raised by a number of respondents who reflected on their experiences of wanting to leave and seeking to develop a social identity outside of the religion, which, while beneficial to wellbeing, had to be done in a covert manner owing to fear of social loss. For example, Rachel commented; *"I wanted to leave…but that was as far as I'd got…I knew I'd be kicked out and would lose everything… I was kind of living a double life".* In short, narratives suggest that JWs who are thinking of leaving seek to weigh up religious membership (and personal

commitment to the religion) and the desire to preserve social ties, against their desire to manage their identity and build social interactions outside of the church.

Longitudinal reflections from those interviewed again after a 12-month interval seem to indicate that participants had begun to engage in a period of retrospective reflection about the nature of their social identity within the religion. John for example comments *"you can play the identity politics game and 'you're not a JW and therefore not a person I would choose to be with'…and that's exactly how JWs operate in terms of social structure, who you can be with and who you can't…are they friends of Jehovah or not? It somewhat trivialises friendship"*. This reflective meaning making of a former social identity that had evolved into a more authentic social identity post-exit was explained this way by Marius who comments *"every time I think about this I think about the courage that I had to leave the organisation…I was the first in my circle of friends who left…another from my friend circle just left…we talked and talked and talked and have maintained friendship and now we are super close…another close friend of mine, his wife is in contact with me, she doesn't want it* [the religion] *anymore"*. Here, the notion of losing (on exit) then re-establishing relationships with other JWs who subsequently left implies that former JWs may maintain an affinity for former members, perhaps due to the shared social identity during membership. This suggests that social identities (re)forged post-exit are important to former JWs and may be strengthened through shared experience (as regards to exit). In attempting to account for the nature of these close relationships within the JWs John comments, *"as soon as you come out of your mother from birth you are tied to that sense of family, and it never escapes you…it's an intrinsic part of human existence, and when you're without it you know that you've lost it…and this is how it feels when you come out of the religion, it's like losing that"*. Here, relationships garnered in the religion are described analogous to 'kin', may explain why re-establishing relationships

with others who subsequently leave appeared to be so important to respondents, re-establishing in some way a lost social identity.

Theme 2: "literally overnight, they all went" - social identity loss in the JW religion.

This theme explores the widespread experiences of social loss and the impact this had on identity post religious exit. Ostracism, and an associated loss of social identity was experienced by all respondents, notwithstanding the exit method. It appeared that the nature of this process meant that these respondents experienced losses of their pre-existing social support networks as an isolating and distressing experience, typified by this comment from Beth who said. *"Just alone…so alone…one minute you've got that, and the next minute it's not part of you"*, and from Sonia, *"There were people I knew for 20 odd years, most of my adult life…so…it's very sad that they're not part of my life anymore…it's saddening"*. Such accounts explain how individuals' self-concepts appeared to be derived from JW membership and from the social groups formed within the community, such that the loss of these group memberships appeared to impact individuals' identities and cause distress. Further exemplifying how the enforced nature of the disfellowship process abruptly impacted their social reality, accounts also reflected difficulties in social adjustment, as the loss of their religious membership also entailed the loss of JW friend and familial groups and the cessation of associated social activities therein. As explained by Sarah; *"All my friends gone…all your friendships…your holidays…your best friends…coffee…go out for tea…everything…all my friends were JWs…all of them…and literally overnight...they all went…and these were people I had known from as a baby…I've got pictures of being little girls with them"*. Because, for many, respondents' social bonds had been formed over many years, losing these long-time friendships was also commonly described in psychologically distressing terms, as evidenced by the following: *"I was in a room, with people I'd known for 20 odd years, over 20 years! and some really close friends, and yet I couldn't speak to them, and they wouldn't speak to me, they wouldn't even*

look at me…it was the weirdest thing…it was a proper mind fuck" (Diane), and Julie who described a withdrawing of social contacts, as indicated by this comment *"gradually, one by one, everybody just disappeared… I had one very close friend, we would email every day…we were like sisters…and last year she completely cut me off...she's gone…everybody's gone…everybody…I didn't have anyone, or any family"* (Julie). Indeed, this experience of losing long-established social ties was ubiquitous in the narratives of individuals as was the consequent distress and anxiety.

Appearing to stem from the JWs mandate to seek 'separateness from the world', respondents' post-exit reported that it was difficult to engage in (new) social activities, further impacting their social identity. This was illustrated by a comment from Gail who said *"you go to a funeral and sing hymns?…this has all been alien to you before…forbidden even…and all of a sudden you are thrust into these activities that you never had before…so socialising is quite difficult for a long time when you come out…it takes a long time to get into that pattern of normality".* Demonstrating the difficulties associated with adopting social behaviours that were contrary to hitherto established and normative patterns of behaviour, this sentiment also affirms what many former JWs described as a perceived lack of belonging. This was further characterised by Sonia who comments *"I made the break at an age when people have an established circle of friends…I found it difficult to establish connection within the community…so having a social life, it's really impacted on that".* In describing the loss of a long-established community, this respondent also illustrates the difficulties many conveyed in having to 'start over'. These experiences of social loss further appeared to change respondent's social identity, affecting their ability to form new relationships and integrate with society, as illustrated by this remark; *"I found it hard...even now I still find it hard to fit in...I just don't feel that I fit in anywhere because my friendships were built up over years and years and years, I'm not that good at making friends, I'm just not good at that"* (Diane). Here again, the loss of long-term

relationships, compounded by feelings of alienation, meant that some respondents struggled to form new relationships and social identities post exit, resulting in isolation and introversion.

Since many respondents tended to be part of larger multi-generational JW families, the scale of lost social ties was, in some cases, extensive. As a consequence, engagement in social activities with many (in some cases all) kin was severely curtailed and was a further source of anxiety. In this way, although their sense of social identity remained as a family member, leaving the religion affected the nature of social interaction, in some cases removing it altogether. This was typified by comments from Gail *"obviously because I was distanced, and I have got quite a few family that are JWs and who have remained JWs…when I think back, some things are very vivid, and the things that upset me are relating to my children…I think my eldest daughter wants a relationship with me, and my son, but they are still entrenched in this religion, so there will always be a barrier".* This respondent epitomised the distress felt as a result of familial ostracism and is an indication of the extent to which losing a (religious) identity may have wide-reaching impacts.

While initial interviews indicated a period of social disruption which impacted respondent's social identity, longitudinal reflections seem to indicate that over time, disfellowshipped JWs were in the process of building a more authentic identity, and that initial feelings of crisis were developing into stable self-perceptions. Although (family) social ties for these respondents remained severed, there had developed a general feeling of acceptance and inevitability, as typified by this comment from John who said; *"Because of the way religion – or this particular religion works…I haven't* [seen my sister] *is the easy answer to that question… this is the game that they play…it's unavoidable isn't it…if you're not a witness then you're not my friend, or my sister, or my brother".* This remark illustrates how JWs associate their social relationships, sense of self and belonging (social identity) with their religious membership and that those who leave, even family members, are no longer considered as 'belonging', which continues to

impact the lives of former members socially. The process of acceptance of social loss appeared therefore appeared to be an evolutionary process, as illustrated by Julie who comments *"you have to give yourself time, you go through anger, denial, bargaining, acceptance…when you leave, you're quite angry…you're bargaining that you can still have a relationship with some people, but then you have to accept that you can't".* This comment epitomises how over time, part of the process of identity reformulation includes acceptance of a lost social identity. In a similar vein, respondents described improvements to their wellbeing. This was typified by comments such as *"I've just finally realised…it's hard to pinpoint a time, but I feel like I'm over it all now…I'm fine!…during the first lockdown I was driving and I saw my best friend from when I was in the organisation…like for 23 years…so I wound my window down and said 'hi, it's nice to see you'...my friend sort of looked, then looked straight ahead, and at that moment I thought 'stuff them'.* (Julie). This comment further illustrates how social identity loss, over time, may develop into a more relaxed attitude towards JWs, and, in the context of this subset of respondents mean that they feel they are "over it".

Theme 3: Social identity transition and new social groups.

A long and in some cases challenging process of transitioning one's social identity was expressed by respondents, who describe the process of finding new social groups and aligning one's identity. For many, this process was aided by joining online social media support groups for former JWs. Indeed, finding commonalities with other former JWs and establishing new relationships in the online community supported life (re)directions and appeared to give respondents new sense of belonging, as well as the opportunity to build new a social identity. This was illustrated by a comment from Julie who recollected how she felt when she discovered that a community of former JWs existed, *"I was angry about the child abuse cover up, I got very much involved and I set up a signposting website called 'victims voices'. I started networking heavily on twitter and then I got into the group…and then I realised…oh my*

goodness, there's loads of us! I didn't realise there was an ex-JW community! I started to get involved and do counsellor training". This comment typified the pleasure respondents experienced when they had the realisation that their experiences were not unique, and that they could find support and commonality, and share life stories outside of the JW community. That this gave former JWs the opportunity to start to create new social bonds and, through it, establish a new identity, was typified by expressions from Lisa *"Julie told me about the ex-JW community, and I was really excited knowing I was going to end up part of an extended family that had gone through what I had been through and what I had been coping with, it gave me an inner calm".* This indicates the beneficial effects, described by numerous respondents, of finding an online community with which to identify and belong. It also demonstrates the importance of formulating a new social identity outside of the JWs and suggests that identifying commonalities in experiences and building friendships with other former JWs may alleviate and / or compensate for the negative impacts of social ostracism from those within the faith. Further testimonies centring around the perceived importance of establishing new group memberships are described by Gail who comments; *"I find that being in the group I am in with other exJWs is incredibly helpful…it's made a vast difference"* and this comment from Mark; *"the only support I had was the online community, the forums…they were a lifeline for me and I used to post on there all the time…people would give you advice on how to deal with the situation".*

Respondents who had chosen to exit appeared to demonstrate a resilience and determination, developing new support / friendships in a way that appeared difficult for those who were disfellowshipped. This was demonstrated by Julie who said, "*I threw myself into a counselling course and the friends that I had started to make outside…and I built new friendships"* Here, accounts appeared to highlight purposeful and positive attempts to reinvent and forge towards new relationships, reducing the apparent "loss of self" that was more evident in those who had

no agency in their decision to leave. This is highlighted by a quote from Craig, and demonstrates that establishing a new social identity by forming and identifying with new social groups may be beneficial to former JWs who are able to do so; *"I went to a new city and a new life because I knew my friends would have nothing to do with me…I was already making friends in the world as it were, and having success"* and John, *"you go on an exploration of your new identity…I have met new people… there are so many things that have been opened to me in terms of relationships".* These quotes suggest that individuals who leave voluntarily are able to break down their attachment to the JWs and are more able to seek and establish new social groups, establish a new identity, and a new sense of belonging. For some, this meant a complete transformation by starting over in a new city. Others who chose to leave appeared to have already begun to form new relationships outside of the JWs prior to exit, which meant that relating to social groups and forming new social identities outside of the JWs was a more straightforward process following departure. Harry for example detailed his social activities outside of the JWs this way *"I'd go to friends' birthday parties, or go to someone's house, at work I used to go to the Christmas party…I feel a great sense of belonging at a cricket club"*. This comment illustrates how having already prepared, to some extent, for life outside of the organisation by establishing links and relating to social groups, social identity transition is facilitated, and distress ameliorated.

Indeed, that these groups had a beneficial effect on mental health was a typical perception amongst former JWs, as illustrated by a further comment from Mark; *"I don't go on them much now because I am in a good place, but if they hadn't of been there I daren't of imagined what would have happened…I can see why people go back to the religion in the old days before the internet, because there's nothing else."* This comment illustrates how the online communities of alike peers provided a source of support of for former JWs. One respondent indicated that they had even received support from *current* JWs who were covert members of online exJW

support groups; *"some of them were active elders or active circuit overseers* (regional travelling ministers-akin to an area manager) *even, and they don't believe it, but they can't leave…one Circuit Overseer was on there and he can't leave...Circuit Overseer's don't even have a house or car, it all belongs to the society"* (Craig). Here, the notion of remaining in the higher echelons of JW membership while simultaneously seeking and offering support as part of an exJW support group illustrates how some individuals may feel that they cannot exit the religion even if they want to, and thus seek to establish a social identity outside while preserving their social identity inside the JW organisation.

Respondents also indicated that forming new social relationships was a vital part of their identity reformulation and described the extent to which they received support from the exJW online communities and started to build a new social identity. One respondent for example commented *"Most of the support I found, after being disfellowshipped for about 18 months, I found online from former JWs… as far as friends are concerned, my main circle of friends are former JWs who I have met online and in person".* (Sonia). As well as forming an important part of respondents reformulated social identity, there was an indication that online support groups were helpful in practical ways. For example, Sonia continues *"Actually what helped me was former JWs discussing with me and helping me critically think about whether these men, these elders, who were deciding my future about the religion…actually did have holy spirit"*. This comment illustrates how online support communities may not only provide the foundation on which to build a new social identity, but also provide practical support to 'unpick' and challenge beliefs. Respondents who had been long-time members of online communities for former JWs also commented on the reciprocal nature of support within these groups. Although no longer needing support to the same extent as when they first left the JWs, these individuals remarked that they remain membership of online support communities in order to offer assistance to individuals who have newly left the organisation. This was typified by Craig, who

said *"Yeah that's how I basically viewed it, and that's why I joined it, to offer support…and I'm not saying I haven't received support… I have received a lot of support"*. Here, the notion that a new social identity facilitates the giving of support to others, and that social identity is possible through support is notable. Specifically, that the reciprocal, almost cyclical, nature of online support communities can promote recovery and the opportunity to "pay it forward". In addition to the interchanging benefits of online support, this respondent also highlighted the importance of more specific online support groups that had been created for former JWs who are also survivors of childhood sexual abuse, Craig continues, *"there is a much, much smaller group, which is just for survivors of child abuse…now that's a different story…and we try to be very supportive".* This comment indicates that sometimes more than one kind of support may be needed, thus illustrating how support groups can vary in their nature and scope. In this way, respondents who have experienced abuse may start to establish new social groups and reformulate their identities with the support of others who have experienced this form of trauma. Other respondents did not feel the necessity to join specific online exJW communities because they were receiving support and establishing a new social identity elsewhere. This was illustrated by Ezra who comments *"I had other social circles, so I didn't need to…but I imagine that those circles would be useful for people who didn't have support…or workmates, or other people who'd been disfellowshipped, to kind of connect with and find out what to expect and how you feel afterwards"*. This comment exemplifies comments from respondents generally, that social support, whether this is from a community of former JWs, or elsewhere, is vital in the establishing of a new and supportive social identity outside of the JWs.

For converts, exit from the JWs appeared to improve their relationships with their families who were never JWs. Janet, for example, in contrasting her relationships during and after her JW membership comments *"you're restricted on things like birthdays and joining in family occasions like Christmas…and you have to say sorry no…I can't do that".* In describing

changes post-exit, she continues *"family relationships definitely got better, and we became closer"*. Similarly, Janice talked about the process of rebuilding relationships with her family after leaving the JWs commenting *"I was able to start building a relationship with my mum and dad, they fell out with me for being a witness and the witnesses told me to stay away from them, they classed them as the devil".* Thus, data indicate that although born-in respondents tended to lose their social and family identities upon exit, converts appeared to be restored to their families and received support, which appeared to compensate somewhat for their lost JW social identity.

Although the majority of respondents in the study were, or had been, members of exJW online support communities, there were some instances where respondents hesitated to do so or resisted completely. Here, despite no longer being a member of the JWs, there was an apparent reticence to associate with people who had renounced the faith (so called, apostates) and a concern about engaging with behaviours that would be renounced by the JWs. These respondents had all been born-in / raised according to JW doctrine, indicating an engrained fear of apostasy. Beatrice, for example said, *"I didn't* (join an online community)*…I don't think I could have done that in my 20's had they existed, but I would have struggled with it…so I didn't believe it* [the doctrine]*, but I struggled with apostates".* Here, rejecting or being forced out of the JW religion, yet resisting joining support groups was notable and indicated a deep-rooted fear of this association that respondents themselves could see was irrational. In a similar vein, Katie, who created and runs a social media group for exJW women, said that she was initially apprehensive to do so because of the association with apostasy, commenting, *"it's forbidden territory… when I set up the online group up I was like 'there's no going back from this, I'm going to get killed at Armageddon'"* Here, and aligning with comments from other respondents, a fear of being associated with 'apostate' activity may result in a reluctance to join support groups even in cases where such social support may be beneficial. Comments such as these

provide an indication of the far-reaching effects of childhood training and indicate that identity may remain somewhat (unintentionally) aligned to the JWs (POMI identity - Physically in, mentally out, as discussed in chapter four of this thesis). Thus, although it is apparent that these respondents have a desire to change their social identity and form new social relationships, they appear to struggle in doing so and must push past childhood inculcation in order to do so. As such, although the process of transitioning ones' social identity by establishing new social groups with which to identify and find support is beneficial, this does not appear to be a quick process and there is apparent variability in people's readiness to engage in the stabilising of these new social support networks.

Longitudinal data from respondents who had left the JWs within the last five years indicated positive changes over the last twelve months that facilitated identity reformulation. For example, John comments *"figuring out what to do when a void appears, and we* (former JWs) *are very good at filling voids…I've made new friends, had new experiences, and that's improved my overall self-perception in comparison to a year ago, it's, as I say, positive."* This comment illustrates a generally positive trend evident amongst respondents over time, whereby they had been able to take further practical steps to further establishing a social identity outside of the JWs. As such, while the process of reformulating one's social identity may be initially challenging and associated with social grief, time appears to be important such that, even after just 12 months, respondents are able to make positive progress towards establishing new sources of social supports. When questioned as to how progression may be facilitated, respondents unanimously said that continuing to access social support throughout the transition process was vital. This was typified by Marius who comments *"what's definitely important is to seek support from exJWs…or it doesn't have to be exJWs but have been in another mind-controlled cult…but with JWs it's much easier because they understand…surround yourself with people who understand and are supportive"*. Here, by retrospectively thinking about how

social identity changes were experienced on exit, this comment aligns with those of other respondents who expressed that new social identities can be established with time, providing a beneficial sense of belonging.

It was also a notable observation in the longitudinal data that six out of seven respondents had embarked on a higher education degree course as part of their transition out of the JWs and that they reflected on this on this as a change to their sense of self. This was typified by Ezra who commented *"I've been trying to make my own person since I left…you have to reforge your identity…I'm on a payroll and pension degree course…it's pretty intensive and related to my career and job, but yeah…rather than studying the bible and reading the same passages"*. This positive step which hitherto had not been part of life as a JW (JWs discourage higher education) appeared to be an important part of identity transition away from the JWs, and entirely distinct from the social identity experienced in the religion. This transformation seemed to have a significant positive impact on both wellbeing and identity reformulation. Indeed, respondents commented that higher education was an important arena in which to not only forge new relationships in pursuit of a new social identity, but an opportunity to create a better life through better life prospects.

6.3 Discussion

Previous work has indicated that the experience of leaving the JWs results in social loss, with subsequent effects to sense of belonging and wellbeing (Aboud, 2020; Gutsgell, 2017; Hookway & Habibis, 2015; Lalich & McLaren 2010; Ransom et al., 2021; Testoni et al., 2019). Less literature has explored the process of forging a new social identity in a world that feels unfamiliar to those who have left the religion. This study explores how membership and disaffiliation with the JWs impacts upon a sense of social identity, and the challenges faced by members as they transition towards developing new sources of support and, with it, a new

social identity. Exploring the experiences 26 former JWs indicates how a sense of social death following ostracism from established support groups within the JW community may be followed by a social renewal vis-à-vis affiliation with social media support groups specifically created for former members. In addition, longitudinal data, in the form of additional interviews with a subset of respondents who had exited the religion during the last five years indicate an upward recovery trend in the years following exit.

Prior to their exit, respondents, described years of shared religious and social activities that had fortified their social identity within the religion. This, along with the propensity of JWs to foster social relationships exclusively with other JWs resulted in social identities that were intertwined with religious membership. This finding is in line with previous research (Aboud, 2020) which suggests that struggles to identify with society outside of the JW organisation emanates from the exclusive nature of social bonds that were garnered therein. Furthermore, while all respondents expressed an awareness that their (religious) social identity was contingent on maintained membership in the religion, religious exit nevertheless resulted in loss of (JW) social identity which brought psychological pain and anxiety, a finding that accords with the existent research in this area (e.g., Ransom et al., 2021) where respondents described social identity loss as impacting their sense of self, belonging, self-worth and mental health. As such, it appeared that all JWs experienced ostracism and a loss of support and contact, which impacted their social identity following departure from the JWs. The present findings reinforce the notion that exit may entail a complex process of weighing up options and identity conflicts as losses and gains (see also Nica, 2019). This is important because it illustrates that part of the process of disaffiliation is dealing with internal conflicts regarding identity management and reduced commitment.

However, in exploring the experiences of those who left JW through different means, divergences were apparent in respondents' sense of social identity and connectedness prior to

leaving the faith. Respondents who were disfellowshipped tended to describe strong attachments to the JWs at their time of exit, which appeared to transfer into struggles to cope with the forced nature of their social identity loss after being disfellowshipped. Indeed, aligning with the psychological challenges described in Williams (2009) model of ostracism, respondents appeared to struggle with the forced nature of religious shunning and the loss of agency that was associated with disfellowship. As such, these disfellowshipped respondents appeared to describe a significant loss of belonging, which, in common with findings from Lalich and McLaren's work (2010) elicited depression, suicidal ideation and even suicide as a consequence of disfellowship. In contrast, those left through choice appeared to anticipate their social demise in the religion and consequently appeared better prepared for the social loss incurred following exit. As such, although previous research has indicated that those who left via disfellowship and voluntary exit both experience social losses that are difficult to replace and find it hard to identify and form connections with "worldly" people (e.g., Aboud, 2020; Lalich & McLaren, 2010), the present study indicates that disfellowship may have a more damaging impact on social identity post-exit, and that this may result from the lack of agency in the exit process. Thus, although all respondents experienced comparable social loss which impacted their identity, differences in bondedness to the religion *before* they left had a bearing on how they coped with this social loss.

When used a lens by which to examine the current findings, the notion of identity fusion (Gomez et al., 2011; Swann et al., 2009) may also offer insights into the observation that while those who were disfellowshipped felt socially content within the faith prior to exit, those who chose to leave were more likely to report feeling discontent. This theoretical framework posits that there is an alignment of the personal and social self which results in a sense of visceral oneness with the group (Gomez et al., 2011; Swann et al., 2009, 2012, 2014). Indeed, respondents in the current study described close relationships within the JWs, referring to one

another as 'brother and sister', according with the *relational ties* principle that relationships built within highly fused groups may be felt akin to family relationships (Swann et al., 2009). As such, family-like bonds forged within the JWs and reinforced by an avoidance of outside influences may have resulted in identities that were 'fused' to the religion (Swann et al., 2015), magnifying the sense of loss upon departure. In contrast, however, in describing their social interactions within the faith as somewhat perfunctory and lacking in conviction, accounts from interviewees who departed voluntarily may suggest a lower level of identity fusion prior to exit. Specifically, these respondents described a sensation that they did not really "fit in" with fellow JWs, nor fully accord with the religious doctrines prior to leaving the religion, in apparent accordance with previous findings from Testoni and colleagues (2019) that some JWs experience a struggle to find an "authentic self". This finding is notable as it not only suggests divergences in the nature of the social belonging among JWs, but it lays a foundation to explain the observed differences in the process of social identity that were also apparent in the current study.

Supporting the findings of Hookway and Habibis' (2015), who studied young born-in JWs, the current study similarly finds that former JWs experience struggles in trying to transition their social identities into a world that felt alien to them upon departure. Here, respondents described childhood integration into the JWs resulting in a lonely, isolating struggle for self and identity post-exit due to an absence of support structures outside the religion (ibid). These findings also accord with previous research among former JWs who left the religion because they were homosexual (Lalich & McLaren, 2010) and suggest a degree of homogeneity of experience among all those who leave the JWs. In other words, there appears to be a common process of coming to terms with changes to one's social sphere and the reformulating of one's identity is experienced by all JWs who are ostracised upon leaving the religion.

Furthermore, the current research adds further weight to accounts from previous research where it was suggested that the formulation of new social groups was an integral part of the process of identity transition and a significant determinant of wellbeing (Ransom et al., 2021). Indeed, respondents' accounts suggest that they went through a process of alignment by forming new social groups with which to reformulate one's identity, in accordance with similar models of transition within the addiction, recovery and distance literatures (Best et al., 2016; Best, Irving & Albertson, 2017; Kay & Monaghan, 2019). Here, the value of social support groups within online social media networks for former JWs were heavily emphasised within the narratives. As well as having an inoculating effect against the isolation and loneliness respondents had been experiencing, these groups appeared to provide a means of socialisation and support from likeminded individuals who would *understand* their journey and offer practical support. This finding aligns with research by Haslam and colleagues (2009) on the "social cure", which highlights the profound positive impact that social support has on wellbeing when experiencing life challenges (see also Jetten, Haslam & Haslam, 2012). As such, the current results indicate that support groups may improve life paths of former JWs vis-à-vis the establishment of a new social identity. The current findings also expand on existent understandings of this identity transition among former JWs, suggesting that this process is not uniform and that some may find it harder to form new social groups. Specifically, and as previously outlined, those who were disfellowshipped (as opposed to choosing to leave) appeared to be more committed to the JWs before they were expelled, and expressed deep sense of belonging, and appeared in turn to experience significant challenges adjusting to life outside of the organisation. For example, these respondents tended to avoid (at least initially) association with support groups created for former JWs because of their perceived association with 'apostasy'. Drawing again on the theory of identity fusion (Gomez et al., 2011; Swann et al., 2009), it may therefore be postulated that those who are disfellowshipped have a sense of self that is more attached with their JW

membership and their social relationship within this sphere, making it harder for them to establish a new social identity by forming bonds with non JWs. So too it appeared that those who converted to the JWs in adulthood and had subsequently left/disfellowshipped appeared to revert to (or retake) the social identity that they had (particularly with their family) prior to membership. As such, any negative post-exit experiences for converts (who joined the JWs without their families) appeared to be ameliorated to some extent. Specifically, although respondents reported distress at the loss of their social contacts, at the same time they experienced a social renewal and a strengthening of family ties who offered support post-exit, which helped them find a new sense of belonging. Adding further insights, the current research therefore suggests that while by aligning one's identity with new social groups is an important part of life after leaving the JWs, there are barriers and facilitators to this transition that may impede progress and impact the longer-term wellbeing of some former JWs.

In addition to benefitting from the support available in online groups specifically created for former JWs, respondents in the current study talked about the oft-times reciprocal nature of this community, with some established (long time) members remaining on the sites solely to support others rather than utilising the support themselves. This aligns with work that has explored affiliative and self-as-doer identities where the relationships between social identity, social support and emotional wellbeing were explored among survivors of acquired brain injury. (Walsh, Muldoon, Gallagher & Fortune, 2015). This research illustrates how identity can become disrupted post-injury, necessitating (re)construction of the self and how reciprocity between the constructs of social support (Douglas, 2013) and social identity (Haslam et al., 2008) can improve emotional wellbeing of survivors. This work indicates that social identity makes support possible, and that social identity is *made possible* through social support. In a similar way, the present research highlights the value of reciprocal support and implies that this construct may be a useful tool after exiting high-cost religions such as the JWs, where social

support had been restricted to an insular religious community. In short, by indicating that individuals who have recently left the JWs may begin to establish a new social identity, this model may work to drive the understanding between social identity, social support, and wellbeing.

The present findings reinforce the notion that exit may entail a complex process of weighing up options and identity conflicts as losses and gains (see also Nica, 2019). This is important because it illustrates that part of the process of disaffiliation is dealing with internal conflicts regarding identity management and reduced commitment.

Turning now to a consideration of longitudinal interviews with a subset of respondents who left the JWs within the last five years, analysis revealed a general trend to pursue social networks outside of the religion. Although respondents were grieving important relationship losses, these appeared to be met with a sense of acceptance rather than anxiety, indicating that their new social identity was becoming more stable and resilient. In this way, data indicate that respondents viewed their former membership of the JWs akin to a 'contract', and social loss a consequence of them having broken the terms of that contract. This more logical approach to social losses, seemed to be rooted, in part, from the benefits of social identity recovery in finding new supportive communities, and is an indication of the efficacy of this form of social rebirth. Arguably these findings are the first step towards documenting the process of social identity transition which has hitherto only been applied to the desistance and substance use literature (Best et al., 2016; 2017; Frings & Albery, 2014), and builds on preliminary findings from the exJW community (Ransom et al., 2021) by showing this more longitudinally – and future research could carry out longer term follow-ups.

It was a notable finding that six out seven respondents interviewed for the longitudinal aspect of this research had embarked on higher education degree courses, indicating that this too may

be associated with positive identity reformulation away from the JWs (where higher education was discouraged). Here, higher education was described as a means to embark on new life paths, improve life prospects and a further means to further establish a new social identity.

6.4 Limitations and Conclusions

Although the sample size of 26 participants is considered generous according to the principles defining IPA research, it should be borne in mind that the current findings may not generalise across the entire ex JW community. Similarly, and by way of reflexive disclosure, although the analysis of the narratives was performed with the greatest of care and integrity, it must be acknowledged that the perspective of the lead researcher (as a former Jehovah's Witness), may have coloured the interpretation of the data. A more comprehensive account of the limitations of the chapter is contained in the overall discussion chapter.

This thesis chapter sought to add to the body of literature that explores religious exit from the JWs and focusses on social identity during membership, post exit, and explores processes of social renewal. Although findings indicate that these losses were distressing to respondents notwithstanding the exit method, the forced nature of the disfellowship process appeared to render this a more distressing process overall, due in part to the lack of agency associated with forced exit from the religion. Other findings indicate that respondents generally experienced a strong attachment to the JWs during membership indicating a co-existence of religious and social identities, to the extent that a social identity could not survive the breakdown of the religious identity. This attachment was more apparent in born-in respondents who typically lost all social and familial supports post exit, whereas converts appeared to receive support post-exit from their (non JW) families, benefiting from strengthened family ties. This finding is important because it provides an indication of the far-reaching impacts of childhood training and religious inculcation. Nuances in narratives revealed divergences. For individuals who did

not have a strong attachment to the JWs during membership but nonetheless wanted to protect their JW social identity, attempts to create a social identity outside of the religion resulted in the necessity to lead a 'double life'. Findings also indicate that membership of social media support groups specifically created for former JWs were instrumental and beneficial in establishing a new and supportive social identity away from the JWs and improved wellbeing significantly. Finally, by adding a longitudinal aspect to the present study, it may be postulated that leaving the JWs is not merely an event but is in fact a temporally experienced social identity transition with improvements seen over time.

7. Chapter 7 – Concluding Discussion

7.1 General Discussion

This mixed-methods thesis applied the social identity approach to investigate the psychosocial impact of leaving the Jehovah's Witness religion. The impetus underpinning this research emanates from the need to better understand the impact of exiting from this under-researched religion. The past decade of (almost exhaustively qualitative) research indicates that leaving the JWs is associated with deleterious impacts to wellbeing, and challenges in terms of forging a new identity outside of the religion (Hookway & Habibis, 2015; Lalich & McLaren, 2010; Testoni et al., 2019). Chapter 2 (literature review) interrogated the current state of knowledge concerning religious exit from the JWs and other high-cost religions, and, in doing so, introduced the social identity perspective as a potentially appropriate theoretical framework through which to better understand the process of leaving a high control religion. It was argued that there is a need to better understand how research into religious shunning and previous religious affiliation as well as the method of exit (forced vs voluntary) may shape the process of leaving a religion and impact individuals' wellbeing. Therefore, by framing shunning as an identity-related process, this thesis aimed to explore the various contextual factors associated with exit (such as forced versus voluntary exit, childhood indoctrination versus adult conversion, and the implications of retaining belief in JW doctrine post-exit), and the extent to which these potential influences may ameliorate or exacerbate the impact of social loss. Further, although a body of ostracism literature has advanced our understanding of its impact on perceived belonging, self-esteem, control and meaningful existence, ethical constraints have limited the scope of this existing research, which has also largely been conducted in settings which, to a greater or lesser extent, are removed from the real world. As such, although Williams' (2009) temporal needs threat model has proved a useful tool for mapping the process

of ostracism in manipulated settings (e.g., Cyberball, Reed, 2018, Williams & Jarvis, 2006; social media settings where (dis)likes are manipulated, Lutz & Schneider, 2020), but real-world religious ostracism remains a seldomly explored phenomenon. In addition, although experiences of ostracism can last from a few seconds to many years, most research tends to focus on the shorter-term effects of ostracism (Riva, Montali, Curioni, & Williams, 2017). Consequently, the second aim of this thesis was to add to the literature regarding real-world religious ostracism and to examine the extent to which this impacts the mental health and the wider wellbeing of targets, as well as assess how it is experienced over time.

7.1.1 Overview of Empirical Studies

Study 1: In the first of its kind, this quantitative study examined cross-sectionally the psychosocial impacts of leaving the JWs. Specifically, it assessed the extent to which 'disfellowshipped' former JWs' experiences of ostracism and sense of identity are associated with indicators of psychological wellbeing and identity transition. It also scrutinised whether forced or voluntary exit and prior religious commitment was implicated in shaping outcomes, and whether post-exit membership of online support groups (for former JWs) was associated with greater self-esteem and identity reformulation. Results indicated that although religious shunning was pervasive, participants who left the JWs through choice reported more ostracism compared to those who were disfellowshipped, contrary to predictions. This finding suggests that being disfellowshipped may not necessarily necessitate a perceived lack of agency, or it is possible that those who left voluntarily may not have anticipated to be subjected to the same degree of shunning as those who were forced to leave through being disfellowshipped, which is associated with immediate mandated shunning. Results also indicated that higher levels of commitment (during membership) were associated with increased ostracism, lower self-esteem, and contrary to expectations, more success at transitioning identity away from the religion post-exit. This finding was, in part, in accordance with previous research exploring

motivations for exit from other faiths and suggests that low commitment levels may predict motivation for exit (Bahr & Albrecht, 1989; Fazzino, 2014). Furthermore, the finding that participants who reported more success at transitioning their identity away from the JWs (despite experiencing higher levels of ostracism and lower levels of self-esteem) may suggest that these individuals may be better at commitment per se, or perhaps that transition has been possible over time (warranting further exploration). Furthermore, collective self-esteem scores suggested that there may be a partial utility for the application of the social identity approach to understanding the process of identity transition, hitherto applied within desistance and addiction literature (Best et al., 2016; Kay & Monaghan, 2019). Specifically, findings suggested that identification with social (online) groups of former JWs had positive benefits, although results were complex. For example, in support of the model, membership CSE (how one sees themselves in a group – am I a good member?) was positively related to identity transition/recovery and decreased self-reported dysphoria. Importance to identity CSE (how important group membership is to self-concept), was positively related to identity transition/recovery and self-esteem, which extends other recovery-based work and theory (Beckwith et al., 2019, Best et al., 2016; Kay & Monaghan, 2019), and supports the notion that recovery-based groups support positive lifestyle changes. This suggests that online resources are a pragmatic means of responding to, and coping with religious ostracism (Cheung & Lee, 2010; Nica, 2019; Ridout et al., 2012; Smith, 2011). Furthermore, membership CSE was associated with decreased self-esteem, which is a predictor of perceived approved group membership (Richman & Leary, 2009), and identity CSE was positively related to self-esteem. This result indicates that different aspects of collective identification impact the construct independently, perhaps as a result of past membership of JWs. In addition, importance to identity CSE was associated with elevated levels of dysphoria, indicating that perhaps association with other ex-JWs would previously have been perceived as a 'forbidden' step

toward apostasy, perhaps prompting residual guilt. While such results could only be speculated upon, as the JW faith suggests that is an act of apostasy to have dealings with former members who express disagreement with aspects of doctrine, it is possible that such results may indicate a sense of guilt at involvement with exJW groups. Overall, this study lends support to previous research suggesting that leaving the JWs is associated with reduced self-esteem and diminished mental health (Friedson, 2015; Lalich & McLaren, 2010; Ransom et al., 2021). This finding is an indication that during membership, an important source of self-esteem derived from working towards the organisation's aims and goals as well as from status of membership and participation in group rituals, or perhaps that self-esteem was correspondingly low during membership.

Findings from study 1 therefore lend partial support to the utilisation of social identity models of recovery utilised in unrelated recovery/desistance research (Beckwith et al., 2016; Best et al., 2016; Kay & Monaghan, 2019), indicating that while certain characteristics of identification may support identity reformulation and enhance wellbeing, others exercise paradoxical effects, meriting further exploration. In addition, the multifaceted findings regarding the individual constructs of the collective self-esteem scale (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992), which indicate partial support for the utility of applying this theoretical approach to understanding the experience of religious exit, demonstrate how nuances of membership of the JWs may exert a residual effect on identification. This suggests that leaving the JWs is not a linear process and that contextual factors influence identity reformulation that this model cannot account for. In order to explore further what facilitates/impedes identity reformulation, specifically, what influences may be residual from JW membership, (qualitative) exploration of contextual differences regarding circumstances of membership were deemed to be warranted.

Addressing this issue, Study 2 incorporated theories of personal identification to help understand the extent to which identity reformulation post-exit, may proceed as a function of a pre-JW identity and associated membership commitment. This was achieved by examining qualitatively whether challenges specific to identity were experienced according to the exit method (forced or voluntary). Findings indicate that challenges to identity were experienced irrespective of the exit method, and that respondents generally appeared to retain a deeply embedded JW identity on exit. In support of identity theory (Stryker, 1968; Stryker & Burke, 2000), the data indicate that roles respondents played during religious membership, particularly among individuals raised according to JW doctrine, resulted in a salient residual JW identity which continued to exert influence post-exit. These findings are consistent with other studies which tend to associate religious upbringing in the JWs with challenging identity reformulation (Hookway & Habibis; Lalich & McLaren; Ransom et al., 2021), suggesting that childhood socialisation has a more powerful bearing on post-exit identity reformulation compared to respondents who converted as adults and appeared more readily able to 'revert' to a pre-JW identity post-exit. These results add weight to the concept of role identity when exploring exit from the JWs, specifically, that the extent to which roles were salient during religious membership may have a bearing on identity reformulation post-exit through a residual JW identity. Further, in accordance with self-perception theory (Bem, 1972), some respondents appeared to embark on a purposeful process of identity reformulation through involvement with behaviours in direct contrast to those permitted during membership, suggesting that a salient JW identity may be subjugated through purposeful changes to behaviour in pursuit of identity change.

Other findings indicated that the propensity of JWs (during membership) to segregate themselves socially (Weddle, 2000), resulted in feelings of alienation when attempting to integrate into mainstream society, thus highlighting the interplay between personal and social

identities (Stryker, 1968; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and illustrating how changes to a personal identity may come about through changes to a social identity established through religious membership. Interesting insights into the gamut of the JW identity were evident in the data, with respondents describing themselves with acronyms (familiar to the ex-JW community), such as PIMO (physically in, mentally out - Ostensibly a JW, but no longer believing the doctrine) and POMI (physically out, mentally in - no longer JW but maintaining belief in the doctrine) to describe their (continued) mental alignment to JW dogma. This is perhaps a sign of the extent to which former JWs make sense of their identity pre- and post-exit and indicate that retained obedience to JW doctrine (POMI) may inhibit identity transition (at least initially). The extent to which identity reformulation could proceed however, was also impeded through religious shunning, which acted as a barrier to exit for some time for individuals who left voluntarily and although this made establishing a new personal identity a more challenging process (post-exit), did not motivate respondents to return to the organisation. In addition, and consistent with identity theory (Stryker, 1968; Stryker & Burke, 2000), although respondents tended to take some years to accept and participate in popular societal norms such as Christmas and birthdays (indicating the prevalence of a salient JW identity), over time data indicate that identity as a JW gradually dissipated, demonstrating that identity hierarchies may be rearranged post-religious exit and allow progressive identity reformulation. This became more apparent when considering longitudinal accounts in newer exiters (over the past five years), who had demonstrably abandoned ties to their previous JW identity (by beginning to celebrate Christmas/birthdays) and had subsequently become more 'relaxed' and less anxious.

Study 3 explored whether the impact of ostracism on wellbeing and mental health was influenced by exit method (forced or voluntary) from the religion. It also assessed whether childhood inculcation into the JWs inhibited identity transition and whether respondents

retained belief in doctrine post-exit impacted psychosocial wellbeing. Results indicate that ostracism was a ubiquitous experience regardless of familial ties, and in accordance with the ostracism literature, detrimental to wellbeing and mental health (Williams, 2001; 2009). However, when comparing accounts of disfellowshipped respondents with those who left through choice, it emerged that expulsion from the religion could elicit more serious detriments to wellbeing, including low self-esteem, dysphoria, suicide, and suicidal ideation. Aside from the impact of social isolation resultant from religious shunning, these detriments appeared to stem from the forced and 'public shaming' nature of the disfellowship process which could elicit powerful self-perceptions of being 'sinful', and the tendency for disfellowshipped respondents to retain eschatological belief. Regarding the latter, the rumination of Armageddon, which respondents associated with their own imminent death, and the avoidance of disconfirmatory evidence, appeared to cause existential fear of the future, with negative consequences to mental health. In accordance with previous work that has highlighted how disfellowship can harmfully impact mental wellbeing (Lalich & McLaren, 2010, Ransom et al., 2021), the current study reinforced this notion by dichotomising between exit methods, finding that although disfellowship caused significant psychological harm, respondents who left voluntarily tended to engage in a process of 'unpicking the doctrine' which appeared to benefit wellbeing by a deliberate process of undoing the eschatology. This finding further indicates that having a sense of agency in the leaving process may partially alleviate/be protective against some of the negative effects of ostracism and allow identity reformulation away from the belief system of the JWs.

Further exploring links between ostracism and mental health and finding partial support for Williams' (2009) needs threat model of ostracism, results indicate that poor self-esteem, depression, dysphoria, suicidal ideation, attempts and (completed) suicide were oft recurring themes in the narratives and attributed to social and family rejection. Reports of suicide,

perceived as an attempt to alleviate suffering were prevalent in the data, including narratives describing the deaths of former acquaintances and family members who had killed themselves post-disfellowship, thus echoing findings from previous research (Lalich & McLaren, 2019; Ransom et al., 2021). Specifically, it illustrates how social rejection resultant from religious shunning can endanger mental health. Also linked with accounts of poor mental health and suicidal ideation were reports of various occurrences of abuse experienced during religious membership. Narrative accounts of childhood sexual abuse, child rape, intimate partner violence and homophobia added unique insights into plight of former JWs who could face trauma resultant from abuse experienced during membership, attributions of blame from other JWs, perceptions of self-blame, and social/family loss from ostracism post-exit. Regarding reports of childhood sexual abuse, two participants in this study gave testimony to the Independent Inquiry into Childhood sexual Abuse (IICSA, 2021), conducted by the Charity Commission UK (see chapter 5 of the thesis). Aligning with the findings of the inquiry, that were published immediately prior to the submission of this thesis (September 2021), the perceived failure of the JWs (amongst other religions), to protect children who were victims of childhood sexual abuse caused considerable long-term psychological harm and suicidal ideation (see also, Australian Royal Commission, 2016). Although this thesis is the first research to explore these themes within the exJW community, previous research provides accounts of attributions of blame that are well established within the wider psychology literature (Bhuptani & Messman-Moore, 2019; Filipas & Ullman, 2007; Ullman, 1996; 1997). This form of repeat (or secondary) victimisation amongst former JWs was oft attributed as the root of suicidal thoughts, echoing former research within the arena of (attempted) suicide (Vatne & Nåden, 2018), and reinforcing links between poor mental health and attempted suicide (Lopez-Castroman et al., 2015; Plunkett, et al., 2001). Likewise, incompatible (sexual) identity was also attributed as a cause for poor mental health, and in accordance with previous

literature (Garbarski, 2021; Hernandez, Mahoney & Pargament, 2014; Lalich & McLaren, 2010), was a potential precursor of suicide due to internalised beliefs about the 'sinfulness' of homosexuality. As such, findings of this research accord with that of Lalich and McLaren (2010), with descriptions of low self-esteem, poor mental health, dysphoria, and suicidal ideation. Finally, results also indicate that childhood indoctrination, sometimes referred to as a 'grooming' process by respondents was perceived to impair respondents' ability to transition their identity out of the JWs, and in accordance with previous literature (Aboud, 2020; Hookway & Habibis, 2015; Ransom et al., 2021), seen as a cause for a continued belief in aspects of the JW doctrine post-exit. This finding provides an indication of the extent to which childhood inculcation can influence adulthood, producing conditioned religious responses that are challenging to overcome post-exit.

The final empirical study, outlined in Chapter 6, explored the impact of terminated religious group membership on participants' social identification. It also assessed qualitatively the extent to which membership and participation in online ex-JW support groups facilitated the establishment of new supportive social networks outside of the JWs. Findings indicated that generally, respondents who were disfellowshipped experienced strong attachments to the JWs at their time of expulsion which impacted their ability to manage social/familial loss. Contrastingly, those who exited through choice, despite experiencing similar exit costs, appeared to anticipate and, as a result, prepare more for anticipated losses. Other findings indicated that since JWs tend to associate exclusively with other JWs, their prior social identities were intertwined with religious membership. Resultantly, upon exit, respondents reported that after being socially outcast from their JW communities, they were naïve and ill prepared for establishing social relationships outside the organisation. These findings are consistent with other research which finds that irrespective of exit pathway (forced versus voluntary), former JWs experience difficulties in attempting to assimilate into society, and with

realigning their social identity with those on the ‘outside’ (Aboud, 2020; Hookway & Habibis, 2015; Lalich & McLaren, 2010). By distinguishing between the experiences of those who were disfellowshipped and those who left through choice, the current research adds insights regarding the benefit of maintaining and fostering a sense of agency in the leaving process which, while not necessarily reducing loss, may help to improve wellbeing.

Other findings indicate that commitment to the JW religion shaped social identity transition. Respondents who left by choice oftentimes expressed that their belief in JWs had been in decline prior to their exit, and that they gradually withdrew their commitment entirely. Accordingly, although expressing close attachments to the JWs during membership, these respondents had already begun to embark on a purposeful transformation of their social identity, forming new social groups outside of the JWs, which in turn aided their transition after exit. Other respondents indicated that their membership had been circumstantial, founded on parental conviction/conversion to the JWs. In accordance with previous work exploring voluntary exit conducted by Testoni and colleagues (2019), where threatened social identity prevented some respondents from leaving the religion, so too, some respondents in the present study expressed how threats to their social identity, specifically the anticipated loss of family and social relationships through religious shunning, prevented them from leaving the religion earlier than they finally did. This illustrates how leaving the JWs can be a challenging process of ‘weighing up’ the losses and gains (see also Nica, 2019) of religious exit, and that this process may take some time. It further highlights how disfellowshipped respondents can be denied this opportunity.

In order to aid a theoretical understanding of the role of commitment in the decision process concerning exit, identity fusion theory (Gomez et al. 2011; Swann et al., 2009, 2012, 2014) may be a useful lens through which to understand the findings in the present study. Findings indicate that commitment to the JWs was diminished (pre-exit) in those who had made a

purposeful decision to leave and may be posited as an indication of weakened identity fusion to the religion. Resultantly, these respondents were able to weigh up the consequences of leaving, deciding to accept their social loss in exchange for the pursuit of new life paths and social identity outside of the religion. In contrast, disfellowshipped respondents appeared to exhibit stronger attachment to the JWs at their time of expulsion and their reports suggested greater anxiety concerning their social losses than those who left through choice, which is in keeping with theory of identity fusion (Gomez et al., 2011). Although previous research concerning JW exit has not considered the utility of identity fusion theory, studies, although scant in number and scope have established that JWs struggle with forming new social identities outside of the insular JW organisation whether disfellowshipped or not (Gutsgell, 2017; Ransom et al., 2021). Nevertheless, since findings from this study lend partial support to the utilisation of identity fusion as a suitable theoretical lens through which to explore religious exit, it may be speculated that this framework may be a suitable means by which to explore contextual differences such as different exit methods and circumstances of memberships (such as born-in versus conversion). Specifically, it may be that voluntary exit is associated with (purposeful) decreased fusion while disfellowship associated with heightened fusion, thus providing an indication of the role of agency in the leaving process. In addition, findings indicate that individuals who had purposefully *converted* to the religion appeared less fused post-exit, even if they had been disfellowshipped. Although previous research has not explored impacts to social identity and wellbeing on the religious exit of adult JW converts, the present study found that paradoxically, social cost was ameliorated to some extent by improved relationships with their (never-JW family). However, whether this appeared to be due to these respondents benefitting from available support outside the religion, or by reduced identity fusion due to the absence of childhood JW inculcation remains unclear and warrants further research.

Exploring whether social identity was positively impacted to a greater or lesser extent through online social media support groups for former JWs, results indicate that respondents benefitted from this provision. In accordance with previous research in the recovery and desistance literature (Best et al., 2016; Best, Irving & Albertson, 2017; Kay & Monaghan, 2019) which posits the benefits of supportive communities in support of positive life change, the present study also found that online groups created within the ex-JW community provided opportunities to build more supportive social identities outside of the JWs. In a similar vein, online support communities allowed a form of reciprocal support, aligning with the notion of a self-as-doer identity postulated by Walsh and colleagues (2015), and work exploring ethnic identity (Phinney, 1996). In keeping with these models of social identity, which suggest that 'disrupted' identities may benefit from identity reconstruction vis-à-vis dynamic social support, the present research indicates that identity disruption from religious shunning may be ameliorated through reciprocal support as an active member of online support groups, which further works to drive the understanding between social identity, social support, and wellbeing (see also Haslam et al., 2008). Overall, findings found partial support for models of social identity reconstruction, providing indications that these may be an appropriate lens through which to explore social identity in the context of religious exit.

Longitudinal data from a subset of respondents assessed whether improvements to social identity may manifest over time. Initial interviews indicated that individuals who left the JWs recently (within the past five years), struggled to create new social identities outside of the religion. Addressing this issue, repeat interviews revealed that improvements had been made over the past 12 months, evidenced by efforts to seek to establish social networks outside the religion. In addition, despite continued mourning of lost relationships (e.g., family and friends), respondents appeared more resilient and accepting of their situation. Finally, the notable finding that six out of seven respondents who were re-interviewed had embarked on a degree

course (contrary to the tenets of the JWs) in itself could be seen to evidence a purposeful identity transition away from the JWs and towards new life paths and goals.

7.1.2. Theoretical contributions

Underpinned by the social identity approach (Brown, 2020; Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), the current thesis examined processes of identity transition out of the JWs and focused on how this may be ameliorated by membership of new supportive social groups. Results from the empirical parts of this theses indicated that, although social identity models utilised in recovery research in other domains were a useful lens through which to examine identity reformulation of former JWs, contextual factors associated with leaving this high control religion complicated the utility of this approach. To illustrate, work in the desistance and recovery literature highlights the usefulness of social identity models of recovery (e.g., SIMOR – Best et al., 2016) as a means of helping to understand social identity transition away from groups which could be construed of as harmful (e.g., by encouraging particular types of behaviours) towards those more supportive of positive life change. To assess the extent to which these models may be beneficial in a religious setting in the establishment of a new social identity outside of the JWs, Study 1 (Chapter 3) utilised a range of established measures (e.g., collective self-esteem; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992; Identity transition; Haslam et al., 2008) to examine cross-sectionally the extent to which these were associated with 'recovery' from membership of this high control religion. Although facets of identification with ex-JW social media groups supported identity reformulation and wellbeing, others appeared to yield paradoxical effects. For example, although certain categories of the model were correlated with increased self-esteem (in support of other theoretical contributions in unrelated research such as the social cure – Haslam, 2009), others were associated with decreased self-esteem and dysphoria. This suggested that contextual nuances associated with religious membership and exit complicated the extent to which the hypothesised variables were associated with successful

recovery. It was argued that a more nuanced understanding of religious exit and identity transition (and how this may be supported through reconfigured membership of groups) was required to understand the recovery process.

Addressing this issue, qualitative data indicate that although ex-JW support groups were beneficial, several respondents expressed an initial reluctance to associate themselves with the ex-JW community due to fears of apostasy. This appeared to centre around a deep-rooted fear of *divine* ramifications resultant from what would have been (during membership) considered 'forbidden associations', and highlighted the possibility that the somewhat contradictory quantitative findings regarding the mixed consequences and benefits of developing new social identities outside of the JWs may, at least in part, be explained by the extent to which such religious 'hangover' beliefs continue to shape the life paths of those who have left the organisation. Specifically, and in accordance with identity theory (Stryker, 1968; Stryker & Burke, 2000), it was noted that many respondents appeared to retain an entrenched JW identity, which impacted their ability to transition their personal and social identities out of the JWs. As such, the qualitative data generated as part of this thesis also supports the notion that personal and social identities are intertwined (ibid). That this finding was limited to respondents who had been raised according to JW doctrine adds interesting insights to the identity transition literature, as well as the utility of theories of personal and social identities in examining religious exit and childhood inculcation. As such, although theories of identity were a useful lens through which to understand identity change out of religion, contextual factors, such as being born-in to the JWs, and method of exit, appeared to impact identity reconfiguration considerably.

Conceptualising religious ostracism as being somewhat akin to other forms of (e.g., ethnic) discrimination, the thesis drew on ethnic identity theory (Phinney, 1989;1990), which posits that the power of group membership may help individuals overcome adverse life events such

as racial discrimination, to understand the ways in which these experiences impacted respondents' sense of self and wellbeing. Both religious ostracism and discriminatory experiences, it was argued, may threaten wellbeing and individuals' self-concept through the negative attributions of others, with supportive group membership (including those online) providing an ostensibly beneficial supportive social environment as a basis from which to start to rebuild self-esteem. Although data indicate that the experience of support derived from (new) group membership was beneficial to wellbeing, the current thesis found that these positive impacts were diluted by residual identification with the JWs. Since many respondents had never known a culture outside of the religion, which had been their sole meaning-giving reference point, it was more difficult to derive resilience from new group membership. As such, it was difficult for interviewees to derive a sense of pride from their membership of new social groups as they, in effect, also had to re-configure their 'compass' with regards to how to derive meaning and purpose outside of a religious setting which had previously bestowed this.

Echoing insights derived from unrelated research (e.g., acquired brain injury; Walsh et al., 2015), the current research found that affiliate identities and reciprocity between giving and receiving support was evident in interviews. As such, former JWs explained how the nature of ex-JW support groups meant that those more 'recovered' from the effects of ostracism would give emotional support to exiters who were dealing with more recent ostracism and identity recovery. In this way and in partial support of the theoretical framework, ex-JW social groups appeared to function as a replacement, rather than as an additional, social identity. In a similar way, the notion of identity fusion (Swann et al., 2009) was apparent in the experiences of former JWs. For example, some individuals retained obedience to the JW doctrine and described an initial reluctance to celebrate social norms such as Christmas/birthdays, while others did not. This variation in 'fusion' appeared to be facilitated by contextual factors that included circumstances of membership (born-in versus adult conversion) and the influence of

retained eschatological belief. However, certain principles of the model (ibid), such as the relational ties and identity synergy principle appeared to relate to current rather than ex-JWs, providing partial support of the utility of the model in regard to religious exit. For example, these facets of the identity fusion construct (ibid) appeared to explain how current JWs may ostracise family members despite the personal cost, putting the requirements of the group (JW religion) above their own family relationships. As such, identity fusion as a theoretical construct was useful in identifying why ostracism was experienced by exJWs and why it is endorsed by current JWs. Respondents' ability to 'diffuse' their identity may indicate that fusion may be a function of agency and is an indication that 'religious' identity fusion differs somewhat from the original construct posited by Swann and colleagues (2009). In sum, identity fusion (Swann et al., 2009) appears to be a necessary and effective addition to earlier mentioned theoretical models used in unrelated identity recovery research (e.g., SIMOR – Best et al., 2016) to progressively illustrate how religious identity reformulation may proceed in light of wider influences on, and differences between, respondents seeking to transition their identity out of the JWs, and those who find themselves outside of the JWs against their will through the disfellowship process.

Similar patterns of partial support are identified in support of Williams' (2009) temporal model of ostracism, which asserts that reactions to ostracism change over time and may differentially be characterised by immediate distress and threats to basic needs of self-esteem, belonging, meaningful existence and control. Here, the complicated nature of religious exit identified in the current work meant that reactions to ostracism tended to occur according to the circumstances of membership and exit and did not typically proceed according to Williams' theoretical framework (ibid). For example, disfellowshipped former JWs often described initial relief at no longer being tied to the JW religion, despite experiencing what could be construed of as a loss of control and belonging as immediate mandated ostracism. Since stage one of

Williams' model associates ostracism with *reflexive* distress and threat, it was notable that the paradoxical nature of forced religious exit meant that this was not always experienced, thus indicating partial support of the model. Other respondents who exited the religion through choice (and, to some extent, retaining control) described distress at the experience of ostracism but appeared to anticipate this as an inevitable consequence of their choice to exit. These complicated and somewhat varied reactions to ostracism were therefore not fully aligned with those espoused by stage one of the model and provide indications that religious ostracism is not typical of the forms of ostracism previously studied within this framework.

In consideration of Williams' (2009) second *reflective* stage of ostracism, which postulates that targets engage in rumination as to the causes and remedy of ostracism, respondents in this thesis demonstrated an acute awareness of why they were being ostracised. They also understood what they needed to do to restore relationships lost through religious shunning – specifically, to return to the JWs. This perception of 'relative control' meant that threatened needs were experienced in more complicated ways that could arguably be captured by the experimental methods that have largely informed the development of Williams' model. As such, although religious exit was resultant in ostracism, it remained under respondents' control whether they returned to the religion or not.

However, despite this relative retained sense of control, most respondents tended to experience the third *resignation* stage of the model (2009), a result of prolonged ostracism which frequently resulted in feelings of helplessness, alienation depression, low-self-esteem, and, in some cases, suicidal ideation. Aligning with the model, the experience of loss of belonging meant that respondents reported considerably reduced wellbeing as a result of lost social and family ties and relationships. This appeared to be resultant from what might be termed a 'psychological interaction' between prolonged ostracism/social isolation and retained eschatological belief in JW doctrine of 'Armageddon'. Thus, although the third stage of

Williams' (2009) model could account for the experience of former JWs who were experiencing long-term ostracism and associated reductions in wellbeing, it could not account for the additional determinants resulting from retained eschatological belief.

In sum, this thesis provides indications that although religious ostracism may be explained through the lens of Williams' (2009) theoretical framework, nuances of exit and contextual differences between respondents appeared to complicate how ostracism was experienced temporally according to the model. Hence, it may be postulated that religious ostracism differs somewhat from more 'traditional' forms of ostracism traditionally explored using this framework. However, despite these limitations, this thesis adds to the body of work that elucidates the consequences of long-term ostracism in a real-world setting.

Overall, the findings of this thesis add to our understanding of what happens to the personal and social identities of former JWs when they leave or are cast out from their religion. Findings indicate that although religious exit typically results in ostracism notwithstanding the exit method, the experience of disfellowship tends to be associated with more detriments to wellbeing than voluntary exit. This appears to be due to the enforced nature of disfellowship and the immediate mandated ostracism that ensues. Contrastingly, voluntary exit appeared to be associated with a sense of inevitability and anticipation of ostracism, which although distressing, was accompanied by a sense of control which ameliorated to some extent these deleterious effects, indicating the powerful effect that retained agency may have in experiences of religious exit from the JWs.

This thesis also found that individuals personal and social identities were inexorably intertwined as a consequence of their religious membership. Post-exit this typically resulted in social isolation and, in particular those individuals who were raised from infancy according to the doctrine and behavioural restrictions of the faith, often described their identity being in

crisis post-exit. This was more evident among disfellowshipped respondents, who appeared to retain the eschatological beliefs concerning death at Armageddon. In contrast, individuals who left voluntarily appeared to engage in a purposeful deconstruction of their previous faith as a way to purge their JW identity and engage in building what they construed as a more authentic identity. This appeared to be reminiscent of self-perception theory (Bem, 1972), whereby attitude change is postulated to come about through inferring who we are by observing what we do. A further contrast was observed among adult converts to the JWs. Upon exit, whether disfellowshipped or not, these individuals appeared to be able to 'revert' to their pre-JW identity, and often experienced an increase in support from their (never JW) family post-exit. This finding indicates that former JWs may vary in the support they need post-exit and suggests that religious exit is fundamentally shaped by social and contextual factors. As such, practitioners seeking to offer support to individuals leaving high-control faiths such as the JWs could possibly benefit from an awareness of the these influencing factors facilitating or impeding identity transition.

7.1.3 Limitations and Future Directions

This thesis sought to apply a social identity perspective as a framework for understanding the process of identity transition out of the JWs, with Chapter 2 presenting justifications for using a mixed methods approach. Nevertheless, it remains important to acknowledge and discuss limitations that need to be borne in mind when interpreting the findings of this thesis.

The purpose of this thesis was to gain insights into the lived experience of former JWs and identify what contextual factors influenced and subsequently impacted their identity reformulation from JW to ex-JW. Although findings of this thesis were in accordance with other exJW studies in indicating that ostracism is a widespread consequence of JW exit, it must be acknowledged that recruiting respondents (largely) from social media groups established

for former JW members is likely to mean that findings may not be generalisable across all former JWs. Future research that samples former JWs from more diverse recruitment platforms may therefore be fruitful.

However, garnering a meaningful sample of former JW respondents outside of social media groups may be challenging owing to the practical implications of sourcing former JWs. With this in mind, it may be worthwhile to more purposefully study individuals presenting from differing contextual standpoints. For example, the present sample yielded data from a significantly higher number of individuals who left the religion through choice rather than disfellowship. As such, studying a sample of disfellowshipped respondents versus a sample of individuals who had left through choice in equal numbers, may more clearly illuminate the extent to which exit method may play a pivotal role in post-exit identity reformulation. In addition, it may be worthwhile to further explore the impact of childhood inculcation by including respondents who converted as adults (e.g., by door-to-door evangelising). Indeed, in the present study, the low ratio of converts (5 respondents) to those born-in to multigenerational families of JWs (21 respondents) is perhaps an indication that most JWs are born-in to the religion. Since these born-in respondents (in the present thesis) tended to report identity crisis upon exit, it may be valuable to consider the impact of identity reformulation in a larger sample of these two groups. It might also be possible to speculate that the findings of this thesis may also apply to other high control religious groups, particular those who practice mandated social ostracism. However, it should be noted that further research among these samples (e.g., Jewish Orthodox, Plymouth Brethren, Mormon etc.) is required to examine this.

Other limitations of this thesis include the possibility of participant and researcher bias. In terms of the former, all research methods that are reliant on self-report, including this thesis, need to be mindful regarding the possibility of social desirability responses (Adams et al., 2000). The findings of this thesis may also be reliant on retrospective sense-making which,

although important following stressful life experiences (Crossley, 2000; Park, 2010), is driven by meaning making.

In terms of the researcher bias, the perceived advantages of conducting "insider" research' (Trowler, 2011) need to be weighed up against the possible disadvantages. For example, my insights as a former JW proffered me with a cultural literacy, or shared 'language' with my participants. This meant that I could fluidly interpret and respond to interviewees in a way that those whom had never associated with the religion may not have been able to (e.g., when talking about JW expressions such as 'the truth', 'being reinstated' and 'judicial committee'). Having both a familiarity with, and an understanding of this language also appeared to reinforce feelings of cohesion between myself as researcher and participants, creating a rapport which is crucial for interviews (Saidin, 2017) and adding a richness to the data. However, despite taking an objective approach when analysing narratives and identifying themes utilising verification strategies for establishing reliability and validity in qualitative research (Morse, 2002), it must also be acknowledged that my position as a former JW is likely to have coloured interpretation of data (in addition to discussions of emergent findings with my supervisory team).

Although there was some diversity in terms of nationality in the current research (one respondent was from the United States and one from Austria), most respondents were British. Similarly, most of the sample were middle aged (mean age = 44 years), and predominantly Caucasian (with the exception of two black respondents). As such, the current work was arguably largely been undertaken by what has been described Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic societies (W.E.I.R.D.) sample (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010), and findings need to be interpreted with that in mind.

In study 1, participants reported on their experiences of ostracism using a workplace ostracism scale (Ferris et al., 2008) created for unrelated research. It became apparent (from participant

feedback), that this scale could not always accurately account for nuances in individual circumstances. For example, some participants commented that as they had relocated in order to start a new life away from ostracism, they could not accurately give an account of post-exit incidences of ostracism. As such, although responses may have suggested an absence of ostracism, this may have accurately reflected that geography can mediate the experience of ostracism. Future research may therefore benefit from the development of a scale specifically designed for the measurement of religious ostracism, in order to more accurately capture the diversity of experiences in this domain.

7.1.4. Thesis Conclusions

An important purpose of this thesis has been to focus on identity transition in the face of religious ostracism using a theoretical lens to add to the body of research that explores religious exit from the JW religion. By adopting a social identity approach, this thesis reinforces how social identity processes impact personal and social identities that can become threatened when leaving a tight-knit religion. In doing so the thesis documents both the possibilities and limitations of applying this approach to exiting high control religions. By identifying contextual factors that appear to impact identity and wellbeing, this thesis indicates that religious exit is not a linear process and that influences such as method of exit (forced or voluntary), circumstances of membership (born-in or converted) and retained eschatological belief mediate social identity transition and responses to ostracism.

Thesis findings outline how social identity principles can be utilised to assess and mediate impacts of religious ostracism. Specifically, this thesis illustrates how identity related processes can facilitate interventions into coping with identity loss by viewing group memberships as (i) a valuable psychological resource to ameliorate social loss, and (ii) a source of influence that can aid identity recovery and transition.

The thesis findings further indicate that identity mechanisms are guided by experiences prior to, during and post-exit. The research suggests that personal identities are built upon the influence of childhood inculcation and develop according to roles played within the religion. Identity is reinforced by religious and social activities around relationships formed exclusively within a religions circle and illustrates how personal and social identities become intertwined in religious membership.

In regard to religious exit, the current work found that prevalence of ostracism, commitment levels and exit method mediated identity transition. As a whole, quantitative and qualitative data indicate a prevalence of ostracism post religious exit from the JWs. Although findings indicated that this was experienced more by individuals who had exited voluntarily, qualitative data indicated that ostracism was a typical experience notwithstanding the exit method. However, although ostracism was a ubiquitous experience that triggered generalised losses to wellbeing, data indicate that respondents who had been disfellowshipped appeared to experience increased dysphoria and were more likely to experience suicidal ideation. It is the author's hope that the findings of this thesis may support individuals transitioning their identity post-religious exit. The unique challenges confronting former JWs are addressed, finding that the impact of ostracism on identity cannot easily be ameliorated. However, this contribution has identified, introduced, and assessed seemingly effective strategies and interventions, including support through ex-JW social media groups, as a means to 'unpick the doctrine' while establishing new supportive social identities outside of the religion. Future work could highlight a need to improve understanding among mental-health practitioners of the potential consequences of leaving or being cast out of this little understood religious group, in order to address the complex needs that may arise from leaving a high-control religion.

8. References

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9. Appendices

Appendix A – Questionnaire for Chapter 3

Leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses, A Survey. Including information/consent/debrief

Leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses: Effects to identity, health and well-being **Who is conducting the research?** The principal researcher is Heather Ransom (ransomh@edgehill.ac.uk) from the Psychology Department at Edge Hill University, Ormskirk. I am a former Jehovah's Witness and I am interested in researching the effects of religious ostracism on identity, health and well-being. The research supervisor is Dr Rebecca Monk. Psychology Department. Edge Hill University. monkre@edgehill.ac.uk. **Confidentiality and personal information** If you agree to take part in this research, you will first be asked to sign a consent sheet saying you understand the information provided here. The data collected will be stored anonymously on a password protected computer and any written details stored securely in a locked drawer. You will be asked to provide a memorable word so that if you wish to retract your data, you may do so by contacting the researcher directly with your code, up to two weeks after completing the survey. The data you provide will be stored securely, without any identifying information, for 10 years, and will be destroyed when no longer required **What does the study involve?** You will be asked to complete an anonymous online questionnaire about your personal experiences of leaving the JWs (either by disfellowshipping, disassociation or fading). The study aims to identify psychological challenges involved in leaving the faith and how they relate to identity. As a former Jehovah's Witness, you are invited to share your experiences of leaving the religion, and your experience of adjusting to life outside the faith. It is important to note that the questionnaire contains potentially distressing subjects pertaining to possible experiences while you were still a member of the JW faith, such as various forms of abuse you may have experienced, and experiences of suicide/suicidal ideation: For example - Were you ever personally (as an adult or a child) a victim of a form of violence, or any kind of abuse while you were in the JW organisation, such as sexual abuse, childhood sexual abuse, domestic violence, emotional/psychological/verbal abuse? And, do you have any experience of suicide while a JW?: yes, I have experienced suicidal ideation but did not act of it; yes I attempted to end my life; yes, I know of others who have tried to end their lives; yes, I know of others who have ended their lives. The survey also asks questions about potentially emotional experiences of religious shunning after exiting the faith. For example - When you left the Jehovah's Witnesses, did you experience any of the following: loss of family and friends due to shunning; loss, or reduced sense of spirituality; loss of, or reduced sense of identity; loss, or reduced sense of self-esteem; loss, or reduced sense of belonging; reduced well-being (mental health); reduced physical health. Other items in the questionnaire aim to measure mental well-being, social support, sense of self-esteem and belonging, feelings of identity, and experiences of ostracism. It is also important to note that this is the first known survey of its kind to explore experiences of both leaving the JW faith, and experiences of being in the faith. As such, it has been designed to be comprehensive in nature, and we ask that you please set aside approximately 40 minutes to complete the survey in a relaxed atmosphere. It is also important

to note that you may leave out any questions that you do not wish to answer, and exit the survey at any time. However, please note that as the survey is anonymous, you cannot ever be identified by any data you supply. **Consent** After reading this information sheet, you may decide you do not want to take part in this research. However, if you decide you do wish to take part consent will be required by indicating in the box provided. At Edgehill we are committed to respecting and protecting your personal data. To find ways in which we use your data, please see: edgehill.ac.uk/about/legal/privacy. **The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)** The university is committed to ensuring compliance with GDPR legislation, and confirms that all data is used fairly, stored safely, and not disclosed to any other person unlawfully. The University is a data controller, and in some instances may be a processor of this data **Right to Withdraw Consent** You may withdraw from this research at any time by exiting the online survey (which will delete all the data you have supplied), or up to two weeks after completing the survey, by contacting the researcher with your memorable word. Please keep this safe. **What will happen to the results of the research study?** The results of this study will be used as part of a PhD thesis, and could also be published in academic journals, or conference proceedings. Nevertheless, you will not be personally indefinable from any data or results. Your (anonymous) data will be kept for 10 years on a locked computer to which only the researchers have access. **Ethics** This study has been reviewed by Edge Hill Department of Psychology's Research Ethics Committee **What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?** Due to the sensitive nature of the study, you are reminded that you have right to stop participation at any time. We cannot give specific advice or support but advise that if you are experiencing physical or psychological distress, you can contact your GP, local counselling services, or ex-JW Facebook support groups which are set up to help you in recovery. Professional help and support services are also available at Samaritans: Freephone 116 123 (UK). Email: jo@samaritans.org (UK) or Freepost RSRB-KKBY-CYJK, PO Box 9090, Stirling, FK8 2SA It may be unlikely that you will benefit personally from their experience of participation, but it is hoped that they will feel better for having the opportunity to share their experiences or helping to potentially help others. **Is there someone independent I can talk to about the research?** In addition to the principal researcher details (ransomh@edgehill.ac.uk), the supervisor of the research is Dr Rebecca Monk (monkre@edgehill.ac.uk). If you would like to speak to someone independent of the research team, please contact Dr Andrew Levy, who is chair of the Research Ethics Committee, and can be contacted with any complaints or issues (Levy@edgehill.ac.uk) **We are grateful for your help, if you are happy to participate, please read and sign the consent form**

Click to write the question text

End of Block: Default Question Block

Start of Block: Informed Consent

Please read and confirm that you have read and understood the following statements:

I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above study and understand what is expected of me

○ Yes (1)

○ No (2)

I understand I am free to withdraw from the research at any time or withdraw my data for up to two weeks after I have been debriefed following the study

○ Yes (1)

○ No (2)

I confirm I have been given the opportunity to ask questions regarding the study and if asked, my questions were answered adequately and to my full satisfaction

○ Yes (1)

○ No (2)

I understand and consent to my anonymous data being used in the write up of a PhD thesis, presentation at conferences, and in academic journals

○ Yes (1)

○ No (2)

End of Block: Informed Consent

Start of Block: Demographics

Q1 We are trying to understand what happens when leaving the Jehovah's Witness (JW) religion. Why did you leave? What were the consequences of leaving? Please write a brief account in the following text box, and then proceed with the rest of the survey. Use as many or few words as you want. Thank you

____

Q2 Which gender do you identify as?

____

Q3 What is your age?

____

End of Block: Demographics

Start of Block: About Your Life in JWs

Q4 When you were a JW, how committed were you to the JW faith, - on a scale of 1-10 where 1 is not at all committed and 10 is fully committed

	Not at all (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	Somewhat (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	Fully (10)
1 (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Q5 Please indicate how you left the Jehovah's Witnesses

◯ Disfellowshipped (1)

◯ Disassociated (2)

◯ Faded (3)

◯ Still a JW (4)

Q6 When you first left the JWs, did you experience any of the following? (please tick all that apply)

◯ Loss of family and friends due to shunning (1)

◯ Loss of spirituality (2)

◯ Loss of, or reduced sense of identity (3)

◯ Loss of, or reduced sense of self-esteem (4)

◯ Loss of, or reduced sense of belonging (5)

◯ Reduced well-being (mental health) (6)

◯ Reduced physical health (7)

◯ Other (8)

Q7 If other, please explain if you are able (otherwise proceed to the next question)

____

Q8 Do any of the following still affect you? (please tick all that apply)

- ☐ Loss of family and friends due to shunning (1)
- ☐ Loss of spirituality (2)
- ☐ Loss of, or reduced sense of identity (3)
- ☐ Loss of, or reduced self-esteem (4)
- ☐ Loss of, or reduced sense of belonging (5)
- ☐ Reduced well-being (mental health) (6)
- ☐ Reduced physical health (7)
- ☐ Other (8)

Q9 If other, please explain if you are able (otherwise proceed to the next question)

____

Q10 Were you a Jehovah's Witness from birth? (or infancy/childhood)

- ○ Yes (1)
- ○ No (2)

Q11 If you were baptised as a Jehovah's Witness, what age were you?

____

Q12 How old were you when you left the JW's?

____

Q13 How many years were you a JW? (If you were born into the faith, please count these years also)

____

Q14 How long is it since you left the JW's? (Whether disfellowshipped, disassociated or faded)

____

Q15 Has belonging to an online support group or groups (e.g., Facebook, Reddit or other forum) helped you in coping with any challenges you have experienced associated with leaving the JW's?

- ○ Yes (1)
- ○ No (2)

Q16 If you answered yes to the last question, how have these groups helped you?

____

Q17 Were you ever personally (whether as an adult or a child) a victim of a form of violence, or any kind of abuse while you were in the JW organisation? (Please tick all that apply)

- ☐ Sexual abuse (1)
- ☐ Childhood sexual abuse (2)
- ☐ Physical abuse (3)
- ☐ Domestic violence (4)
- ☐ Emotional abuse (5)
- ☐ Psychological abuse (6)
- ☐ Verbal abuse (7)
- ☐ No (8)

Q18 Were you aver aware of a situation (or situations) of abuse within the JW organisation? (Please tick all that apply).

- ☐ Sexual abuse (1)
- ☐ Childhood sexual abuse (2)
- ☐ Physical abuse (3)
- ☐ Domestic violence (4)
- ☐ Emotional abuse (5)
- ☐ Psychological abuse (6)
- ☐ Verbal abuse (7)
- ☐ No (8)

Q19 Please reflect back on your life as a JW... What was it like? In your own words, please write as much or as little as you like.

____

Q20 Please reflect back on your life since leaving the JW's, what is it like? In your own words please write as much or as little as you like.

____

Q21 On a scale of 1-10 (1- Never going to happen, 10- Certain to happen), how likely is it that you would consider returning to the JW's?

	Not at all (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	Somewhat (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	Fully intend (10)
1 (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Q22 Have you been shunned by family and friends? If so, for how many years?

____

Q23 To what extent did fear of shunning prevent you from leaving the JW's when you first wanted to? (1- fear of shunning did not prevent me, 10- Fear of shunning prevented me)

	Not at all (did not prevent me) (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	Somewhat (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	Fully (did prevent me) (10)
1 (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Q24 Did you have any experience of suicide whilst a JW? (tick all that apply)

▢ Yes, I experienced suicidal ideation but did not act on it (1)

▢ Yes, I attempted to end my life (2)

▢ Yes, I know of others who have attempted to end their lives (3)

▢ Yes, I know of others who have ended their lives (4)

▢ No (5)

Q25 How many JW or ex-JW suicides are you personally aware of?

____

Q26 Have you had an experience of suicide since leaving the JW's? (tick all that apply)

- ☐ Yes, I experienced suicidal ideation but didn't act on it (1)
- ☐ yes, I attempted to end my life (2)
- ☐ Yes, I know of others who tried to end their lives (3)
- ☐ Yes, I know of others who have ended their lives (4)
- ☐ No (5)

Q27 CESD scale. The following questions measure mental well-being. Please answer each question and how it applies to the last 7 days

	Rarely or none of the time (less than 1 day) (1)	Some or a little of the time (1-2 days) (2)	Occasionally, or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days) (3)	Most or all of the time (5-7 days) (4)
1. I was bothered by things that don't usually bother me (1)	○	○	○	○
2. I did not feel like eating; my appetite was poor (2)	○	○	○	○
3. I felt that I could not shake off the blues, even with help from my family and friends (3)	○	○	○	○
4. I felt I was just as good as other people (4)	○	○	○	○
5. I had trouble keeping my mind on what I was doing (5)	○	○	○	○
6. I felt depressed (6)	○	○	○	○
7. I felt like everything I did was an effort (7)	○	○	○	○
8. I felt hopeful about the future (8)	○	○	○	○
9. I thought my life had been a failure (9)	○	○	○	○
10. I felt fearful (10)	○	○	○	○
11. My sleep was restless (11)	○	○	○	○
12. I was happy (12)	○	○	○	○
13. I talked less than usual (13)	○	○	○	○
14. I felt lonely (14)	○	○	○	○

15. People were unfriendly (15)	○	○	○	○
16. I enjoyed life (16)	○	○	○	○
17. I had crying spells (17)	○	○	○	○
18. I felt sad (18)	○	○	○	○
19. I felt that people dislike me (19)	○	○	○	○
20. I could not get 'going' (20)	○	○	○	○

Q28 Please tell us about the people you socialise with by selecting all that are relevant and tell us how often you socialise with them.

- ▢ Facebook groups (1)
- ▢ Family (2)
- ▢ Work (3)
- ▢ Friends (4)
- ▢ Other (5)
- ▢ Other on-line groups (6)

Q29 How often do you interact with them?

____

Q30 Thinking about these groups, please answer the following:

The following questions measure collective self-esteem, or how we feel about our membership with our groups.

	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Disagree somewhat (3)	Neutral (4)	Agree somewhat (5)	Agree (6)	Strongly agree (7)
I am a worthy member of the social groups I belong to (1)	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I often regret that I belong to some of the groups I do (2)	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Overall, my social groups are considered good by others (3)	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Overall, my group memberships have very little to do with how I feel about myself (4)	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I feel I don't have much to offer to the social groups I belong to (5)	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
In general I'm glad to be a member of the social groups I belong to (6)	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Most people consider my social group, on the average, to be more ineffective than other social groups (7)	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

The social groups I belong to are an important reflection of who I am (8)							
I am a cooperative member participant in the social groups I belong to (9)							
Overall, I often feel that the social groups of which I am a member are not worthwhile (10)							
In general, others respect the social groups that I am a member of (11)							
The social groups I belong to are unimportant to my sense of what kind of person I am (12)							
I often feel I'm a useless member of my social groups (13)							
I feel good about the social groups I belong to (14)							

In general, others think that the social groups I am a member of are unworthy (15)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
In general, belonging to social groups is an important part of my self-image (16)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Q37 Recovering identity scale:
Please answer the following questions

	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Disagree somewhat (3)	Neither agree nor disagree (4)	Somewhat agree (5)	Strongly agree (6)
Being an ex-JW is a central part to who I am (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○
I would describe myself as an ex-JW (2)	○	○	○	○	○	○
I identify with other ex-JWs (3)	○	○	○	○	○	○
Even when not interacting with my ex-JW social group, I think of myself as an ex-JW (4)	○	○	○	○	○	○

Q38 Identity transition scale:
Please answer the following questions

	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Somewhat disagree (3)	Neither agree nor disagree (4)	Somewhat agree (5)	Agree (6)	Strongly agree (7)
Before leaving the JWs, I belonged to lots of JW groups (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Before leaving the JWs, I joined in the activities of lots of JW groups (2)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Before leaving the JWs, I had friends who were in JW groups (3)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Before leaving the JWs, I had strong ties to JW groups (4)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
After leaving the JWs, I still belonged to the same JW groups (5)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
After leaving the JWs, I still joined in the same JW group activities (6)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

After leaving the JWs, I am still friends with the same groups of JWs, as before I left (7)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
After leaving the JWs, I continued to have strong ties with the same groups of people (8)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
After leaving the JWs, I have joined one or more new groups (9)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
After leaving the JWs, I have joined in the activities of new groups (10)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
After leaving the JWs, I have strong ties with one or more of my new groups (11)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Q33 Please answer the following (PBC)

	Very little control (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	A great deal of control (7)
How much control did you have over leaving the JWs? (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Q34 Please answer the following (PBC)

	Very difficult				Very easy			
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
For you to remain outside the JWs is? ()								
How difficult would it be for you to return to the JWs? ()								

Q35 Please answer the following (PBC)

	Strongly disagree (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	Strongly agree (7)
If I wanted to, I could easily return to the JWs (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
It is mostly up to me whether I return to the JWs (2)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Q36 Social support scale
We are interested in how you feel about the following statements. Read each statement carefully, and indicate how you feel about each one

	Very strongly disagree (1)	Strongly disagree (2)	Disagree (3)	Neutral (4)	Mildly agree (5)	Strongly agree (6)	Very strongly agree (7)
There is a special person, who is around when I am in need (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
There is a special person with whom I can share joys and sorrows (2)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
My family really tries to help me (3)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I get the emotional help and support I need from my family (4)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I have a special person who is a real source of comfort to me (5)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
My friends really try to help me (6)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I can count on my friends when things go wrong (7)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I can talk about my problems with my family (8)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

I have friends with whom I can share my sorrows and joys (9)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
There is a special person in my life who cares about my feelings (10)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
My family is willing to help me make decisions (11)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I can talk about my problems with my friends (12)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Q32 Ostracism scale: Please indicate the following:

	Never (1)	Once in a while (2)	Sometimes (3)	Fairly often (4)	Often (5)	Constantly (6)	Always (7)
Jehovah's Witnesses you know ignore you (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
JWs that you know, leave the area when you enter (2)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Your greetings to JWs go unanswered (3)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
JWs you know avoid you (4)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
You notice JWs that know you will not look at you (5)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
JWs you know, shut you out of conversations (6)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
JWs you know, refuse to talk to you (7)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
JWs you know, treat you like you are not there (8)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
JWs you know, do not invite you for family or friend gatherings (9)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
JWs you know, have stopped talking to you (10)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Q31 Self-esteem scale: Instructions: Below is a list of statements dealing with your general feelings about yourself. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement.

	Strongly agree (1)	Agree (2)	Disagree (3)	Strongly disagree (4)
On the whole, I am satisfied with myself (1)	○	○	○	○
At times I think I am no good at all (2)	○	○	○	○
I feel that I have a number of good qualities (3)	○	○	○	○
I am able to do things as well as most people (4)	○	○	○	○
I feel I do not have much to be proud of (5)	○	○	○	○
I certainly do feel useless at times (6)	○	○	○	○
I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others (7)	○	○	○	○
I wish I could have respect for myself (8)	○	○	○	○
All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure (9)	○	○	○	○
I take a positive attitude toward myself (10)	○	○	○	○

Q45 DEBRIEF SHEET **Title:** Leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses: Effects to identity, health and well-being Thank you for participating in this study What was the study about? The aim of the study was to investigate the experiences of former Jehovah's Witnesses upon leaving the faith, as well exploring how they deal with ostracism from family and friends. This is important because self-

identity, belonging and self-esteem may be negatively affected by ostracism but there has been very little research in the JW community, where ostracism is common. The results from this study will be used as part of my PhD thesis, and may subsequently be written up for inclusion in academic journals or conference proceedings. However, it will not be possible for you to be personally identified from any of your supplied data. Withdrawing from the study Your memorable word…………………………………… It is important to remember you may withdraw from the study up to two weeks following your participation, without explanation. Please keep a note of your memorable word and if you wish to withdraw, please email me this word (ransomh@edgehill.ac.uk). This will allow the retrieval and deletion of your otherwise anonymous data. **What if I want advice/help?** We are not qualified to offer advice, but support is available from your GP, counselling services, and through Ex JW Facebook recovery groups. Help is also available from Samaritans, freephone on 116 123 (UK). Email: jo@samaritans.org (UK) or Freepost RSRB-KKBY-CYJK, PO Box 9090, Stirling, FK8 2SA **Who can I contact if I have further questions?**..................

Appendix B: Amos output for the original model

Correlation matrix between variables (original model)

	Ostracism	PBC	Membership CSE	Commitment	Importance to identity CSE	Public CSE	Exit No choice
Perceived behavioural control	-.24***	-					1.86 (.60)
Exit no choice	-.34***	.14	-				
Commitment	.13(.01)	-	-	-			
Identity transition	-.03 (.03)	.20(.08)	.27***	.70***	.33***	.02(.10)	2.02 (1.1)
Self esteem	.01 (.02)	.12(.05)	-.72***	-.25 (.12)	.31***	-.01(.06)	.18 (.67)
CESD	.02 (.03)	-.46***	-1.3***	-.27 (.24)	.42***	-.53(.14)	.25 (1.5)
Recovering identity	.01 (.01)	-	-.02(.03)	.08 (.07)	.15***	-.03(.04)	.21 (.44)
Social support friends	-.08 (.01)						
Social Support Sig other	-.05 (.01)						
Social Support Family	.05 (.02)						
Membership CSE	-.01(.01)						
Importance to identity CSE	-.01 (.01)						
Private CSE	.00 (.00)						
Public CSE	.01 (.01)						
JW from birth	.00(.00)						

How long left	.04 (.02)
How many years JW	-.01 (.02)

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

Correlation matrix between variables (original model)

	Social Support friends	Social Support Sig other	Social Support family	Private CSE	JW From birth	How Long Since left	How long a JW
Self esteem	-.07(.04)	-.05(.04)	.08***	-.56(.10)	-.50(.77)	.00(.03)	-.03(.03)
CESD	-.26(.10)	-.12(.10)	.18(.08)	.30(.23)	2.02(1.7)	.00(.06)	-.11(.06)
Identity transition	.10 (.07)	-.08(.07)	.10(.05)	.15(.17)	1.24(1.2)	.04(.04)	-.01(.01)
Recovering identity	.03 (.03)	-.01(.03)	-.05(.02)	-.84	1.12(.51)	.01(.02)	.03(.02)

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

Parameter estimates for model (initial model)

Path	**Unstandardised Estimate (Standard Error)**	**Standardised Estimate**
Ostracism Score → Exit No Choice 1	-.01 (.00)	-.34***
Ostracism Score → Commitment	.02 (.01)	.13***
Ostracism score → Perceived Behavioural Control	-.08 (.01)	-.24***
Ostracism score → Social support friends	-.02 (.01)	-.08
Ostracism score → Social support sig other	-.02 (.01)	-.05
Ostracism → social support family	.02 (.02)	.05
Ostracism → Membership CSE	-.01 (.01)	-.04
Ostracism → Private CSE	-.00 (.00)	-.02
Ostracism → public CSE	.01 (.01)	.05
Ostracism → importance to identity CSE	-.01 (.01)	-.03

Ostracism → CESD	.02 (.03)	.02
Ostracism → self-esteem score	.01 (.02)	.03
Ostracism → identity transition score	-.03 (.03)	-.06
Ostracism → recovering identity	.01 (.01)	.05
Ostracism → JW from birth	.00 (.00)	.05
Ostracism → How long since left	.04 (.02)	.08
Ostracism → How many years JW	-.01 (.02)	-.02
Exit no choice 1 → CESD score	.25 (1.5)	.01
Exit no choice → self-esteem score	.18 (.67)	.01
Exit no choice → Identity transition score	2.02 (1.1)	-.08
Exit no choice → recovering identity	.21 (.44)	.02
Exit No Choice 1→ Perceived Behavioural Control	1.86 (.60)	.14***
Commitment → Identity Transition	.70 (.17)	.18***
Commitment → self-esteem	-.25 (.12)	-.09
Commitment → CESD score	-.27 (.24)	-.04
Commitment → recovering identity score	.08 (.07)	.05
Commitment → identity transition	.70 (.18)	.17
Perceived Behavioural Control → Identity transition	.20 (.08)	.11***
Perceived behavioural control → recovering identity	-.02 (.03)	-.03
Social support friends → self-esteem score	-.07 (.04)	-.06
Social support friends → CESD score	-.26 (.10)	-.10
Social support friends → identity transition score	.10 (.07)	.06
Social support friends → recovering identity	.03 (.03)	.04
Social support sig other → self-esteem score	-.05 (.04)	-.05
Social support sig other → CESD score	-.12 (.10)	-.05
Social support → identity transition score	-.08 (.07)	-.05
Social support sig other → recovering identity	-.01 (.03)	-.01
Social support family → identity transition score	-.10 (.05)	-.01
Social support family → self-esteem score	.08 (.03)	.09
Social support family → CESD score	.18 (.08)	.09
Social support family → recovering identity score	-.05 (.02)	-.09
Perceived Behavioural Control → Self- Esteem	-.12 (.05)	-.10***
Perceived Behavioural Control → CESD Score	-.46 (.11)	-.16***
Membership CSE → CESD Score	-1.3 (.11)	-.42***
Membership CSE → identity transition score	.27 (.09)	.14
Membership CSE → recovering identity score	-.02 (.03)	-.21
Membership CSE → Self - Esteem	-.72 (.05)	-.52***
Private CSE → CESD score	.30 (.23)	.05***
Private CSE → self-esteem score	-.56 (.10)	-.02
Private CSE → identity transition score	.15 (.17)	.04
Private CSE → recovering identity	-.84)	-.05
Importance to Identity CSE → CESD Score	.42 (.13)	.13***
Importance to Identity CSE → Self Esteem	.31 (.06)	.20***
Importance to Identity CSE → Identity Transition	.33 (.09)	.15***
Importance to identity CSE → Recovering identity	.15 (.04)	.21
Public CSE → CESD Score	-.53 (.14)	-.10***
Public CSE → identity transition score	.02 (.10)	.01
Public CSE → recovering identity	-.03 (.04)	-.03
Public CSE → self-esteem score	-.01 (.06)	-.05
JW from birth → identity transition score	1.24 (1.2)	-.04
JW from birth → recovering identity score	1.12 (.51)	-.10
JW from birth → self-esteem score	-.50 (.77)	-.02
JW from birth → CESD score	2.02 (1.7)	-.05
How long since left → identity transition	.04 (.04)	.18***
How long since left → recovering identity	.01 (.02)	.02
How long since left → self-esteem score	.00 (.03)	.00
How long since left → CESD score	.00 (.06)	.00
How many years JW → identity transition score	-.01 (.04)	-.01
How many years JW → recovering identity score	.03 (.02)	.07
How many years JW → self-esteem score	-.03 (.03)	-.04

How many years JW → CESD score	-.11 (.06)	-.07

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***
How long since left → how many years JW	28.14	

Variances	Estimate (Standard Error)
Ostracism Score	383.10 (24.70)***
Exit No Choice	.15 (.01)***
Commitment	5.91 (.38)***
Perceived Behavioural Control Scale	26.86 (1.70)***
Membership CSE	25.63 (1.66)***
Public CSE	17.04 (1.10)***
Importance to Identity CSE	21.34 (1.38)***
Private CSE	6.42 (.42)***
Self Esteem Score	31.34 (2.06)***
Identity Transition Score	88.14 (5.73)***
Recovering Identity Score	14.17 (.92)***
CESD Score	161.94 (10.50)***
Social support friends	33.79 (2.20)
Social support significant other	34.54 (2.24)
Social support family	60.35 (3.91)
JW from birth	.11 (.01)
How long since left	108.74 (7.05)
How many years JW	96.72 (6.27)

Squared Multiple Correlations	
Exit no Choice	.11
Importance to Identity CSE	.00
Public CSE	.00
Membership CSE	.00
Perceived Behavioural Control Score	.08
Commitment	.02
CESD Score	.29
Recovering Identity Score	.08
Identity Transition Score	.11
Self Esteem Score	.35
Private CSE	.00
How many years JW	.00
How long since left	.01
JW from birth	.00
Social support family	.00
Social support significant other	.00
Social support friends	.00

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

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

Appendix C: Information sheet (Study two, three and four)

Study title

Leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses: Effects to identity, health and well-being

Who is conducting the research?

The principal researcher is Heather Ransom (ransomh@edgehill.ac.uk) from the Psychology Department at Edge Hill University, Ormskirk. The study will form part of my PhD thesis. The research supervisor is Dr Rebecca Monk. Psychology Department. Edge Hill University. monkre@edgehill.ac.uk.

This research is being undertaken on an 'insider research' basis. As a former Jehovah's Witness, I am interested in researching the effects to identity, health and well-being when leaving the faith. I am also interested in researching the effects of religious ostracism, a common experience for former JW's.

What personal information will I be required to provide?

If you agree to take part in this primary part of this research, you will first be asked to sign a consent sheet saying you understand the information provided here. You will also be asked to give your name and contact details. These will be stored and locked separately from your data to ensure your anonymity and confidentiality. The data you provide will be stored securely for 10 years, without any information that will be able to identify you personally and disposed of when no longer required. All information will be kept confidential and anonymous. The data collected, including interview recordings (where you will be given a pseudonym) and transcript data will be stored on a password protected computer and any written details stored securely in a locked drawer. Limits of confidentially mean that your data will remain confidential unless a disclosure is made that suggests, either directly or indirectly, harm to the participant or others, or criminal activity.

Note * You will also be asked if you give consent to be contacted by the researcher in approximately one years' time to take part in the second part of this research. This consent is requested on a separate consent form, and you are under no obligation to take part in this. Taking part in part one of the research, does not obligate you to take part in part two.

What does the study involve?

You will be asked to take part in a sixty-minute face to face (or Skype) interview with the researcher, which will be captured on a secure recording device. You will be asked to relate your personal experiences of leaving (either by disfellowshipping, disassociation or fading) the Jehovah's Witness religion, specifically the experience of religious shunning. The study aims to identify psychological challenges involved in leaving the faith and how they relate to identity. As a former Jehovah's Witness, you are invited to share your experiences of leaving the religion, and your experience of adjusting to life outside the faith. Examples of questions you will be asked are: "Can you tell me how you came to leave the Jehovah's Witness religion?" And "If you were disfellowshipped (or dissociated) can you tell me a bit about that experience?" or "If you decided to fade from the religion, what brought you to that decision?"

What are my rights as a participant?

This research is being conducted in accordance with the British Psychological Society ethical guidelines, meaning you have a series of rights as a participant.

All information you provide will be anonymous and treated in the strictest confidence. You will not be identifiable at any point, as you will be identified by a pseudonym (or participant number e.g., participant 1) in data files. The (anonymous) results of this study will be used for

my PhD and may subsequently be written up for publication in academic journals, used in conference proceedings as well as my final thesis. You will not however, ever be personally identifiable from any of the information/data that is supplied. If you do decide to take part in this research, you have the right to withdraw your anonymous data at any time up to a period of two weeks after you have completed this study. You will be requested to provide a memorable date for this purpose – so that we can identify and remove your otherwise anonymous data You can stop the interviews at any time without providing a reason and without penalty. As this is a longitudinal study, you will be asked to a conduct a second interview in approximately one year, but you are not obligated to do so.

Consent
After reading this information sheet, you may decide you do not want to take part in this research. However, if you decide you do wish to take part consent will be required in the form of a signature.

At Edgehill we are committed to respecting and protecting your personal data. To find ways in which we use your data, please see
edgehill.ac.uk/about/legal/privacy.

The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)
The university is committed to ensuring compliance with GDPR legislation, and confirms that all data is used fairly, stored safely, and not disclosed to any other person unlawfully. The University is a data controller, and in some instances may be a processor of this data

Right to Withdraw Consent
Your anonymous data may be withdrawn from the study for a period of two weeks after the interview, without giving a reason, by contacting the principal researcher at Edge Hill University ransomh@edgehill.ac.uk. You will be asked to supply a memorable date on the consent sheet. This will enable us to identify and remove your anonymous data.

Will my participation be confidential?
To protect your personal details and data, your participation in the study will be kept confidential and anonymous by assigning you a pseudonym. Any details of your identity will be kept in a locked drawer, and your data stored on a locked computer which is only available to the researcher. Limits of confidentially mean that your data will remain confidential unless a disclosure is made that suggests, either directly or indirectly, harm to the participant or others, or criminal activity.

What will happen to the results of the research study?
The results of this study will be used as part of a PhD thesis, and could also be published in academic journals, or conference proceedings. Nevertheless, your data will remain confidential, anonymous and protected. Your (anonymous) data will be kept for 10 years on a locked computer to which only the researcher has access.

Ethics
This study has been reviewed by DREC – Psychology, Edge Hill University

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?
Due to the sensitive nature of the study, psychological distress may occur, and therefore the participant has the right to stop the interview at any time. Although we cannot give specific

advice, we can of course signpost you to your GP, counselling service, or ex-JW Facebook support groups, specifically set up to help you in recovery.
Professional help and support services are also available at Samaritans: Freephone 116 123 (UK). Email: jo@samaritans.org (UK) or Freepost RSRB-KKBY-CYJK, PO Box 9090, Stirling, FK8 2SA

It may be unlikely that participants will benefit personally from their experience of participation, but it is hoped that they will feel better for having the opportunity to share their experiences or helping to potentially help others.

Is there someone independent I can talk to about the research?
In addition to the principal researchers details (ransomh@edgehill.ac.uk), the supervisor of the research is Dr Rebecca Monk (monkre@edgehill.ac.uk). If you would like to speak to someone independent of the research team, please contact Dr Andrew Levy (Levy@edgehill.ac.uk)

Much research in Psychology depends on participation by individuals like yourself. We are grateful for your help. Also, please do not discuss this experiment with other potential participants. If you are happy to participate, please read and sign the consent form

Appendix D: Consent Sheet

Study Title:
Leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses: Effects to identity, health and well-being.

This research is being conducted as part of a PhD. Data you have supplied will be used for my PhD thesis. It may also be written up and used for publication and/or conferences. The data may also be made available on public sites. It will not be possible for you to be personally identifies from any data or publication. If you are happy for your (anonymous) data to be included into the study, possible future studies, and for possible inclusion in academic journals, please read and sign this consent form. Your data will be anonymous and cannot identify you in any way. Further, your data will be stored on a password protected computer available only to the researcher. Any other data that could identify you, will be stored in a locked drawer.
Name of researcher: Heather Ransom (ransomh@edgehill.ac.uk)

Please initial all boxes, and sign twice, where indicated below

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above study and understand what is expected of me ☐

2. I understand I am free to withdraw from the research at any time or withdraw my data for up to two weeks after I have been debriefed following the study ☐

3. I confirm I have been given the opportunity to ask questions regarding the study and if asked, my questions were answered adequately and to my full satisfaction ☐

4. I understand and consent to my anonymous data being used in the write up of a PhD thesis, presentation at conferences, and in academic journals. ☐

Please provide you signature here……………………………..

Name ………………………………………………………………

Please provide a memorable date here ……………………….. This allows the retrieval and withdrawal of your unidentified data If you wish to withdraw your anonymous data, please do so within 2 weeks of completion by emailing the above researcher at Edge Hill University

Thank you for this information. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions

Appendix E: Debrief Sheet

Title:
Leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses: Effects to identity, health and well-being

Thank you for participating in this study

What was the study about?

The aim of the study was to investigate the experiences of former Jehovah's Witnesses of leaving the faith and deal with ostracism from their family and friends in their former religious community.
This is important because identity and associated self-esteem and sense of belonging are all affected when being ostracised. In line with previous research we predict that participants find it psychologically difficult and painful to adjust to life in a world that they were taught to believe was wicked.

Research indicates that identity is threatened when an individual experiences ostracism. When considering the present research, it will be investigated how being ostracised from the Jehovah's Witnesses church could result in a lack of belonging results in ill effects caused to the individual.

Although much research has been conducted in the areas of identity, self-esteem and belonging, this has not been in the context of religious ostracism. This subject has been rarely addressed and it is the purpose of this research to enable a better understanding of the psychological processes involved.

The results from this study will be used as part of my PhD thesis, and may subsequently be written up for inclusion in academic journals or conference proceedings

Withdrawing from the study

It is important to remember you may withdraw from the study up to two weeks following this interview. Please keep your memorable date safe, and should you wish to withdraw contact me (ransomh@edgehill.ac.uk) at Edge Hill University to supply this date. This will allow retrieval of your anonymous data to be removed from the study and destroyed

What if I want advice/help?

We are not qualified to offer advice, but support is available from your GP, counselling services, and through Ex JW Facebook recovery groups.
Help is also available from Samaritans, freephone on 116 123 (UK).
Email: jo@samaritans.org (UK) or Freepost RSRB-KKBY-CYJK, PO Box 9090, Stirling, FK8 2SA

Who can I contact if I have further questions?

If you have any questions, please speak to the researcher: Heather Ransom. You may also speak to my supervisor:
Dr Rebecca Monk
Department of Psychology
Edge Hill University
St Helens Rd, Ormskirk. L39 4QP
monkre@edgehill.ac.uk

thank you once again for your participation. If you have any further questions please feel free to contact the researcher at (ransomh@edgehill.ac.uk)

Appendix F: Permission to Contact (Longitudinal Interview only)

To take part in the second part of this research, your permission is required for the researcher to contact you (in approximately one years' time).

If this is acceptable, and you would like to take part, please provide contact details as below. There is no obligation to take part, and permission may be revoked by yourself at any time.

Name………………………………………………………

Email address …………………………………………….

Contact number …………………………………………..

I give permission for the researcher (Heather Ransom) to contact me to arrange the second part of the research, and understand I am under no obligation to take part

Signed …………………………………………………..

Name ……………………………………………………

Appendix G: Interview Schedule

Research Questions

During this interview we will be looking at your experiences when leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses, paying particular attention to if this affected identity, your sense of self-esteem and your sense of belonging

1. **Can you tell me how you came to leave the Jehovah's Witness religion?**

   Prompt: was that through choice, or were you disfellowshipped?
   Probe: did you leave alone or did you have support (off family and friends)

2. **How many years were you a JW?**

   Prompt: were you born in or did you convert?
   Probe: something about the reasons for leaving if not already clear
   Probe: how many years is it since you left?

3. **How did you feel immediately after you left/were disfellowshipped?**

   Prompt: did these feelings change over time?
   Probe: what are your feelings now, looking back on that experience?

4. **How would you describe the main changes to your life after you left?**

   Prompt: how was your day-to-day routine affected?
   Probe: can you think of any other changes in your life after this experience?

5. **Thinking again about those changes to your life, was there any impact to your family relationships?**

   Prompt: How about friendships? Were they affected?
   Probe: How are relationships with family and friends now?

6. Has your experience of leaving changed how you feel about the JW religion?

   Prompt: how do you view the individuals in the JW religion as compared to the religion itself?
   Probe: Thinking back…Did your experience change how you felt about yourself?
   Probe? How do feel about yourself now?
   Probe: could you tell me a little about how you feel about yourself now, compared to when you were a JW?
   Probe: Has your experience changed how you view people (non JWs) compared to how you viewed people when you were a JW?

7. **Was your identity, your sense of who you are, affected by your experience of leaving the JWs?**

   Prompt: Does this stiff affect you?
   Probe: could you tell me a bit more about how this has affected your identity, your sense of who you are?

8. **Have your religious beliefs changed since leaving the JWs?**

   Prompt: (if yes) why do you think this change happened?
   Probe: Are they still your current religious beliefs?

9. **Thinking now about your self-esteem, your view of yourself and your worth, how did leaving (or being disfellowshipped) the JWs affect this?**

   Prompt: How long did those feelings last?
   Probe: How do feel about yourself now?
   Probe: were these changes (if any) related to your experience of leaving the religion?

10. **When you were disfellowshipped (disassociated, or fading) did you still believe the JW religion was the truth?**

    Prompt: Did you feel this impacted on your self-esteem at all?
    Probe: Do you feel the experience of leaving the JWs has a negative or positive impact on self-esteem?
    Probe: Do you feel it makes any difference to your self-esteem whether you still believe the JW doctrines or not?

11. **Thinking back…Did being disfellowshipped (or disassociated or fading) impact the way you thought about yourself?**

    Prompt: How did you feel about being disfellowshipped? (if applicable)
    Prompt: did you think it was a fair process?
    Prompt: Did you experience any religious shunning?
    Probe: again, thinking back…how did you feel about the shunning associated with being disfellowshipped?
    Probe: After being disfellowshipped (or alternative), and experiencing shunning, did you cope better or worse than you expected?
    Probe: How do you feel now about the shunning associated with the JW religion?

12. **Can you tell me a little more about whether your experience of being disfellowshipped (or disassociated/faded) affected your self-esteem?**

    Prompt: did you feel that you belonged when you were a JW?
    Prompt: do you feel you belong in the religion now?
13. **What support did you have when you were disfellowshipped?**

    Prompt: family?
    Prompt: Friends?
    Probe: How much of a difference did having/not having this support make to your life and your self-esteem?
    Probe: do you feel that it affected your physical health?
    Probe: do you still have/not have support from these friends and family?
    Probe: do you believe leaving the JWs affected your self-esteem?
    Probe: how is your self-esteem now?

14. **Were now going to talk about your feelings about the sense of belonging, it's related to the relationships we have with the important people in our lives, and how we belong in their lives also, our family and friends. How would you say your experience of being (disfellowshipped/disassociated/fading) impacted on this aspect of your life?**

    Prompt: so, thinking about get-togethers then with friends and family, with a mutual concern and care for eachother-how do you think what happened to you impacted on this?
    Prompt: did the mutual concern change?
    Probe: did that ever return to normal (if changed)
    Probe: how are those relationships now?

15. Studies indicated that lack of belonging causes a variety of ill-effects, can you relate to that at all?

    Prompt: Can you tell me a bit more about that?
    Probe: are those effects mended now (if appropriate)
    Probe: has your experience affected your physical health at all?

16. **If you were disfellowshipped (or disassociated), can you tell me a bit about that experience?**

    Prompt: if there was a judicial committee involved, can you tell me about that experience?
    Prompt: how did that experience make you feel?
    Prompt: was there an announcement of your disfellowshipping at the kingdom hall?
    Probe: how did that affect you (were you there for the announcement)

17. **If you decided to fade from the religion, what brought you to that decision?**

    Prompt: do you think fading is easier than being disfellowshipped or disassociating?
    Prompt: why do you think this is the case?
    Probe: did you expect to experience shunning despite fading?
    Probe: have you experienced shunning?
    Probe: how has this affected you?

18. **Do you have intentions of returning to the JWs?**

    Prompt: how do your family and friends view your decision
    Prompt: how has this decision affected family and friends who were never JWs?

19. **If you were disfellowshipped or disassociated, did you agree with the decision of the judicial committee?**

    Prompt: how do you feel about that decision now?
    Prompt: do you agree with the disfellowshipping arrangement?

20. **Talking specifically about the experienced of being shunned, what are your feelings toward that arrangement?**

    Prompt: do you agree with the shunning associated with being disfellowshipped?
    Prompt: how did being shunned affect you personally?
    Prompt: aside from the psychological effects of the shunning, did you experience any physical effects? In other words, did the shunning affect your health?
    Probe: how about now? After x number of years?
    Probe: could you describe the impact on family and friends?
    Probe: and now? Is there still an impact on family and friends?

21. **How did you find life outside of the organisation?**

    Prompt: How did you feel about fitting in?
    Prompt: How do you feel now?
    Prompt: do you feel you belong now?
    Prompt: are there any coping strategies you can share with me?
    Probe: any other coping strategies?

22. **Looking back over your life, are you happy where you are now?**

Prompt: is there anything you wish you could change?
Prompt: is there anything else you would change?
Probe: Have you made any transformations since adjusting to your new life?
Probe: can you briefly describe your spirituality now?
Probe: have you managed to adopt what were previously considered 'worldly traditions' into your life (Christmas, birthdays etc)
Probe: have these enhanced your life?

23. **We are at the end of the interview questions now, is there anything you would like to add, or anything you would like to express that we haven't covered?**

    THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION!