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Portfolio for Professional Doctorate

in Counselling Psychology (DPsych)

"This deep knowledge that your parents, your blood, can reject you":

Endings, guilt and the wounds of rejection

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Table of abbreviations

BACP   British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

BPS   British Psychological Society

CoP   Counselling Psychology

HCPC   Health and Care Professions Council

IPA   Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

JWs   Jehovah's Witnesses

NRM   New Religious Movement

PTSD   Post-traumatic Stress Disorder

RTS   Religious Trauma Syndrome

WBTS   Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania

In addition to this list, terminology which is unique to Jehovah's Witnesses which the reader may be unfamiliar with is defined in a separate glossary (see Appendix A).

Acknowledgements

This piece of work is dedicated to the eight research participants who showed tremendous courage in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges. To these ones, I hope that I've heard your voices and that this "voice" echoes through the pages of this document.

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City, University of London Declaration

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Preface

This portfolio reflects three pieces of work related to my training both as a researcher and as a Counselling Psychologist. The portfolio demonstrates my developing interest in the field of psychotherapy and first-person experience; it also reflects the breadth of research and clinical experience gained over the past three years. The three pieces of work presented are associated with experiences of endings, rejection and guilt, and how these struggles are understood and managed. These areas are directly applicable to those in caring professions and particularly to the field of Counselling Psychology.

This portfolio also reflects my journey of taking part in research concerned with leaving Jehovah's Witnesses – a high-demand religious group. This process has provided me with the opportunity to gain the awareness, knowledge and skills which have in turn facilitated an understanding of the sensitivities in working with this population. I have also had the opportunity to present my research topic and raise awareness about Jehovah's Witnesses and those who leave amongst professionals. This, in turn, has brought much tenderness towards my own experience of leaving Jehovah's Witnesses. While conducting this research, I simultaneously worked with clients who struggled with ending therapy, experiencing rejection and guilt in the process. Over the three years, I have had the opportunity to work with adults and children who grappled with these challenges in a variety of settings including a GP surgery, a charity and within a primary school. These experiences have increased my sensitivity, curiosity and awareness of the complexity these issues may hold, and these three pieces highlight some of the fruits of this labour.

The first part of this portfolio comprises of a qualitative research study that explores the lived experience of leaving Jehovah's Witnesses (JWs). The second part consists of a publishable journal article focusing on a single theme from the research findings. The third part of this portfolio, the client study, has been redacted from the original portfolio to respect client anonymity but also encompasses the themes of rejection and endings. Although the pieces of work are independent, they hold common themes which knit them together. All of them explore experiences of ending and a transition. Experiencing rejection from their closest caregivers, with

concomitant guilt, formed part of the process of both the client and the participants of research study. The salient difference between the research thesis and publishable article relative to the client study is in my approach to analysis and understanding. The research study is concerned with understanding the experience of former JWs through a phenomenological methodology and attitude. The client study instead uses a psychodynamic approach which interprets experience by understanding the conscious and unconscious material of the client. Still, both approaches privilege the unfolding of individual experience through language which is then interpreted and understood by an attentive listener. In this way, the approaches are seen as complementary lenses rather than as opposing perspectives with which experiences can be understood. The sense-making process of myself (the listener) together with the relative merits of both approaches are made transparent to highlight the complexity and rigour of the portfolio.

Part 1 – The research study

The research focuses on the experiences of eight former JWs, where the aim is to capture the lived experience of leaving the JWs. My interest in this area stems from my background as someone who was raised as a JW. Although I was never baptised, I attended congregation meetings from a young age and progressed to the point where I was a speaker giving short religious talks to a large audience. Despite this, I held many doubts and eventually, I would leave the religion in my early 20s (I am now in my mid-thirties). Still, after more than ten years I had never met anyone who had also left the JWs. Taking part in this doctorate offered me a unique opportunity to do this and interested me greatly – to conduct an in-depth exploration into how others also experience leaving the JWs.

My process began with a literature review of previous studies which investigated those who left Jehovah's Witnesses. As only a small handful of studies exist in this domain, my search was extended to include individuals who left other high-demand or new religious movements. Almost all of these studies were conducted by sociologists, who described disaffiliation as a series of stages from their initial seeds of discontent through to their eventual exit. These studies reported varying reasons for their exit, with an overwhelming majority of participants describing painful and challenging accounts of leaving. Despite these contributions, I noticed that not many studies

brought enough depth to the quality and texture of a leavers' experience. I formulated a proposal to investigate the phenomenon from this angle, as I felt this may be an invaluable resource which may deeply resonate with former JWs and those who come into contact with them.

The proposal was accepted by the ethics committee at City, University of London. Still, how would I conduct a piece of research on leaving a religion which featured so prominently in my own background? I began by reflecting on my own history, together with how this history related to my present understanding of what it meant to leave the JWs. I also decided that a methodology which is able to capture the subjective experience of former JWs, while honouring my own experience, would be the most appropriate. Therefore, I decided to take a phenomenological approach which privileges the understanding of experience through the content and way in which an individual describes that experience. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews, which were then transcribed and analysed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the chosen methodology. Using IPA facilitated the aforementioned focus while allowing my own reactions to the data and the study's findings to be carefully managed so as not to unduly impact the study's findings. It is hoped that this level of rigour, together with the contributions of this study and the manner in which it is presented will deeply resonate with the eight participants. It is also hoped that other JWs who leave the religion, or anyone interested in understanding their experience of leaving may also benefit from reading this thesis. As counselling psychologists who work with former JWs are an important part of this audience, the clinical applications together with the limitations of the research are also explored.

Part 2 – The Publishable article

This part of the portfolio has been redacted from the online version in order to preserve future publication.

Part 3 – The Client Study

This part of the portfolio has been redacted from the online version in order to preserve client anonymity.

Summary

In summary, these three pieces of work describe the application of various lenses to understanding psychological phenomena. I hope that this portfolio demonstrates my ongoing development in counselling psychology in addition to highlighting my strengths in describing, formulating, and delivering therapy. In particular, I hope that the engagement with becoming a reflective practitioner could be seen through my curious attitude and transparency while being competent to engage critically with relevant literature and contribute to the growing field of counselling psychology.

Part 1 – Research Study

An exploration of the lived experience of

leaving Jehovah's Witnesses

Supervised by Dr. Jacqui Farrants

Abstract

The act of disaffiliating from one's religion has become more common in recent years, although few studies have investigated the phenomenon in an experiential way. For those who are socialised into a high-demand religion, disaffiliation may involve excommunication, where individuals are cut off from their closest family and friends. This study investigates one such religion, Jehovah's Witnesses, by asking *how former Jehovah's Witnesses experience leaving the religion*. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis was used to analyse interview data collected from eight former Jehovah's Witnesses. Findings suggested that leaving the movement is characterised by emotional trauma and existential insecurity. With this, three master themes emerged: *Chancing one's own truth* encapsulated a desire to rebel from the religion which deprived them of experiences which were wanted. *An outcast in a foreign world* evidenced the alienation and emotional trauma participants experienced in relation to their closest relatives. *Held captive to death sentence* reflected a deep insecurity which former members held about being deserving of death at the hands of their once loving God, Jehovah. The findings relate to studies involving the intersection of religion, disaffiliation and mental health. Implications for counsellors and psychologists working with former members of high-demand religions are discussed.

Literature Review

Introduction

This research was conducted with the aim of exploring the lived experience of leaving Jehovah's Witnesses (JWs). Numerous studies carried out within the last few decades have classified the JWs as a new religious movement (NRM) and high-demand group, stating that they are one of the most rapidly growing and understudied religions (Stark & Iannaccone, 1997). Due to the high demands of such movements coupled with the strong social bonds forged, most people grapple with disaffiliating from them. Even more detrimental is that the world of the movement is often the only world with which the individual is acquainted. In view of this, this review attempts to augment the body of research surrounding disaffiliation from NRMs and high-demand movements and reawakens a controversial question in the psychology of religion – that of its impact on mental health.

The rise of religious disaffiliation represents a significant shift in the worldwide religious landscape. In the US, it was estimated that the religiously unaffiliated (atheist, agnostic or not identifying with any religion) made up 26% of the population in 2019, up from 17% in 2009 (Pew Research Centre, 2019). Religious attendance is also declining, with more Americans stating that they only attend religious services a few times a year. The shift is often explained through secularisation frameworks which posit that as society develops through modernisation, individualism, and rationalisation, levels of religious authority decline across aspects of social life (Norris & Inglehart, 2011). There has also been backlash against religion in politics (Hout & Fischer, 2002) and other factors, such as paedophilia scandals in the Catholic church which have contributed to the decline in religious attendance, or leaving altogether (Bottan & Perez-Truglia, 2015). As religion is becoming less significant for many, this calls for research which investigates the impact of leaving one's religion.

Although less people are turning to religion, nationwide samples in the US have paradoxically reflected growth in newer and less established religions. For example, the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS), which surveyed over fifty thousand respondents, found that

membership in NRMs and "other religions" (which include Scientology, Wiccan, New Age, etc.) grew from 0.8% in 1990 to 1.2% in 2008 (Kosmin & Keysar, 2009). These newer movements are often regarded as illegitimate by members of the general public. Such movements challenge the traditional norms of society (or modernity) and in some cases are met with a hostile reception from secular institutions or established religious organisations. The growth of NRMs has also been reported in the media, who often refer to them as 'cults' where various exposés are featured, including accounts of former members and pictures of hidden rituals and practices.

Due to the rising popularity of NRMs in society and the media, scholars have sought to further understand their development including why people join and leave them. Early within the field, sociologists were focused on the dynamics of conversion and membership, primarily in the context of so-called 'cults controversies' of the 60s and 70s (Barker, 1986). Later on, they looked into experiences of deconversion and the causes of disaffiliation from established religions (Barbour, 1994; Wright, 1987). Typologies of leavers were also constructed around this time, highlighting the various trajectories or roles individuals may take up in their exit (Bromley, 1999; Streib & Keller, 2004). More recently, researchers have been focused on understanding disaffiliation through the narratives of those who leave, but there have been challenges in understanding the concept.

One of the main challenges in the field almost from its inception has been in constructing meaningful models or dimensions by which we can understand the concept of disaffiliation. Not only are there many new religions, but the relationship one has with each of these religions is complex. This involves one's personal attitudes to the religion, their specific level of commitment, and varying circumstances by which they came to be affiliated and which they may become disaffiliated. Leaving may thus take on many forms. For some people, leaving may simply be a case of ceasing to participate in religious services and activities. In this case disaffiliation is relatively simple event where the individual is able to move on with their life. However, for those whose lives revolved around their religious beliefs and community, disaffiliating could more aptly be likened to the end of a significant relationship or marriage, where many memories and feelings about a former partner may still be held – feelings which may be complex to negotiate.

Although some studies have suggested that leavers experience some benefits in terms of their mental health (Nica, 2020), most studies illuminate that it is an arduous and difficult process.

In the case of religions which are considered to be *high-cost* or *high-demand* the transition can be even more daunting. These religions require more active and exclusive commitment and the costs associated with leaving are much greater (McBeath & Greenlees, 2016; Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010). Answers to life's most challenging questions are also readily available, therefore when one leaves the process can be mentally destabilising and confusing to manage (Bromley, 2004). If the individual has also been raised in such a movement and is excommunicated, the individual may be socially ostracised from family and friends whom they have known for years. For these ones, experiences of fear, guilt and shame can accompany their leaving experience and can be particularly distressing (McBeath & Greenlees, 2016; Hookway & Habibis, 2015).

This study aims to provide an element of clarity in understanding the leaving experiences of one such religion, Jehovah's Witnesses. From the outset, one may wonder what attitude is taken towards the religion by the author. Certainly, there is a wealth of existing literature produced by those who have chosen to openly criticise or defend certain religions or their beliefs, including the JWs. It is noteworthy that this study is not concerned with either of these positions, it is instead interested in the *lived experience* of leaving, that is, what it means to leave for those who have experienced it first-hand. It is thus not concerned with investigating the "truthfulness" of former member accounts but chooses to draw attention to the texture and meaning of this experience in rich detail. It is felt that such a study may be able to help mental health practitioners in particular, who frequently work from such a standpoint. Recently, there has also been a call within Counselling Psychology (CoP) for scholars to better meet the needs of this client group through research (McBeath & Greenlees, 2016). It is certainly my feeling that a study which captures the rich experience through first-person accounts may guide treatment in ways which are sensitive, thoughtful while bringing a greater awareness of the range of issues facing such ones.

In order to accomplish this, I first attempt to be transparent about how I searched and selected articles for this review. Following this, a brief overview of the JWs will be given in order to familiarise the reader with the religion's main beliefs and practices. I then outline how scholars have understood various terms associated with the JWs and how these are relevant to this study. A brief overview focused on leaving high-demand groups and NRMs will then be given, followed by more specific contributions within the quantitative and qualitative research pool. Studies which recruited former JWs will also be clearly indicated. Following this, the significance of this study to the field of CoP will be outlined. Finally, a concluding summary of the research together with the aims of the present study will be presented.

Search strategy and selection criteria

Numerous electronic libraries were searched against inclusion and exclusion criteria, including the PsycInfo, PsychSource and Google Scholar databases. Keywords applied during the search were: religious fundamentalism; Jehovah's Witnesses; New Religious Movements; disaffiliation; and apostasy. The selection process began with the consideration of journal titles, a review of the journal abstract, and finally a reading of the full manuscript. Relevant items within the reference lists of all the retrieved journals were also included. Articles sourced were those which: (a) were published before February 2020; (b) were written in English; (c) used terminologies consistent with the aforementioned definitions (i.e., Jehovah's Witnesses, disaffiliation); (d) were not concerned with surgical interventions, notably blood transfusions; and (e) were published in academic journals, rather than grey literature.

A large volume of studies was returned through the initial search, however not all items returned were relevant (e.g., leaving religions which were not classed as high-demand etc.). Of the 52 studies returned, 18 empirical studies looked at disaffiliation and recruited individuals who left high-demand or new religious movements. Of these, four were quantitative, investigating the correlations and differences in leaving such movements (Buxant & Saroglou, 2008; Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016; Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010; Weishaupt & Stensland, 1997). The remaining 15 qualitative studies focused on the exit narratives of participants; three of which exclusively recruited former JWs (Holden, 2002a; Hookway & Habibis, 2015; Lalich & McLaren, 2010).

The other 12 qualitative studies (of the 15) investigated leaving other denominations and NRMs. Research reviewing the concomitant effects of holding stricter religious beliefs on mental health and psychotherapy (Barker, 1996; Brent, 1991; Hartz & Everett, 1989; Winell, 2011) supplemented this body of empirical research. Within this scope, special attention to its application to the JWs was also given (Friedson, 2015; McBeath & Greenlees, 2016).

Jehovah's Witnesses: Theology and practices

Started by Charles Taze Russell in late 1800s, the JWs are a millenarian Christian movement which numbers over 8 million members worldwide (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, 2016a). Standards of scriptural truth are established by the Governing Body of the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania (WBTS), the JWs' corporate entity. The Witnesses believe the Bible is inspired by God, and that they are the only true religion. For this reason, they often call their religion "the truth". The religion is monotheistic as they believe in a supreme God whose name is Jehovah. Although the Witnesses believe in Jesus Christ (as the son of God), they believe that he is a separate entity to Jehovah and not part of a trinity.

The Witnesses believe that Jehovah's purpose is to return the earth to a paradise, where members will eventually be restored to perfection and live forever. This will be achieved via a literal Armageddon where wicked ones will be destroyed. In this regard, the movement believes in different forms of resurrection for two groups – "the anointed" and "the other sheep". Anointed ones are made up of 144,000 chosen ones who will rule with Jesus Christ in heaven while the majority of members believe that they fall into the second group. The second group is sometimes referred to as "the great crowd" and represent those who look forward to eternity on earth in a paradise (WBTS, 2019).

Although commonly known through their strict refusal of blood transfusions and their door-to-door proselytising, the Witnesses also have proscriptions against smoking, gambling, sexual activities outside of marriage, homosexuality, voting, military service, and partaking in holidays and birthdays (Stark & Iannaccone, 1997). Those who do not adhere to these standards risk being excommunicated by friends and family (deemed *disfellowshipping*) in addition to possible death

at Armageddon. In order to be considered active within their congregations, members are required to preach a minimum of one hour per calendar month. Preaching typically consists of door-to-door "field service", holding bible studies, or engaging in street work. Regarding fellowship, JWs are strongly cautioned to remain "no part of the world" as it is ruled by Satan, the Devil. Thus, members are encouraged to only associate closely with other JWs, keeping separate from those under the rule of Satan (WBTS, 2015).

New religious movements

The cohort of NRMs, of which many scholars consider the JWs a part of, has also been an emerging area of attention for scholars in the field of disaffiliation. These movements, popularly and often pejoratively deemed "cults", began appearing in the late 1960s and gained momentum in the 1970s (Bromley, 1991). During this time, public interest with certain movements developed through the application of conversion or "brainwashing" techniques. This public discourse encouraged the distinct new field of new religious studies within academia and the search for a more neutral term (see Melton, 2004).

Since this time, a large and growing number of NRMs continue to appear in society and are classified as such in the academic literature. Although the movements are classified as "new", Beckford (1987) and Robbins (1988) highlight that in fact they are not really new but are only perceived in this way through their countercultural relationship to the dominant religious landscape. Melton (2004) agreed with this and suggested that within each family tradition, groups that diverge *beyond* the acceptable limits fall into the category of NRMs while groups that dissent within acceptable limits are deemed "sects", and those which dominate, or control tradition are the mainstream churches. In this way, he makes the case that new religious movements "are not just different, but unacceptably different" (Melton, 2004, p. 25).

Barker (2004) cautioned on this approach and suggested that negating the newness of such movements is complicated, as they very fact that they are new explains many key characteristics they display. These include holding a dichotomous worldview (e.g., regarding beliefs as true or false, right and wrong etc.), atypical membership, having a charismatic authority, being met with antagonism by society and the undergoing of radical transformations (Barker, 2004). Although

some of these features may presently or historically apply to the JWs, a full discussion of points of difference is beyond the scope of this paper. The debate does however serve to highlight the difficulty in categorizing religious groups and is reflected in the larger debate within religious studies. However, most scholars within the literature highlight that the term "new religious movements" is broad and inclusive rather than sharply defined. To combat this elusiveness, Chryssides (2012) suggests that an NRM could be defined as "as an organization or current of thought that has arisen within the past 150 or so years and that cannot be uncontentiously placed within a traditional world religion." (p. xiii). Popular NRMs such as the Hare Krishna, Church of Scientology, the JWs and the Latter-day Saint Movement (Mormonism) have been regarded as occupying this label (Barker, 2004; Chryssides, 2012; Melton, 2004). In harmony with these authors, and in order to avoid the pejorative undertones of terms like "cult" and "sect", I also use the term "new religious movements" to apply to groups considered marginal, countercultural, and arising within the last 150 years.

Specific terms relevant to the study of Jehovah's Witnesses

In addition to its applicability to the cohort of NRMs, scholars have also used more specific terms to describe and categorise the JWs based on their beliefs and practises. The JWs have been referred to as high-cost (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016; Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010), high-demand (Bromley, 1991; McBeath & Greenlees, 2016), strict (Nica, 2020), fundamentalist (Friedson, 2015) and high-control religion (Weishaupt & Stensland, 1997). Scheitle and Adamczyk (2010) highlight that high-cost religious groups such as JWs (along with the Mormons and Seventh-day Adventists) have high personal and social costs where members are strongly encouraged to forge relationships with members and limit ties to non-members. In addition to these social proscriptions, the JWs have high levels of required participation and are exposed to hostility from the outside world. Not only does this place a high priority on religion for members, it also means that the costs of leaving may include strained or severed family relationships, loss of identity, social isolation and stress (Weishaupt & Stensland, 1997).

Stark and Innaconne (1997) highlight that strictness and excommunication make groups such as the JWs stronger by screening out free-riders, there-by increasing the average level of

commitment in the group. The researchers argue that this, in turn, fuels the overall participation of members and the credibility of the group's culture. Due to the negative costs associated with leaving, scholars have posited that members will often stay in the group regardless of what it means for their well-being (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010; Winell, 2016). McBeath and Greenlees (2016) similarly listed this characteristic of high-demand groups, in addition to other criteria such as tight information control, and the discouraging of outsider contact and higher education (to name a few).

Specifically, scholars have cited the high level of control over one's thoughts (and behaviour) as an overarching characteristic of such groups (McBeath & Greenlees, 2016; Weishaupt & Stensland, 1997). Friedson (2015), who analysed the beliefs of the JWs through a psychodynamic lens, suggested that the worldview of the JWs is black and white and does not easily allow its members to cope with uncertainty or nuance. She also highlighted that the absolute nature of their belief system and their reliance on God or the Watch Tower Society to solve all problems creates interpersonal challenges.

Empirical studies have also been published regarding the mental health of active JWs. Researchers have found active JWs to be over-represented as per the mental disorder rates within hospital settings (Bergman, 1966; Montague, 1977; Spencer, 1975). Spencer (1975) found that the rates of mental illness among active JWs within Western Australia's psychiatric hospitals between 1971 and 1973 was three times higher than that of non-JWs, and regarding paranoid schizophrenia, four times higher. Similar sampling techniques were employed by others in hospitals and also found higher rates of mental disorders, suicide and crime among JWs (Bergman, 1996; Montague[1], 1977). Still, using a patient sample from hospitals with non-probability sampling does not confirm causation and also limits the study's generalisability. The evolution of criteria related to what constitutes a mental disorder also makes these studies harder to interpret.

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[1] Havor Montague is a pseudonym for Jerry Bergman (see Penton, 2015, p. 471), this name was used while he was still a JW. Names were used in conjunction with publication authors.

These early studies represent only a small set of dated research on JWs. Although a search of the literature revealed many scathing critiques of the JWs and their beliefs, there is a lack of empirical studies which recruited members of the religion. One reason for this gap may be due to the lack of availability of active JWs willing to take part in psychological research. Weishaupt and Stensland (1997) highlight that this is because JWs are generally unwilling to participate in research by outsiders, although some individuals might consent to participate in impartial studies. They suggest that one reason for this is the imperative of JWs to portray the religion in a very positive light. Nevertheless, more rigorous studies which recruit active JWs seem to be required by the literature in order to confirm that the incidence of mental illness is high within the group.

More recently, and in view of criticism, scholars have sought to document the history and development of the movement, including its changes in beliefs and policy (see Chrysiddes, 2016, 2019; Knox, 2018). These studies have also highlighted that the JWs have undergone historical persecution for their beliefs and are frequently misunderstood or treated with hostility from the secular world. With this in mind, the terms high-demand and high-cost were selected to demarcate the religion from other religious groups – these were selected for their neutrality and ability to represent a range of experiences. These terms were seen to underpin an existing view of the JWs as an exclusive group highly committed to a set of religious beliefs and practices which does not allow for deviation without punishment or excommunication.

Leaving religion: Studies into disaffiliation

Overview

Against this background, one can imagine that the process of disaffiliating is no easy task. Considering the challenges and avenues of disaffiliation, research has aimed to describe the reasons why individuals leave such groups and the process of disaffiliation. Self-identified reasons for leaving various movements include a loss of faith, failed expectations, changing values, and expressions of belonging (Barbour, 1994; Holden, 2002a). Studies have also highlighted that the process of disaffiliation is significantly different from affiliation (or conversion) as there is less social support for the one who leaves (Bromley, 2004). Further,

affiliation is also highly structured by many high-demand organisations, whereas disaffiliation is usually carried out by the individual with much less guidance (Davidman & Greil, 2007). The presence of these features often results in the process of disaffiliation being less linear, more idiosyncratic and of longer duration than the conversion process.

Studies into disaffiliation frequently break down the process into broad categories of (a) prior to exit; (b) exit; and (c) aftermath of leaving (Bromley, 2004). Most studies have found that disaffiliation is most commonly initiated as a voluntary act by the member following a period of doubt and uncertainty prior to exit (Coates, 2013a). The growing sense of disillusionment by those considering leaving often culminates in a crisis or decision in which the individual decides to cut ties from the group. Once the individual is separated physically from the group, the aftermath has been described as emotionally laden where disquieting and fearful emotions leave a residual impact on the individual (Barbour, 1994; Brent, 1994).

Although many individuals directly chose to leave NRMs or high-demand religious groups, the decision to leave may also be made by others (e.g., parents, trained professionals etc.), or the individual is excommunicated and thus, forced to leave (Beckford, 1987; McBeath & Greenlees, 2016). Leaving may be particularly daunting for these unwilling ones as they leave behind family and friends in the group – often the only relationships they have. They may also face intense guilt and shame as a consequence of shunning or accompanying the status as an apostate (Barbour, 1994; Bromley, 2004; McBeath & Greenlees, 2016).

Although there are clearly different challenges which exist based on how leavers disaffiliate, most studies do not discriminate between the various avenues of disaffiliation in their recruitment. Studies typically define a leaver as someone who was once an active believer but is now no longer affiliated with the religion. This study uses this broad definition, and in harmony with previous studies uses the terms "leaving", "disaffiliating" or "exiting" synonymously. This definition also includes those who decide to switch allegiance to another religious group, termed *religious switching*, or those who became entirely unaffiliated (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010). Noteworthy too is that individuals may or may not deliberately take on a non-religious identity (e.g., atheist, agnostic etc.) when disaffiliating.

Most studies which were reviewed sampled specific movements, shedding light on the unique narratives and meanings of leaving. However, as these movements are by their nature small and insular, recruiting a large enough sample is often quite difficult for researchers. This is especially the case for those who adopt quantitative designs and need to generate data with enough statistical power. Therefore, participants from various denominations are often pooled into larger groups such as high-cost groups or NRMs. To shed light on the existing research, I have chosen to divide the pool of research into quantitative studies and those which are qualitative, focusing on the narratives of former members. Specifically, I've also targeted the contributions and limitations of studies which recruited former JWs.

Quantitative Studies

Quantitative studies investigated the reasons for disaffiliation and compared the health and well-being of leavers before and after disaffiliation. Two correlational studies aimed to find an association between high-cost religion and an individual's health by utilising survey data from the General Social Survey in the US (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016; Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010). Both studies demonstrated that switching or leaving a high-cost religion such as the JWs is associated with poorer self-reported health. Scheitle and Adamczyk (2010) posited that because such groups necessitate active involvement, members become disillusioned with poor health in the face of strong theological promises leading to disaffiliation. Frequent church attendance and proselytising may also facilitate stronger social ties between members which when broken may lead to poorer health (Sherkat, 2001).

Fenelon and Danielsen (2016) found similar results to those of Scheitle and Adamczyk (2010) but included subjective well-being in their analyses. The researchers surprisingly found no disadvantage in this area for members who specifically disaffiliated from high-cost groups. This finding contrasted with data from other religions such as evangelical Protestantism, which reported disadvantages in both health and well-being. These differences were attributed to the positive effect of healthy behaviours of high-cost groups, such as prohibitions against heavy drinking or smoking, which may have a stronger impact on health than on well-being. However,

these elucidations must be qualified as the Fenelon and Danielsen (2016) did not clarify whether health or well-being is a motivating factor for leaving such groups or the result of leaving itself.

Buxant and Saroglou (2008) measured several cognitive and affective components in their study of NRMs. They found that although the general well-being of participants decreased after leaving, participants were optimistic that this will change in the future. The researchers' characterised disaffiliation as a negative and destabilizing experience associated with difficulty in having confidence in relationships – a salient cue for counsellors utilising relational orientations to psychotherapy. This harmonises with previous research highlighting severe social difficulties in transitioning from the close-knit group of the movement to complete isolation after exiting (Barker, 1996). Despite these social challenges, Buxant and Saroglou (2008) found that a high level of spirituality and belief in God endured after leaving, described by the authors as similar to a "deception in love rather than a realization that love might not exist" (p. 266). The accompanying question this raises is how these spiritual and affective needs were negotiated outside the religious community, but this was unaddressed in this study. Additionally, the control group utilised was different for each construct measured making comparisons tenuous.

Only one quantitative study exclusively targeted former JWs, this was conducted by Weishaupt and Stensland (1997). The researchers recruited 20 female members of the JWs who exited the religion and measured three areas: (a) the amount of control the group exerted on its members; (b) patriarchal versus egalitarian attitudes (before and after leaving); and (c) levels of emotional distress (before and after leaving). The researchers found that a high degree of control (by their authority) was perceived by members who left JWs compared to other religions. They also found members had stronger egalitarian attitudes and less mental distress after leaving than when in the religion.

Despite these findings, this study had several methodological problems. A major limitation was that standardised measures and scales were not used, questioning the validity and reliability of their results. Secondly, the authors only provided a comparison group for the control scale and so comparisons to other groups are at best tentative. Finally, and more broadly, the authors appeared to take a polemical approach to refuting numerous beliefs and practices of the JWs; in

many cases these were unrelated to their empirical findings and highlights the need for researchers to not define the group based on the negative. Despite these methodological problems, their study demonstrated that women may experience positive social and mental health benefits upon leaving the religion.

Narratives of former members

Qualitative studies have been concerned with the narratives of former members and their motivations and struggles when disaffiliating. Most studies were interpreted by sociologists, focusing on social identity and interpreting events in light of their historical, religious and cultural impact. Generally, disaffiliates revealed that personal conflicts were underpinned by increased ambivalence and fear faced when doubts about their securely held religious beliefs crept in. Social ostracism and the marginalised status of apostates further fuelled internalised feelings of guilt and shame, necessitating changes in identity. In synthesising the contributions of these studies, features which arose were grouped into two main areas: (a) conflicts with lifestyle strictures and doctrine; and (b) managing identity transitions.

Conflicts with lifestyle strictures and doctrine

Studies found that the attractions of the secular world conflicted with participants' lifestyles and beliefs which led to their departure. Bahr and Albrecht (1989) found those leaving Mormonism rejected the restrictive lifestyle and were regarded as marginal members during disaffiliation. Shaffir (1997) and Davidman and Greil (2007) studied ultra-Orthodox Jews and found that such lifestyle conflicts existed for long and torturous periods, often spanning years. Dissonances challenged participants' all-or-nothing ways of seeing the world to more loosely structured beliefs of the secular world. Brent's (1994) phenomenological study of ex-protestants characterised this as a phase of toleration and suppression prior to a crisis point and emotion-laden aftermath. Although Brent's (1994) study represented the only phenomenological study of former members, it offered more of a staged account of leaving as opposed to describing in rich detail the essence of such experiences.

Studies looking into former JWs found varying conflicts as leading to their dissonance. Hookway and Habibis' (2015) interviewed adolescent JWs and found that the attraction of "worldly" social relationships and an accepting view of homosexuality contributed to their dissonance and de-identification process. Like Weishaupt and Stensland (1997), they found that former JWs also demonstrated a loosening adherence to patriarchy. Conversely, Holden's (2002a) interviews of six disaffiliating JWs in the UK revealed that discovering the unorthodox nature of JW beliefs and the alternative attraction of Protestant Christianity was the primary motivation for disaffiliation. Holden (2002a) found that Protestantism was attractive to JW leavers as it only necessitated faith as an entry requirement into heaven, freeing JWs from the encumbrance of attending weekly meetings and proselytising.

Holden (2002a) commented that the process by which former JWs transferred their allegiance from one religion (or authority) to another when leaving may signify a lack of moral liberty and existential security. This feature of leaving raises several questions for psychologists and mental health practitioners: (a) how to nurture agency if ex-members are fully dependent on secular forms of authority (including clinicians) for guidance; and (2) how do ex-members navigate relationships if such allegiances are absent between individuals? For clinicians these questions are important to address as the quality of the therapeutic alliance is at stake – a factor which recently has been defined as important, if not the most important to successful clinical outcomes (Cuijpers, Reijnders, & Huibers, 2019).

Despite the contributions in the studies by Holden (2002a) and Hookway and Habibis (2015), divergences in reasons and meanings of leaving JWs may be explained as due to the varying methodological factors employed. Firstly, Holden (2002a) focused on the dissatisfaction with the Watch Tower Society rather than on the experience of leaving like Hookway and Habibis (2015). Secondly, his participants were all converts from previous religions while those of Hookway and Habibis (2015) were born-ins. Finally, Hookway and Habibis (2015) focused on young people, and thus, developmental factors such as religious socialisation and parental attachment were prioritised. This means that studies which attempt to characterise disaffiliation greatly depends on the chosen methodology, type of participants, the perspective of the researcher, and the level of religious exposure prior to joining the movement. Delineating these along with other

components, such as participant's proximity to their disaffiliation experience, are salient factors future studies will do well to demarcate.

Managing identity transitions

A key imperative for those who disaffiliate is to shed their religious beliefs and subsequently re-construct a new identity after leaving. Two studies focused on describing and interpreting this transitional effect on identity through the theoretical frameworks of Irving Goffman (Dyason, 2015; Lalich & McLaren, 2010). Lalich and McLaren (2010) analysed the written narratives of homosexual ex-JWs and found that attempts were made to insulate and conceal themselves in order to repair and honour their private ego identity. They highlighted that JWs require individuals to suppress both sexual behaviour *and* feelings, a divergence from other high-demand groups. Due to this, their participants were burdened by their "sinful" state even when in private (Lalich & McLaren, 2010, p. 1314). Similarly, Dyason (2015) found that former members of the Exclusive Brethren often felt ashamed of their past and needed to project a certain image to outsiders during the transitioning process in order to cope. The only review of the beliefs of JWs concerning psychotherapy supported these narratives, highlighting that identity aspects which the religion deems unacceptable "may become ego-dystonic and any association with them may result in extreme feelings of shame and self-denigration" (Friedson, 2015, p. 705).

Disaffiliation may also not solely depend on resolving identity conflicts internally. Coates' (2013a) study of NRMs and Berger's (2015) study of Ultra-Orthodox Jews found that the availability of alternative identity solutions in which one's sense of self could be anchored is equally critical. Berger (2015) suggested that often what a leaver lacks is a script in which they can formulate a narrative of de-conversion, a script which others can help them locate or develop. Coates (2013a) explains that this may take the form of being connected to non-group others, harmonizing with well-documented evidence the on importance of social support in managing traumatic events (Trickey, Siddaway, Meiser-Stedman, Serpell, & Field, 2012).

The literature also reveals that the creation of new roles also helps those who leave to reconstruct their identity. Nica (2020), who recruited former Christian fundamentalists, found that they often experienced a role loss and reduced well-being associated with leaving their religion. As a result, her participants were motivated to reconstruct their identity through the acquisition of secular roles which boosted their well-being. Accessing new roles may also heighten the sense of belonging individuals feel with others, and how they feel towards themselves. Hogg and Abrams (1988) explain that this is because one's self-concept is often composed of self-descriptions attached to characteristics of the social group which they belong to. However, for those in Nica's (2020) study who were former JWs, they instead adopted a "defector" role – which Bromley (1998, p. 147) describes as one negotiated *with* the religious authority who give permission for role relinquishment and control both the exit process and interpretive narrative. Despite this finding, Nica (2020) was unable to illuminate the impact on the self of the disfellowshipping process for former JWs, but aptly highlighted the need for future studies to do this.

Although these studies highlight various contributions, they suffered from some limitations which make these difficult to untangle. The perspective of Friedson (2015), while insightful, lacked empirical evidence for many claims, instead relying on conjecture. Other articles revealed similar flaws (see Brent, 1991). Lalich and McLaren's (2010) study also focused on homosexual identity where heteronormative culture and stigma may have contributed to separate identity challenges. What is less known, but briefly mentioned by Lalich and McLaren (2010), is the concomitant effect of disaffiliation on one's relationship with God and how this aspect of their identity is managed. Scholars explain that while religions vary in their exit costs, they also vary in their potential positive rewards (Stark & Finke, 2000). Groups such as JWs, which have many regulations, promise a personal relationship with God with a promised future. How participants negotiated this aspect, if indeed this happened at all, was not explained in the literature. Assimilating such knowledge may indeed be a therapeutic imperative for ex-members in light of research which associates well-being with whether God is constructed as personal or remote (Bradshaw, Ellison, & Marcum, 2010).

Relevance to Counselling Psychology

Given the nature of the dilemmas facing leavers, it is not uncommon that those making this transition would turn to counsellors and psychologists for intervention. As we have already seen the pool of research around those who leave new religious movements is not large by any means; the pool appeared even narrower when it came to resources to help these ones cope. It is certainly evident that prior to the internet in the 1990s, ex-members had almost no resources in which to aid their transition. Although organisations such as Fundamentalists Anonymous (Yao, 1985) which aided the transition of leavers operated around this time, forced interventions were also common, where an individual's family desperately kidnapped them to help find a different perspective.

Since then, voluntary exit counselling has emerged which is often delivered by former members who possess knowledge related to the movement, and real-life experience to how such ones can cope. The proliferation of the internet and social media has also afforded leavers the opportunity to connect with former members and access material which critiques their religious beliefs. The JWs are no exception to this, although in regard to mental health, very little has been published in scientific or academic journals to inform clinicians of the various issues which this client group may present with.

There may be other reasons why there exists a dearth of research relevant to counselling on the JWs in particular. Many scholars have highlighted that JWs are discouraged from seeking psychotherapy and provided evidence of this through the published literature of the religion (see Friedson, 2015; Weishaupt & Stensland, 1997). This means that JWs, or those who have been raised in the religion and subsequently left, are more unlikely to present in therapy. Further, JWs are discouraged from seeking higher education; statistics report that JWs are the least educated of all religions in the US, with 63% of members having a high school education or less (Pew Research Centre, 2014a). Due to this lack, those who are JWs are unlikely to train as researchers or therapists which often require years of post-graduate study in order to add to the body of research.

More recently, this gap has been identified in this client group and a call for CoP researchers to address this area has been made (see McBeath & Greenlees, 2016). Therapists such as Dr. Gillie Jenkinson, an ex-member of a high-demand group, highlighted that seeing a specialist counsellor who understood how such groups work speeded up her recovery (Jenkinson, 2013). Indeed, addressing this area may lead to more tailored clinical programmes, or at least interest in them, for former members. In the absence of any manuals or treatment, some such as Winell (2011) have attempted to construct a separate trauma label for those who disaffiliate from high-demand groups, what she refers to as *Religious Trauma Syndrome* (RTS). She suggests that the long-lasting effects of leaving such groups most closely resemble the symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) – symptoms such as negative emotional states, problems with social functioning and intrusive thoughts. Winell (2016) also drew attention to the fact that clinicians often lack guidance about treating such clients while neglecting to ask them about their religious background in the assessment process.

Research within this scope may help clinicians to understand more about the experience of leaving and may provide specific knowledge that may guide treatment. Further, it may help raise awareness within the field of counselling and wider society as to how important these issues are to address. It will also be able to clarify common beliefs, biases, and challenges that clinicians may or may not have when working with people from high-demand groups. Finally, it may help give a voice to the silent majority as well as inform the larger debate about if religious beliefs themselves are helpful or maladaptive to one's mental health (Delaney, Miller, & Bisonó, 2013; Rosenfeld, 2010).

Summary of previous research

Despite the size and longevity of the JW movement, there have been few studies looking into the processes and characteristics of disaffiliation. Quantitative studies demonstrated poorer health when leaving such groups but not necessarily poorer well-being. Wieshaupt and Stensland (1997) highlighted that female ex-JWs might see improvements in mental health, but their study had many methodological limitations. These studies also revealed an enduring spirituality in God after leaving, although this was no longer experienced as part of a community. Qualitative

studies revealed the conflicting nature of the leaving experience and the subsequent necessity to re-construct their identity post-leaving. Sociological studies utilising narrative analysis dominated the qualitative literature, with only one study utilising phenomenology (Brent, 1994). However, this exception provided more of a step-by-step account of leaving rather than providing adequate descriptive depth. Furthermore, only three qualitative studies exclusively recruited former JWs and either interpreted them through a sociological lens (Holden, 2002a) or focused on specific aspects such as adolescence (Hookway & Habibis, 2015) or homosexuality (Lalich & McLaren, 2010). Studies were also unable to shed light on how participants negotiated key aspects such as their relationship with God, which may be of particular interest to clinicians.

Aims of the present study

This review suggests there has been an enquiry into the motivations of leavers from NRMs and high-demand religions and the struggles they experience when leaving. Due to the variety and complexities of disaffiliation, in addition to the lack of availability of research participants, qualitative designs have become more popular for studying this phenomenon. As an abundance of sociological research exists, the aim is then to investigate the experience of leaving high groups from a psychological perspective – one which possesses adequate analytical rigour relevant to CoP. Therefore, this study aims to depart from narrative analytic methods by instead focusing on the lived experience of leaving, as this has not been adequately captured before. Such a focus will be able to explore the subjective quality of leaving, rather than trying to find out the broader reasons, explanations, or phases of exit. It may also inform clinicians of the associated meanings and characteristics when engaging with ex-members and bring attention to this area of counselling community. Furthermore, a lack of studies relevant to former JWs makes them an ideal candidate for research. To accomplish these aims, the focal research question put forth in this study is *how do former JWs experience leaving the religion?*

Methodology

Rationale for the selection of qualitative approach

Several reasons exist for selecting a qualitative approach to answer the research question. Qualitative approaches are poised to explore the meaning and function of a particular experience. This is because qualitative researchers often seek to study phenomena through a person's perspective, paying attention to its emergent context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This may allow for a closer understanding of the social and psychological phenomena being studied. With this kind of approach, the concept of the objective and value-free researcher is rejected, and process issues are emphasised (Willig, 2013). This allows the particular role of the researcher, in relation to the research, to be made explicit, catering for the exploration of other important aspects of the researcher-participant relationship. I felt that prioritising these issues of reflexivity was salient in this study because of my personal background in relation to the subject. Remaining open-minded through an awareness of my own position was felt to engender clarity in understanding another's experience of leaving. This subjective focus, owing to greater reflection and analysis, aimed to improve the validity of the present study through rigour, credibility, and trustworthiness (Koch & Harrington, 1998; Rolfe, 2006).

A quantitative design may have also been adopted; however, it was felt this may present greater challenges to answering this particular research question. Quantitative designs involve the measurement and analysis of causal differences or correlational relationships between variables (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Since this study neither claims causation nor seeks to find associations between variables, such an approach would not adequately address the research question. Implicitly, this also means that the study does not have or claim any predictive value, but instead seeks to honour and shed light on aspects of consciousness.

The distinction between these two approaches can further be understood by Reichenbach's (1938) early differentiation – to what he calls the "context of discovery" and the "context of justification" within academic science (p. 6-7). Within a context of discovery, an exploratory method of inquiry is chosen to draw out experiences which are personal, rather than seeking to verify an a priori hypothesis–as within a context of justification (or verification). With this in mind, I also chose to veer away from mixing qualitative and quantitative approaches, deciding that this may weaken the richness of personal meanings for participants and instead assign some priority to establish "objective" truths. This position harmonises with the stance of other qualitative researchers who view such designs as epistemologically inconsistent, believing it may risk the credibility of their research (Baker, Wuest, & Stern, 1992).

Ontological and epistemological stance

A process capable of fulfilling the aforementioned purpose places primary importance on understanding human experience. This kind of inquiry, aimed at describing the world and constructing knowledge, necessarily entails the adoption of philosophical assumptions. Critical to this activity are the assumptions of ontology and epistemology. Ontology is concerned with what exists in the world, the fundamental nature of reality and being (Punch, 2013). Epistemology, which is fundamentally linked to ontology, is concerned with the nature of knowledge and asks questions such as "What do we know?" and "How do we know it?". Such questions are important to consider, particularly for qualitative researchers who aim to produce knowledge which is representative and grounded in the data of their participants.

Within empirical research, several ontologies and epistemologies exist which are rooted in a range of different philosophies. Some of the most common philosophies within qualitative research are positivism, critical theory, phenomenology and constructionism (Madill & Gough, 2008; Willig, 2013). Often these philosophies can be classified as having a basis in *realism* or *relativism*. Realism posits a theory of truth in which the world is a single external reality which is objectively identifiable and knowable (Madill, Jordan & Shirley, 2000). This reality is seen as independent of human cognition and perception, possessing an objective nature that may be accessed by the researcher. Often, this is adopted by quantitative researchers, who apply

systematic scientific methods in order to research this reality and produce knowledge which is immutable (or close to it).

Relativism, conversely, is the view that the same observation can be linked with many distinct, equally valid interpretations and therefore, data is not seen as directly reflecting reality. This is through the belief that the human world is never a world in itself, but that it is always experienced as a conscious subject (Heidegger, 1962). Accordingly, knowledge is conceptualised from a certain perspective, based on the perceptions of the individual. From this stance, social phenomena and meaning are constructed through an individual's lens and can never be seen as definitive. Unlike positivist research, research utilising relativist epistemologies stress the discovery of meanings over universal truths, and therefore, knowledge is always constructed through one's perceptions and experiences.

Rather than simplistically classifying research into either of these two categories, Willig (2013) suggests that the research epistemology can be often be placed on a continuum ranging between their poles; that is, between naïve (or direct) realism and extreme relativism. A direct realist approach assumes there is a relatively uncomplicated relationship between what the researcher can gain through the data, and what is happening (the reality). More critical varieties of this realist position which veer away from this pole, do not assume that the data we capture directly reflects reality, but rather, the data requires interpretation which can further our understanding of the underlying structures concerning the phenomena we are investigating. At the other end of the spectrum, strong relativist approaches instead view all knowledge as constructed, including physical, biological and psychological reality. Within each of these approaches, various distinctions may also exist in the degree to which researchers determine what constitutes "knowledge" and "reality" (Willig, 2013). This is important to be clear about as it determines exactly what kind of knowledge can be generated about a subject – in this case, disaffiliation from the JWs. It may also influence how this knowledge will be used in future research.

In view of this, where do I (the researcher) sit along this spectrum, and what may be the most suitable means of tackling this particular research question? This research seeks to explore how former JWs experience leaving the religion. Therefore, my focus is not on whether what is being

said is "factually" accurate or not, but rather, is on how leaving the religion is experienced *subjectively* by former JWs; the aim is to understand leaving from the perspective of former members. Therefore, it can be said that my approach does not lie on the realist end of Willig's (2003) continuum. Neither is my approach positioned as an extremely relativist one in that I assume an intersection exists between what a person says (their description) and their subjective experience of reality (Harper, 2011). Hence, the approach can be seen as roughly located in the middle of the realism-relativism axis. The aim in this space would be to discover and uncover the essence of the leaving experience. To accomplish this, it was felt that a phenomenological approach may be the most appropriate to adopt.

Phenomenological approaches place emphasis on one's perspective and interpretation. Literally, it is the study of "phenomena*"*, or something that appears. Even more strictly, it could be considered the *appearance* itself (Lewis & Staehler, 2010). Initially, the term phenomenology was restricted to the characterization of sensory qualities – of seeing, touching, etc. However, experience often involves more than mere sensation and therefore, phenomenologists have expanded this definition to include the meaning things have to us – the significance of events, our feelings, the self, and others (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Through these means, researchers seek to identify structures or patterns of meaning which are typical for groups of people; this allows them to contribute to the existing knowledge base by providing insights about a phenomenon.

To be clear, this stance is different from other qualitative approaches, even ones which may lie roughly in the middle of Willig's (2013) continuum. For example, it is different from social constructionism, as the aim is not on how knowledge is constructed socially; it does not attempt to view participants accounts as primarily serving a range of interpersonal, religious or societal functions (Harper, 2011). Neither does this stance aim to criticise or transform the social, political, ethnic, religious, structures that constrain or exploit humankind, as would be done in critical approaches (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Instead, phenomenological investigation sees experience as a window into a person's world consisting of thoughts, perceptions, feelings, images, etc. Further, phenomenologists do not concern themselves with what *causes* these

thoughts, perceptions, or feelings, but is instead are interested in the texture of the experience itself (Willig, 2013).

Differences exist in how phenomenological researchers constitute meaning and experience, namely, between *descriptive* or *interpretive* phenomenology. Therefore, this aspect may be important to clarify to the reader. Although there is some debate whether any description does not exist without some interpretation, most scholars delineate between these two elements (Willig, 2013). Purely descriptive approaches choose to describe experiences "precisely as it presents itself, neither adding nor subtracting from it" (Giorgi, 1992, p. 121). These approaches try to stay as close as possible to the data, being careful not to attribute meanings which come from outside the accounts of participants. Interpretive phenomenologists also attempt to stay close to the data, however, they may interpret a person's experience by understanding it within their sociological, cultural or psychological context (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006).

As many studies have investigated leaving JWs from a sociological context, my position aims to draw on both descriptive and interpretive elements to explore leaving experiences, and what they mean. As previous studies have focused on the religious and social context in which disaffiliation occurs, this study aims to shed light on the experience primarily as it manifests psychologically. However, interpreting the findings in this way follows the rule that it is only done *following* description and analysis, rather than preceding it (Smith et al., 2009). This allows me to investigate the phenomenon genuinely and openly, rather than drawing on any pre-existing psychological theories. It was also felt that drawing on psychological knowledge (following the analysis) will allow the findings to go beyond the givens of a subject matter and may inform the wider field of mental health research (Wertz, 2015).

Compatibility with counselling psychology

Recently within CoP, there has been a development towards a greater emphasis on qualitative designs. Aspiring counselling psychologists like myself, are often drawn to these approaches due to their compatibility (Ponterotto, 2005). Qualitative approaches together with CoP share the stress importance of subjective experience and the exploration of it, and further, that the

meanings which are derived are valuable in of themselves. Qualitative approaches also emphasise the role of the researcher, clarifying how the assumptions they bring mediates the production of knowledge. This makes it an imperative, according to Finlay (2006), that the approach which a researcher adopts closely aligns with their own epistemological position.

In line with this, the aforementioned philosophical position harmonises with my own ethos and pluralism of CoP, negotiating a desire for privileging one's subjective and intersubjective experience over actuarial claims of truth. Specifically, the humanistic tradition which strongly resonates with me prioritises an orientation towards empowering clients through a non-hierarchical relationship (rather than therapist as an expert). I feel that this humanistic stance, and the values that go with it, honour the phenomenological method in particular. The defining feature of CoP may also be the commitment to this humanistic "value-base", as Cooper (2009) argues, in striving to engage with others "as agentic human subjectivities who cannot be reduced to, or treated as, objects of natural scientific inquiry". (p. 6).

Wertz (2005) supports this view and highlights that this kind of research is particularly suited to counselling psychologists as they often require "high-fidelity" knowledge which esteems first-person experience and the situational context in which it exists (p. 176). Hence, understanding the texture of former members leaving experience may allow counselling psychologists to better encounter and make sense of the experience of other ex-members who disaffiliate. Although phenomenological investigation does not generate any hypotheses or theories, it is hoped that the faithful reflection of participant accounts will elevate the voices of participants. This, in turn, may help clinicians to better meet the needs of those who have disaffiliated, or those who may be contemplating it.

IPA: Features and theoretical influences

The primary research object within the scope of the research question is the individual's experience of reality, particularly the lived experience of leaving the JWs. The notion of lived experience could be traced back to the phenomenological idea of *lifeworld* which was first developed by Edmund Husserl in 1936. Husserl believed that one's lifeworld is always

universally present, being subjectively and inter-subjectively constituted through ongoing negotiations with others. Human science approaches grounded in this idea place primary concern on the "richness and texture of experience which is understood through rich engagement with another person's lifeworld" (Banister et al., 2011, p. 4). Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), developed in the mid-1990s, has been one of the foremost methodologies geared to understanding one's lifeworld, that is, their lived experience and consciousness.

More than simply a method to analyse data, IPA is a methodology and strategy that involves the detailed examination of participants' lifeworlds and how they ascribe meanings to particular experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2008). IPA is described by its proponents as being guided by three major theoretical influences: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Shinebourne, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). Although some of these features are shared by other methodologies, the way IPA combines them, and the methods IPA draws on, identify it as a distinct approach in their field of qualitative inquiry.

The central tenet of IPA is phenomenology, the philosophical study of conscious experience (i.e., of being and existence) in detail and depth. Husserl (1954), who was a key protagonist of this philosophy, stressed the identification of (or reduction to) the essential structures of a given experience. He encouraged the questioning of one's natural attitude through phenomenological reflection, aiming to transcend our everyday assumptions. Husserl believed that this would lead to experiencing a state of pre-reflective consciousness, allowing us to describe phenomena as they present themselves to us. Further, this could only be achieved by consciously setting aside our previous knowledge and detaching ourselves from our own prejudices and history (Giorgi, 1992).

Husserl's successors, notably Heidegger (1962) and Merleau-Ponty (1962) argued that this is never truly possible because our observations are always made from somewhere and are always embodied. The field of *hermeneutics* (started by Heidegger) thus suggests that phenomenological inquiry is always a situated enterprise, co-constructed through one's interpretation. Hermeneutics is therefore regarded as a pre-requisite of phenomenology, emphasising that while phenomenology aims to be descriptive, it can only ever be interpretative in its implementation.

IPA's approach thus understands meaning-making through a *double hermeneutic*, where the researcher seeks to make sense of the sense-making activities of the participant (Smith & Osborn, 2008). As Larkin, Watts and Clifton (2006) aptly put it, the phenomenological commitments of IPA give voice to the concerns of participants, whilst interpretation permits the researcher to clarify and contextualize their experiences from a psychological perspective.

Finally, IPA is committed to idiography, implying a focus of analysis on particular meanings or events, rather than on general descriptions (Shinebourne, 2011). The subject of inquiry is narrowed to how a particular experience has been understood through a particular perspective and context (Smith et al., 2009). The lived experience of the phenomenon is considered on its own terms without presupposing any form of categorisation or classification, through an inductive, bottom-up process. For this reason, those who adopt IPA often keep their research question adaptive throughout the process. In this way, specific features of participants' experiences can emerge or be "harvested" to make sense of the phenomenon and produce knowledge about it.

Rationale for the selection of IPA

This methodology departs from existing qualitative research on disaffiliating from high-demand movements which primarily adopted narrative methodologies. McLeod (2003) points out that the super-ordinate research approach within CoP should be methodological pluralism, which involves incorporating varying qualitative methodologies. Given that a wealth of narrative research already exists within the scope of disaffiliation, an IPA study looking into lived experience may contribute to the methodological pluralism of the larger research body. So far, only one study utilised a phenomenological methodology (Brent, 1994); however, its findings offered more of a step-by-step explanation of leaving rather than illuminating (with enough depth) the essence of the leaving experience. Unlike narrative analysis, utilising IPA may additionally offer a chance to capture the leaving phenomenon in a more original and nuanced way since it does not attempt to encode data into a chronology or plot.

Notwithstanding this, alternative methodologies such as grounded theory or discourse analysis were equally considered (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). Willig (2013) considers grounded theory to essentially represent a sociological approach rather than a psychological one, where the goal is to explain and theorise rather than attending to the way in which meanings are ascribed. Discourse analysis also veers away from experiential and embodied meanings, opting instead to attend to language and its role in constructing participants' identities and social world. Unlike these approaches, IPA researchers see the world as not simply known through the language one uses to describe it, but one which is richly alive in the person and their sense of being. It was felt that such an approach may come the closest to appreciating how one subjectively experiences the phenomenon of leaving the JWs.

Limitations of IPA

IPA presents specific limitations and tensions for this piece of research. Firstly, IPA assumes that language is a representative and valid tool for communicating experience (Willig, 2013). Due to this, the richness of the data depends on the ability of the participants to authentically and verbally communicate their experience; it also depends on my own ability to access and "translate" this experience carefully. The key challenge here is ensuring that both myself (the researcher) and the participants have the skills to successfully communicate the nuances of their experience. For this reason, IPA may favour those who are more verbally eloquent, as Tuffour (2017) argues, implying a form of elitism in that "only those who have access to the right level of fluency are allowed to describe their experiences" (p. 4). In order to account for this, I had to make sure that the data which was collected possessed a certain level of richness. Admittingly this was a challenge at times; it meant that I had to reflect on any of my own attempts to get something more from the data, or to extract "something from nothing" as it were. Still, on the whole, I felt satisfied with the level of data provided by participants and their willingness to communicate their lifeworld to me.

The use of IPA may also mean that certain kinds of knowledge cannot be generated about disaffiliation from the JWs or high-demand movements. As previously stated, phenomenological knowledge seeks to understand lived experience but does not attempt to explain *why* it occurs.

Counselling psychologists, and those who practice from a cognitive or psychodynamic perspective, may find this particularly limiting, as it may not reveal the conditions which triggered certain experiences. Willig (2013) also argues that the understanding of cognition is also problematic for those adopting IPA as traditionally, phenomenologists challenge the subject/object split between "person" and "world". Others such as Smith et al. (2009) have argued that sense-making may necessarily involve cognition especially if this is how participants make sense of their lived experience. Although these debates require further understanding according to Willig (2013), at this stage it may be helpful to clarify that within this study the "self" is conceptualised as an owner of various cognitions which are used to make sense of the world.

Finally, and possibly the greatest risk to utilising IPA, is that participants' experiences of leaving are not clearly revealed in the findings; rather, the findings represent the data as a stage for the researcher's own positions (Kasket & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011). Due to my background within the JW religion, I attempted to mitigate this by shedding light on elements of my own process throughout the research as much as I felt this was possible and relevant. In particular, I described how my own position in relation to the research may have influenced the extent to which the phenomenon could be clearly envisaged and described (see Reflexivity). Together with this, the research will also be evaluated according to the criteria for evaluating qualitative research developed by Yardley (2000) which are discussed at the end of the report (see Discussion). As a whole, I felt that this kind of scrutiny, through constant clarification, served to strengthen the credibility of the research findings.

Methods and procedures

Sampling and participants

Participants were purposively recruited to represent a homogeneous sample for whom the research question was meaningful (Smith et al., 2009). Although some recommendations have been made as to the ideal number of participants for a doctoral-level IPA study (see Turpin et al., 1997) a specific number of participants was not pre-determined. Instead, the guidance of Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) was followed, who recommended that IPA researchers balance bringing adequate depth (rather than breadth) to their research while ensuring the volume of data is not overwhelming.

Several inclusion and exclusion criteria were utilised. As this research is being conducted in the UK, only UK residents were considered. Prospective participants must have been raised in the faith, with subsequent baptism and disaffiliation. Baptism was regarded as a core characteristic of identifying as a JW. Within the religion, it represents a private and public dedication to do the will of Jehovah and spread his word. It is also expected that members considering baptism "need to know and accept at least the basic teachings of the Bible" (WBTS, 2016b, p. 187). Although baptism was a prerequisite of taking part, it was not mandatory that participants were disfellowshipped, only that they identified with "leaving the religion". In order to be sensitive to the nature of disaffiliation experiences, only those who disaffiliated more than six months ago were considered. The study also excluded those who were not sufficiently robust to take part in an interview through informed consent. This naturally included those deemed actively distressed; vulnerable; or unsuitable to participate for reasons such as lack of cognitive capacity or heavy medication. Additionally, any potential participant known to myself as the researcher was excluded as it was felt this may knowingly colour the data collected from interviews; I also felt that this limited the risk that any participants felt obligated or coerced into participation.

In accomplishing this, eight adults formed a small demographic which consisted of 6 females and 2 males recruited within the UK. This ratio of females to males can be compared to the proportion of women within the religion (within the US) – 65%, roughly two-thirds (Pew

Research Centre, 2014b). Although it has been commented that most who disaffiliate tend to be young adults (Bromley, 1991), most participants who volunteered were in the 40s (five), with two participants being under 40 and only one participant in their 60s[2]. All participants were raised in the faith (with subsequent baptism) and identified with leaving the religion. Of these, only one participant was not disfellowshipped. The most recent leaver who volunteered had disaffiliated four years ago, while the average time separated from the group was 15 years.

Recruitment process

Prospective participants were initially planned to be recruited through an online social networking website Meetup (.com). Meetup is a social networking website and mobile application that facilitates offline group meetings in various localities around the world. It allows members to find and join groups unified by a common interest such as politics, religion, health or various hobbies. The plan was to source participants from the *xJW Friends UK group* which is a faith-neutral group, made up of those who have left the religion. I began by reaching out to the administrator of the group, requesting permission to put together a post for prospective participants. However, the administrator suggested that I use a Facebook group instead, one which caters to supporting former JWs. This group, as it turned out, was already used by others in reaching out to former JWs for current research or other volunteer purposes.

It was recommended that I contact one of the administrators of the Facebook group in order to join it, as it was a private group only for members[3]. I had spoken with the administrator about conducting research on leaving, and we had agreed for me to put a post on the group inviting participants to take part in the study (see Appendix B). Interested individuals were then free to contact me through the messenger service within Facebook itself and were selected on a first come first serve basis. After responding, volunteers who wanted to take part in the study were

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[2] Specific ages were not given in order to maintain the anonymity of participants (at their request).

[3] The name of this group will remain anonymised to protect the identity of the participants of this study and uphold the privacy of other members.

initially screened for suitability criteria. This was done by asking questions about their age, if they were baptised JWs, and if they would say they have left the Witnesses. They were then asked around when this was, and if they were actively disfellowshipped in the process. Finally, they were asked if they were willing to take part in an audio-recorded interview on leaving the religion. If they agreed at this early stage, I then sent them the participant information sheet (see Appendix C) and consent form (see Appendix D) via email. I recommended that each participant take their time in reading these and not to hesitate in coming back with any questions they had about the interview or anything else. I mentioned that if they were still interested in taking part, they could contact me again via email or over Facebook messenger.

Once participants contacted me again, I answered any questions they had about the interview or the study more generally. At this stage, I provided with more detail about taking part in the interview in question. It was made clear that this will involve discussing the way in which leaving affected their life, relating that some may find this difficult if they have found this experience to be particularly distressing. After answering any further questions, I asked participants if they were still interested in taking part. With this second agreement, a two-week cooling-off period was given in which responders could withdraw from partaking in the project. Following this, participants were contacted again, and a date and time were mutually agreed; this was followed by booking a suitable room on the campus of City, University of London.

Initially, four participants were sourced from the original Facebook post and interviews were conducted on-site of City, University of London campus. As a whole, I felt that I needed more data as some interviews were felt to be limited in their degree of detail and quality. To achieve this, I had reached out to the administrator again to ask if I could place a second post. I mentioned that not many people had responded to the original post or were located very far from London; I asked for any suggestions that could be given in order to tailor a new post to attract more participants. The administrator suggested that I mention that I was also a former JW in the post which was thought to increase the chance participants would volunteer.

At this point, I had to make a choice on whether to include my own history as a JW or not. I reflected that I did not want to colour the data unnecessarily, but I knew I also needed

participants. Still, of the interviews I had conducted, I realised that all the participants had asked me at some point if I myself was an "ex-JW" (this happened mostly prior to the interview). I mentioned that I had been raised in the religion, as I felt it was self-evident through my understanding of the various doctrines of the JWs (included in their stories). Hence, I had decided to be transparent about this and reveal this information in the second post. With this, I included an option to interview participants in their private home, a project amendment. This amendment was made as the majority of my existing participants mentioned that they had travelled far for the interview. This made me reason that others may have also not volunteered to the original post because of this. Therefore, the new post included the information that I was a former JW together with the option for participants to be interviewed in their private homes or in another suitable location.

The second post received roughly four times as many responses as the first post, and I was able to easily arrange several more interviews. Although two changes were made to the original post, I felt that the information regarding myself was what influenced more participants to volunteer for the second post – this was because of what I discovered through the interview situation. This opened the possibility that participants felt significantly more comfortable with volunteering for the study and taking part in a personal interview with the knowledge that the person opposite them was a former JW. I was curious as to what exactly was it about this knowledge that made this experience be perceived so differently, if indeed it was true. This question kept percolating in my mind throughout the latter interviews and was thus, posed to participants when it came up again. It also became relevant in the analysis phase and are thus explained in the findings of this study.

Interview process

One-on-one interviews were conducted between myself (the researcher) and each participant; this was the preferred method of data collection. A semi-structured interview was used to strike a balance between retaining a focus on the research question while permitting space to explore the nuances of their experience. All interviews lasted between 60-120 minutes and were recorded using a Sony ICD-PX333 voice recorder with the permission of participants. Seven interviews

were conducted in a private room on site of City, University of London while one interview was held in a participant's private home. Hosting most participants on the university campus was felt to allow for greater control to manage any risks while ensuring greater personal safety. However, I was also aware that such a location may have rendered me as an "expert" versed on the topic, a position which I was mindful of. The single interview which was held outside of the university campus was also ensured for safety and suitability before and during the interview.

The semi-structured interview was based on an interview schedule of open questions (see Appendix E). Participants were asked about the way in which leaving affected their lives and relationships, attitudes towards themselves and their perspectives on God and spirituality. Respondents were free to define "leaving Jehovah's Witnesses" for themselves and thus, this study's definition evolved from the ground up. The schedule began with broad questions where any pertinent issues which arise could be explored further (Bright & Harrison, 2013). Questions were used only as a broad guide to collecting data and not delivered as a standardised detailed questionnaire, which Ponterotto (2005) posits is more akin to "post-positivizing" research. Bright and Harrison (2013) suggest that this format may also help to build rapport and trust between the researcher and participant before more specific questions can be explored. The aim in this vein was to listen completely to participants, attentively, listening not only to the words but also to the feeling of what is being conveyed. Prompts were only used to clarify the meanings for the participant or if they were unclear about the question. Once the interview was complete, participants were debriefed (see Appendix F) and asked and if they have any further questions.

Ethical considerations

In order to comply with ethical standards, the research received ethical approval from the psychology department at City, University of London (see Appendix G), and complies with the British Psychological Society (BPS) and Health and Care Professions Council's (HCPC) ethical guidelines regarding research (BPS, 2014; HCPC, 2016). Written informed consent was obtained prior to participation and interviews were primarily held on site of City, University of London to manage risk and maintain safety.

Although only one participant volunteered to have the interview in their private home, several new protocols needed to be introduced in order to minimise risk from the outset (and for all prospective participants choosing this option). The location was checked out prior to data collection in order to assess the possible risk associated with their social environment. I familiarised myself with escape routes from the housing area in case safety was in any way compromised. A safety contact (a friend) was also put in place who was informed about the person and the location of the interview. On the day of the interview, regular contact was maintained by making sure that my mobile was fully charged with updates before and after the interview.

For all interviews, confidentiality was protected by anonymising any identifying information. Participants were also informed of the limits of confidentiality, that is, that information with appropriate services will be shared if any party was at risk of harm. All transcripts and audio recordings were encrypted, securely stored and destroyed once the research requirements have been fulfilled. Although the research only included those capable to take part in a semi-structured interview, the risk that interviews may be potentially distressing to participants was not ruled out. To mitigate for this, a lot of information was provided beforehand about the study (see Appendix C); with this, participants were asked if any subjects were off-limits. They were also informed of their right to withhold personal information, take a break, or withdraw at any time without giving a reason for doing so. In the event that a participant did become very distressed, this was mitigated firstly through my own therapeutic capacity. This happened on one particular occasion which was related to severe abuse a participant had experienced. At this point, I listened sensitively and gave the opportunity for the audio recording to be switched off, or to take a break, or stop the interview entirely. As this participant felt ok to continue following a brief pause, this was honoured. With this, details of support and counselling services local to each participant were also provided to participants after each interview or when the need arose.

Being informed by my therapeutic training, interviews were conducted as sensitively as possible. Although some probing was required, this was balanced against not being excessively intrusive following ethical guidance to do no harm (HCPC, 2016). This was especially relevant considering the associated stigmas surrounding disaffiliation (Lalich & McLaren, 2010) and

power imbalance implicitly present in this frame. Finally, I was safeguarded from any unanticipated distress through the appropriate use of personal therapy, reflection and supervision throughout the project. To ensure this, I kept a reflective diary throughout the project, including my own reactions and feelings to participants, their experiences and any emergent interpretations. This diary was then used to help safeguard participant experiences and ultimately, ensure the rigour and quality of the research.

Transcription and analytic strategy

Interviews were transcribed verbatim by myself. I felt that transcribing interviews myself yielded several advantages. It brought more depth to the data in the form of noting prosodic features of the text, including the cadence, tone and, volume. I felt that my own assumptions, thoughts and feelings pertaining to the responses of the participants could be noted more easily this way, as well as what I may have been thinking at the time. This seemed to facilitate an understanding of the nuanced responses by participants to these reactions, which I felt further complemented the data.

Following transcription, each interview was first analysed individually (Smith et al., 2009). This idiographic process began with reading the transcript and listening to the recording several times. This process helped me immerse myself in the data, remembering the participant and atmosphere of the room. During this exercise, I closely read and documented aspects of the content, language and context and any initial interpretive comments; these were recorded in the left margin of the transcript. Specific features of language use, such as metaphors, repetitions and pauses, were also noted to come closer to how the experience felt for that participant. The data was also interrogated by asking various questions relating to phrases and sentences which I felt were significant in the participant's leaving experience:

- What is the participant experiencing here?
- What does this mean to them (or for them) in the context of leaving?
- What do I see as the essence of this experience?

Together with this, and because of my own position in relation to this research, my own reactions to the audio and data were logged. This was to ensure a level of robustness regarding the suspension of my own assumptions, making sure and the analysis is well anchored in the data of participants. These personal reactions included thoughts, feelings, and any associations to my past or to aspects of the religion. During this activity, I found it meaningful to draw on more specific questions which clarified my position:

- What am I experiencing reading (or listening to) this?
- How do I feel about this?
- Is my experience different to their experience (as I understand it)? If so, how?
- How do I understand their words in terms of my own knowledge of leaving the religion?

These questions served to highlight how my interpretations influenced the meaning of participant's responses. I felt that noting these features in turn contributed to the unique voice of each participant being more closely heard and reflected.

Once this stage was complete, the transcript and notes were re-read multiple times, with the goal of capturing preliminary themes representing the salient qualities of each interview; these were recorded in the second, right margin. Any new insights or interpretations which arose during this activity was also recorded. Particularly important at this stage was Heidegger's concept of the hermeneutic circle which involves understanding the text as a whole by reference to the individual parts and understanding of the individual parts by reference to the whole. Following the advice of Smith et al. (2009), this process was applied at a variety of levels in order to inform the meaning of the text by locating it within its religious, cultural, and historic context. Themes were then formed around this process, at a slightly higher level of abstraction, employing psychological concepts which were integrated at this later stage of analysis (Willig, 2013).

After all the interviews were analysed to this level, emergent themes were then listed chronologically and shifted around, forming clusters of related themes. This process was done electronically in Microsoft Excel, so as to create a paper trail; this also allowed me to retrace the stages of the analysis process and to highlight any disconfirming cases (Yardley, 2015). Following this, themes were grouped together under a hierarchical relationship into an agreed set

of master themes. A master table of themes was then developed with associated quotes which best captured the thoughts, feelings and essence of leaving the JWs (see Appendix H).

Data in the form of direct quotes from the interviews were used to support the aforementioned themes. Any data which would reveal participants' identities were anonymised using a pseudonym. Where it was felt identifying data may compromise the participant or others, data was omitted; this is indicated by […] (Saunders, Kitzinger & Kitzinger, 2015). When quoting from the transcript, the participant's pseudonym was used (also to refer to their unique transcript), together with the location in the text (e.g., Kate, 172). Pauses were indicated by [pause] and any non-verbal reactions felt to be salient were also placed in parentheses.

<center>**Analysis**</center>

Overview

Leaving the JWs was seen as an experience temporally spanning many years rather than as a particular moment or event in participants' lives. Participants constructed leaving as an experience which began while they were still active JWs. Leaving was seen as "active", drift, or being "forced to leave", as in conversion for social reasons (e.g., marrying within the religion to engage in sex). Features of leaving involved ambivalence about the religion, disputes with members and family, being cut off and struggling to adapt to life outside the religion. Due to these wide set of features, many participants felt that they were still in the midst of leaving, despite being separated from the religion and their congregation years ago.

For most of the participants who experienced tension and ambivalence, a particular moment existed in which their indecision was surmounted and a path of action toward separation was initiated. During this period, seven participants were actively disfellowshipped with little or no contact with their family who had raised them within the religion. One participant was disfellowshipped and reversed course (being "reinstated"); this was followed by being disfellowshipped a second time. Almost all participants described leaving the JWs as an overwhelmingly destabilising experience in which they had little support. In some cases, members were able to forge rudimentary relationships with outsiders prior to leaving which aided their transition to into the secular world. Many participants went onto to completing university degrees, change their careers, and engage in activities once frowned upon as JWs (e.g., sexual relations outside marriage, watching violent entertainment etc.). With this, common themes emerged out of participants' attempts in understanding what leaving the JWs means to them and how it impacts on their life and relationships.

Analysis of the data revealed material which was clustered around three master themes (see Table 1). Participants found themselves *chancing their own truth*, where they negotiated experiences of being deprived as a JW while forging a new identity and belief system. Participants felt caught between two worlds: they realised that what they were taught within their tightly knit community was not the only valid way of life, but equally did not feel steady enough

in a new, different world to entirely discard their past. Participants thus found themselves *as an outcast of in a foreign world* where they felt rejected by their loved ones and struggled to be understood by others in the outside world. Participants were also *held captive to a death sentence* by the religion, feeling trapped by tormenting guilt and worrying about a coming Armageddon.

In addition to these, disconfirming cases included two participants who described struggling with the anti-female stance of the religion. Although such issues are relevant to leaving, they were not seen to fit into the emergent pattern of most participants.

Table 1. Summary of master and sub-themes.

Theme titles
1. Chancing one's own truth
Wanting to live a different truth
Deprived of a wanted life
Searching for a new moral compass
2. An outcast in a foreign world
Alienated as a dangerous outsider
Burdened by the "deep scar" of rejection
Struggling to open up to worldly others
Finding solace through speaking the same language as ex-JWs
3. Held captive to a death sentence
Destined to die
Wrestling with tormenting guilt
'Jehovah makes Hitler look like a pussy cat': Dismissing Jehovah
Disenchantment with future hope

Theme 1 – Chancing one's own truth

Chancing one's own truth was a master theme which emerged out of several themes which clustered around how participants negotiated a desire to live more authentically. *Wanting to live a different truth* involved participants becoming aware of a strong desire to rebel from their life

as JW. Related to this was a feeling that participants were *deprived of a wanted life*, experiences which propelled participants to risk leaving "the truth" in order to forge their own truth. As participants took the plunge into forging a life outside of the JWs, they found themselves questioning their moral compass which directed their actions towards *searching for a new moral compass*.

Sub-theme: Wanting to live a different truth

The desire to live differently or rebel from their former JW way of life seemed to be a consistent feature which began before participants actively left or were disfellowshipped. This desire appeared as a developing sense that they wanted something different from what the religion offered, becoming more curious to explore what this was. This allure was facilitated by interactions with non-JWs which they found more pleasurable in comparison to their JW counterparts. Leaving was also marked by an exploration which included experimenting with different lifestyle choices and being more open to experiencing what they were formerly warned against and restricted from. In some cases, this was done cautiously while in others more dramatically. Wanting to live differently was seen as an enthralling prospect of escape inviting anticipation of a more fun, passionate, and 'real' way of living. Primarily, this theme illuminates a sense of rebellion with the potential to live with more freedom, without conforming to standards laid out by the religion and their members. One participant recalled a song during our interview which prompted this feeling:

> I think it was this Billy Joel song, the words of the song was I'd rather dance with the sinners than die with the saints, and that really resonated with me. I thought, 'Yeah that's what I want to do [elated], I don't want to be this saintly person that lives forever with all these saintly people'. I suppose it was that sort of teenage rebellion […] (Kate, 137-144)

Kate employs the metaphor of "dancing" here perhaps to signify the joyfulness, spontaneity and freedom she wanted to experience. This was in the context of the participant's experiencing of pleasurable non-JW relationships and activities outside of the religion, which were attractive to participants. This desire is also opposed to living as "saint" or holy person who lives forever, an analogy likened to JWs who believe that they will live forever in an earthly paradise. The

necessity of this desire went to the extent that participants seemed willing to forgo everlasting life (i.e., dying with the saints) in order to chance their own truth. While still belonging to the religion, participants such as Kate found themselves enjoying the company and activities of "worldly" people (non-JWs), and being curious to explore this further. This can further be seen through Stephanie's comments:

> Then I started talking to other people not in the Jehovah's Witnesses group, and just kind of fell in with them. Probably cause they were a bit wild as well, probably just looked exciting as well [laughs] probably was a bit of a rebel spirit in there as well. Yeah just just kind of drew me in. (Stephanie, 244-250)

Her statement that she "just kind of fell in with them" brings to mind the idea of a fall, involuntarily surrendering control. Her seeing them as "wild" and "exciting" could be interpreted as seeing them as doing perhaps what they really wanted to do in their eyes, amidst a sense of risk. The kindred nature of being able to relate more to this group than her JW group could also be gleaned from her repetition of the phrase "as well". Hence, the opportunity to live this new way also meant feeling like they belonged to "worldly" social groups, who offered this way of living as an experience which participants yearned for. Like Kate, Stephanie's vague sense of being rebellious was understood as deviating from her former JW knowledge which warns against associating with those who are not members (WBTS, 2015a).

Salient in understanding this theme is the understanding of how participants conceptualised the truth, and how this was re-conceptualised. Important in this regard is that the JWs often refer to their religion as *the truth*. For example, if a member was to leave, it would not be uncommon to hear another member relate that, "[this person] has left the truth". For this reason, wanting a different truth challenged an ingrained sense that living a life as a JW was the only true and correct way to live or even be.

> I still believed it was the truth, but in the end I had to just walk away because I knew it wasn't my truth even though for me then it was the truth, it wasn't the truth that I wanted. (Kate, 413-417)

A differentiation between "the truth" and "my truth" could be seen in this extract, although the participant's words highlight the dissonance of believing in the truth, while simultaneously knowing it wasn't *her* truth. The choice to leave was thus seen in the midst of *still* believing in JW doctrines, be it in some sense. Participants also seemed to look forward to a future time when they would no longer need to produce excuses to family members about their behaviour. Hence, chancing one's own truth was seen as an opportunity to negotiate the need for greater freedom through their desire to live differently.

Sub-theme: Deprived of a wanted life

Chancing one's own truth was also reinforced by the discovery of being robbed of experiences which were wanted during their time as an active JW. As participants looked back on their experiences, they described a feeling of being deprived of various activities across their lifespan. These experiences were thought to relate to the essence of what propelled their motivation to chance leaving the religion in which they were raised. One participant in looking back on her JW life said the following:

> Now I look at my growing up and go that was ok but actually I didn't get to have my choice in life. I didn't get the education I wanted, didn't have the job I wanted, you know do anything I wanted. (Sophie, 937-942)

Sophie here describes the feeling that she did not have choice or decision-making freedom in her life, particularly as regards her education and her career. This is understood in the context of JW guidance which discourages higher education as it is warned this could be detrimental to one's relationship with Jehovah (WBTS, 2011). Further, she extends this to include "anything" she wanted showing the degree of frustration and loss she is grappling with. Bereavements which participants described also were not limited to education or career opportunities, but also involved grieving over loved ones who belonged to the JWs:

> It's created tremendous loss for me. I would say that, pretty well. Um all the things and the people that I have loved I have ultimately been robbed of because of being a Jehovah's Witness. I think I was robbed of having a, having a a a mother because sh- , because of her devotion to, to the Jehovah's Witnesses. I would say I was robbed of a husband, um because

of blood transfusion. And there's been some other things as well but ultimately I think I've been robbed of an education because of being a Jehovah's Witness. I've been robbed of an authentic life because of being a Jehovah's Witness. (Beth, 1041-1056)

Beth describes "tremendous" and large-scale losses in experiencing key relationships and past experiences being taken from her by being a JW. Her mother's strong devotion to the JWs led Beth to feel ignored or deprioritised in her family. Beth implies too that her husband may have been saved through having a blood transfusion, and thus, blames the religion for unjustly taking this possibility away. Her repeated use of the word "robbed" may highlight that the experience of being a Jehovah's Witness retrospectively can be likened to a thief stealing something not belonging to them. The statement that she has been robbed of an authentic life appeared to me as especially touching and terminal. One way of making sense of this lost authenticity is that Beth may be experiencing self-deprivation in that that she may have deprived herself of her own desires, for example, in not pursuing tertiary education in favour of being a Jehovah's Witness. Equally, her repetition of this phrase ("robbed of") accentuates the gravity of her loss and may reflect feelings of anger, regret and pain.

The widespread nature of these losses appeared to contribute to a desire for participants to explore experiences which participants felt they missed out on. In this way, they began to chance their own truth, now risking what they had known and believed to gain or capture these experiences. Separating from their congregations, and with diminishing judgement from them, participants felt spurred on to gain back these experiences or curiosities.

> I suppose I just wanted to live a normal life, do things that I wanted to do, go where I wanted to go. Umm and make my own decisions. Umm you know, since leaving I've, I've done a little bit of gambling […] I've been to Las Vegas for holidays, you know, if I'd been in the religion that's frowned upon because it's, you know, it's, it's drugs, sex, alcohol, gambling […] I've been to Amsterdam with the lads […] I've been to boxing, been to cage fights. (John, 980-994)

John here describes taking part in gambling, sexual exploration, and boxing and cage fighting. His use of the phrase "frowned upon" conveys a sense of shame and that he is being looked down upon. Hence, in experiencing a lessening of criticism through leaving, participants were

able to do things they wanted to do and go to places they wanted to go with more freedom. In this process, one participant described going far beyond what was felt to be acceptable normal behaviour:

> I was just out partying, and I felt to some extent I was kind of trying to have the experiences that I hadn't have, and that I was going further than people who had just been brought up in an ordinary environment where they had fun. (Kate, 292-304)

Kate describes a sense of wanting to make up for lost time as it were, being deprived of fun growing up. She also makes a comparison to growing up in an ordinary environment (which involves having fun) which implies a necessity to go "further" and make up for these absent or lost experiences in light of missing out. This need to take back or make up for lost time was expressed and negotiated in various ways by participants. For example, three participants mentioned enrolling in tertiary education as a direct action related to leaving. Participants needed to make up for lost time as it were, and these activities were not necessarily limited to taking part in those which were formerly prohibited or frowned upon. Paul, who had a love of storytelling changed many bible-based stories he learned as a Jehovah's Witness, and expressed these as new stories, in order to "reclaim" elements which were lost. He remarked:

> I guess you could call it, of this like love of storytelling. And so I kind of, usurped all of this um stories I've got from being in the church, all these Bible stories and kind of made them my own, bastardize them some would say. [..] I've reclaimed them! [excited] I guess, yeah umm and I'm still doing that. (Paul, 2059-2074)

In particular, Paul uses the verbs "usurp" to describe his process of changing stories to suit his own experience or narrative. These words could be interpreted to refer to *taking back* stories which held meaningful content, content which was taken away, but not forever lost in Paul's mind. Hence, Paul was able to restructure his experiences of being deprived through storytelling in order to take back or glean content which was significant in his history. Such activities thus represented the means by which participants experienced and processed deprivation or loss.

Sub-theme: Searching for a new moral compass

Chancing one's own truth also involved participants questioning their former belief system with a growing imperative to forge a new moral compass. Initially, participants who left found themselves without bearings or a sense of what was right and wrong, and not knowing how to act as a result. Formerly as JWs, they were able to depend on the religion which provided them with the moral direction in almost all matters related to relationships, worship, and lifestyle choices. Now finding themselves in the absence of JW oversight, and in the midst of their disillusionment, participants began to question their own beliefs about themselves and others. Although questions were raised regarding these "truths" throughout, participants appeared lost on how such *right action* could be achieved in the absence of religious guidance. Hence a search for a new moral compass was initiated to help participants determine the correct and right behaviour to employ.

Participants had multiple ways of searching for and trying to identify a new moral compass. Many participants negotiated this process by striving for "normality". This involved experimenting with formerly prohibited activities which participants deemed as normal, despite the existence of their own JW beliefs:

> Yeah just um obviously the novelty when it, when it first started to celebrate Christmas and birthdays and Easter and Halloween, it was, it was all very raw and really nervous as well, I wasn't too sure. But um obviously over the years it has got a lot easier, so it's just, it's just second nature now. (John, 556-561)

John describes here first taking part in Christmas or birthday celebrations, activities regarded as false and pagan by the religion (WBTS, 2016). His "nervous" and "raw" apprehension highlights a discomfort and uncertainty he may be enduring. Further, his use of the phrase that it is "just second nature" could be interpreted to imply that his first impulse may still be to fear these activities or what they mean about his understanding of himself. Kate's experience below also highlights the conflicting nature of trying to engage in "normal" activities during her leaving experience:

> Umm and then that kind of began some difficult years of kind of who am I, what am I, what am I doing? I tried to to do normal things for Carrie like birthday parties and things like that

but it was just like [pause] I don't agree with these birthday parties [pause] I don't [pause] I don't get it, it's pagan, but my beliefs [pause] (Kate, 417-424)

Kate's constant pondering, seen here through the use of pauses, highlights the sense of the wrestling which plagued participants who sought to justify their life choices and existence. Kate's attempt at normalcy through celebrating a birthday party was difficult in light of her moral and existential conflict in losing the religion's guidance. Kate seemed to find herself torn between the need to develop a new belief system on the one hand, and the fear of relinquishing the doctrines which she held so dear on the other. The existence of entrenched JW beliefs regarding birthdays, which formerly provided protection now seemed to prevent her from fully engaging in what she deemed "normal" life. Hence, normalcy was interpreted as a distant a form of living or goal which may have only been partially achieved, if at all.

As participants grappled with angst about making decisions, they went through a process of turning to others to help them cope with uncertainty. Stacey described this as a loss of identity, and revealed that this was a process never embarked upon prior to leaving:

And it's really hard when you come out, because when you come out the religion and you don't really have an identity anymore, I found one of my biggest problems was an inability to make decisions. Just couldn't do it, because I'd never done it before. It was always been, what should I do? Tell me what to do and I'll do it, cause it was all, everything was to do with with the Witnesses. So having to make decisions for myself and it actually mattering what I thought, that had never happened to me before. It never mattered what I thought. (Stacey, 889-900)

Stacey's anxiety and restlessness in quickly trying to find out what she should do and how she should act are evident in the above extract. Of particular salience, is that she relates the process of making decisions for herself relates to *mattering*. In this way, Stacey may have experienced the thoughts (relating to her self) as not mattering in the past as a Jehovah's Witness. She also experiences this "mattering" as something happening *to* her, as a new discovery in the present. This discovery, gained through this moral search and angst, seemed tied to participant's awareness of their own feelings, thoughts and identity amidst the JW standards they were brought up with. This was echoed by Hanna below:

> Cause when you've been bought up so strictly as to what's right and what's wrong, I think you then are like what it- what am I happy doing? What am I not happy doing? How do I feel about this? You know, do I feel quite comfortable doing this particular thing? Do I not feel comfortable? And it's just kind of finding your moral compass because your moral compass has been set to Jehovah's Witness standards, and then when you realize that that's actually not right, you then have to find your own moral compass. (Hanna, 210-220)

Initially, Hanna relates her not knowing what to do as relating to her strict upbringing. She then begins to ask herself many questions relating to *doing*. Her self-examination is then extended to include how she exists in reference to an action, and how she experiences that action in terms of a feeling (i.e., how do I feel about this?). Moreover, this statement can also be seen to be decomposed of two smaller questions: (1) how do I? and (2) I feel about this? These two questions could be seen to suggest her imperative to know how to act, akin to searching, while also being uncertain but curious about her own feelings (i.e., if she is comfortable). Hence, searching for a new moral compass was seen to include scanning their embodied preferences or feelings in order to ascertain what was right and moral.

Theme 2 – An outcast in a foreign world

Leaving the JWs meant that participants were thrown into a new world which they were warned about as active JWs. Being an outcast meant that participants were no longer supported by their closest family and friends while being *alienated as a dangerous outsider* in relation to their former community and in relation to "worldly" others. *Burdened by the "deep scar" of rejection* was a theme which emerged out of participants carrying of scars of being rejected, ignored and isolated from their closest family and friends. Intimately joined to this rejection, was *struggling to open up to worldly others* where participants felt misunderstood by others who they perceived as unable to relate to their experience of being a Jehovah's Witness. *Finding solace through speaking the same language as ex-JWs* helped participants feel heard and supported, where experiences of loss, anger and hurt could be shared in a space which fostered mutual understanding.

Sub-theme: Alienated as a dangerous outsider

Upon leaving the nest of religious safety, participants were thrown into a new world consisting of "worldly" people who were unfamiliar to them. Their former world, consisting of their loved ones, congregation, and their tightly held beliefs were also now becoming a distant memory. Separated from all family and friends, participants felt fundamentally different and alienated from others. Finding themselves in this foreign world, participants were both curious and wary of others as an outsider. Kate aptly describes it in this way:

> There was this sort of developing knowledge that these were just young people having fun, they were they were kind of looking out for each other, and they were just kind of normal. And I feel like in some ways I was looking at them like an alien that had landed and trying to learn what normal was, and kind of even though I was in a terrified state, I was kind of observing what normal was. (Kate, 843-851).

Kate relates her developing knowledge of normality in this new world, and that almost as an alien she knew was fundamentally different *from* them and foreign *to* them. Her statement that she had "landed" could be interpreted that she felt this was her first encounter with the world, and that this world was not like her. Although on one hand she describes them as "just young people having fun", and thus harmless, on the other she holds herself almost at a distance from them, terrified. In this way, Kate experienced a feeling of being both curious and threatened in the presence of others. What was she threatened by? Was there anything she was afraid would happen? While the answer to these questions is unclear, Kate's discomfort with self together with the terror felt may have related to the JW belief that getting close to worldly people is dangerous as it can harm one's thinking, faith, and conduct (WBTS, 2005).

Kate's clear feeling of difference seemed to be felt by almost all participants and was evident in interview transcripts through the frequent and consistent occurrence of the words "strange", "odd" and "weird"; these words were used to describe their how they encountered others and at times, their own reactions. Participants did not feel fundamentally "normal" and accordingly, strived to fit in as normal. This striving for normality was seen as occurring both in reference to a way of seeing others and as a developing moral standard. With the existence of JW beliefs still

forming remnants of participant's mental world, participants tried to re-establish their identities as normal:

> I think what was important for me, which was to obviously find myself again as a person, and re-establish a life that that felt normal and realistic, um without being judged. And I've got that. And um and I just hope I can just view it like that as well. (John, 1175-1180)

Here John relates having or possessing a normal life, free of judgement. However, his *hope* that he can view it like this implies that although this may be in his possession ("I've got that"), he does not feel he can truly relate to this kind of normalcy ("I just hope I can view it like that"). Hence participants were seen to be searching for this sense of normalcy which others seemed to have, amidst not fully fitting in. John also uses the word "realistic" to describe this hoped-for normal life, which implies his experience may feel distant or even surreal. Hence, both his word conceptualisations of "life" and "self" may lie somewhat outside of an embodied and connected way of being in the world outside the JWs.
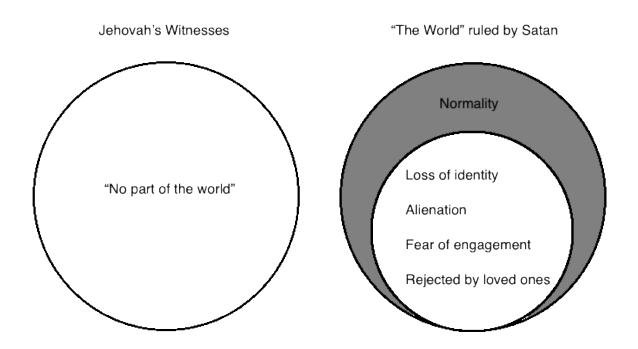

Figure 1. Conceptualisation of participants in relation to "The World" and the JWs.

Although participants now found themselves in this new world, they appeared to be cocooned with remnants of their former beliefs, together with the knowledge that they were different (see Figure 1). In this way, they held the perspective that others viewed them as strange and different from "normal" people, and that they were even potentially dangerous to them. This could be seen through the extract below, where Kate relates her experience of being introduced to the mother of her new partner (who is not a JW).

> The mum sat down and said, 'We were just going to watch this program, do you watch TV as a Jehovah's Witness?', and so I was kind of like yeah I haven't got two heads and a tail or anything like that, but is just kind of that sense of not fitting in, sense of being weird kind of was very alive really, and not having anybody I felt like I could confide in. (Kate, 186-194)

Kate above seems to experience (and interpret) the question directed at her to mean that she is weird, likely as something as banal as watching TV is considered normal. She uses the analogy of a mythical creature possessing two heads and a tail to highlight how she believes she may be *viewed* by others – as strange, or even, dangerous and frightening. This mental image may also relate to a figurative wild beast depicted in Watch Tower literature, used to symbolise false religion alienated from God (see WBTS, 1988). However, the following sentence clarifies that this weirdness is also very much "alive" *in* Kate herself. This aliveness or embodied experiencing appeared to relate to feeling alienated as uncomfortable, with the understanding that others would not in any way be able to relate to them. Her use of the word "confide" also highlights a longing for intimacy and safe privacy; this also stresses an implicit danger. Kate's response to her partner's mother, be it mental or verbal, could also be interpreted as a form of reassurance or distance-closing, leaving open a possibility that she may not be quite as strange or even threatening as others see her.

Sub-theme: Burdened by the "deep scar" of rejection

Once participants were separated from their former world consisting of their families and congregations, experiences of rejection appeared as one of the most distressing aspects of leaving the JWs. The despair of separation and being cut off by the closest members of their inner circle was described by many participants as a "scar", "wound", or "trauma". This vulnerability was

seen as existing in response to be being cut off from their former world which provided love, direction and comfort. During interviews, participants became much more emotionally distressed in describing these moments; this was seen through their expression of feelings such as sadness, anger, frustration and mourning. Struggling to reconcile how their families could reject them was seen as an ongoing burden which participants carried following their disfellowshipping. Salient in this regard was the *degree* of their ostracism; participants felt that they had completely lost their parents and loved ones. As a result, participants grappled between feelings of rejection, unwantedness and anger while also being desperate for any contact with family members:

> I really struggle to just kind of, I do really struggle to trust people, I really struggle to open up to people. I don't [pause] there's something about losing your family, where they are your anchor aren't they and there's something about losing them which has always made me go well if my own family don't love me [tears up] and accept me then no one can, and I still struggle with that… (Sophie, 750-758)

The strong sense of rejection which Sophie experiences appears to carry a feeling of being unloved and abandoned. The metaphor of an "anchor" likely represents the security and stability which her family provided to her. Cast out into a sea of unknowns and no longer firmly grounded in her beliefs (or self), she is no longer able to hold steadfast onto to her family as her safe place. Sophie's distress coupled with the identification of not having an anchor highlights a real struggle to cope with a sense of drifting or drowning in its absence. The overwhelming and consistent nature of this distress could be seen through her tears and her statement that she is *still* struggling with *it*. Stacey and other participants seemed to become very wary or hypersensitive of others rejecting them as a result; Kate echoes these sentiments:

> I suppose it's the trauma of what's happened at a relational level, it's like this deep knowledge that your parents, your blood can reject you, and that feels like a really deep scar; that if they can reject you then anybody can. And so there is some sort of solace I suppose, in keeping a really small friendship group, um yeah [smiles]. It feels a bit depressing [smiles] but kind of (Kate, 864-875)

Kate refers to this rejection as a relational trauma and "deep scar". A scar is also typically reflected on the surface of the skin and is the body's response to a wound which could be visibly

seen by others. Kate's description of this as "deep" could imply that this wound is painful and is not easily seen or healed; it may also imply that she struggles to reach it due to its depth. Hence, the feeling was seen as a painful wound which participants' *themselves* may be cut off from. The use of the word trauma also highlights the degree and lack of completeness of this healing. Her friendship group also appeared as a token solace which comforts her from this depressing plight. Her decision to keep it small may also highlight a feeling of wanting to limit the damage or hurt that can be done by virtue of its smaller size. Hence, the trauma of rejection which Kate currently experiences in relation to her parents, means that she may feel threatened by others who may expose her to similar hurt. Leaving the JWs, because of its shunning, was thus seen to dispose participants to a fear of re-experiencing rejection. More speculatively, her use of the phrase "your blood" means that this can be likened to a kind of rejection of her own body, akin to a self-rejection. These battle wounds as it were seemed to take a heavy toll on participants which participants felt they carried during leaving:

> Because obviously because, mentally and emotionally it's, I would probably say I'm scarred by it I would say, it's something that's never going to go away. Um yeah, yeah it's always going to be with me. I'd probably call it remorse and resentment I would say [pause] because I'm I feel like I'm starting a whole new life again as it were, sort of finding myself again as a person. (John, 1058-1066)

> But yeah, it is difficult, if you've got ties within, with parents or brothers or sisters or aunties or uncles that are still within the religion that you don't see anymore. That's the, that's the burden. It's the shunning, the shunning process, which is the most difficult part of the process. (John, 1175-1186)

Experiences of rejection also appeared as creating a sense of loss and remorse in participants. John relates that it's "never going to go away", highlighting the ingrained sense of remorse and resentment. His statement that he needs to "find himself" again also allows us to understand that leaving created a sense of total loss and rejection which participants grappled with. However, in the second extract John's use of the phrase "if you've got ties" leaves open a possibility that he may not have ties and could be seen as a struggle to fully engage or admit the degree of this shunning. His sense of not coming into contact with various relatives could be seen as a loss of connection, one which once existed and has now been severed. Hence, John may be experiencing

himself, or part of himself, as a burden in the absence of this lost connection. Others also related feeling as though they had been cut off or unreachable:

> I've lost many friends, people who I thought was, we're friends who've cut me off, totally (Beth, 166-168)

> So yeah, they said I was a diseased limb that needed to be cut off. I wish I could get rid of that expression out of my head cause that's like quite a few years ago now. But I know I'll never forget it. It's kind of like imprinted into my, into my brain now. And I know I'm not a diseased limb, but when somebody that you've respected for a long time says something like that to you, it can, it kinda, it does something to you… (Stacey, 222-230)

In this extract, Stacey recalls being called "a diseased limb" by one of the local elders in her congregation. This metaphor likely refers to the congregation cutting her off (as a diseased limb) to prevent her from contaminating the whole community. Further, her wanting to "get rid of that expression out of my head" coupled with her statement that it has been imprinted into her brain shows that she may be experiencing herself as being mentally contaminated. In view of this, her wish to get rid of it highlights her need to amputate this "disease" amidst a vague discomfort which it brings. Again, the nebulous nature of this discomfort was seen through her statement that "it" was doing "something" to her. Overall then, the feeling of being diseased, with the imperative to be separated from it, was thus seen as a tug-of-war which participants experienced when they were separated and cut off from their congregations and loved ones.

Almost all of the participants expressed anger towards specific congregational officials on the one hand, while longing for affection from family members (who were forbidden to associate with them) on the other. In their struggle to reconcile feelings of distress, rejection and loss, participants also felt contempt and disgust towards relatives that had cut them off:

> I guess there's some of me still there, but your childish you're a child really um so to cut somebody out your family for something they did when they're a teenager, I find it pretty abhorrent. I can't imagine doing it because you know if my daughter does something silly I kind of, you know raise my eyes a bit, 'Oh well she's a teenager she will [rolls eyes] grow up, she'll sort it out'. I don't think, 'my goodness um I don't know, she's smoking or whatever,

I'm never ever gonna speak to her again'. It just seems idiotic. So again, I just think it's another life stage [pause] wow that's really difficult. (Stephanie, 395-407)

Stephanie here seems unable to reconcile her family's actions in their decision to cut her out of the family. She begins by seeing them as childish or rather, immature. Not only does Stephanie appear to experience a sense of abhorrence and loathing here, but her use of the phrase "pretty" coupled with "abhorrent" also shows that may be experiencing an ugliness which she turns away from. Her statement that she is unable to imagine doing it, shows that she cannot relate to this or see how it is justified. In this case, this denigrating stance of not being able to relate to this "idiotic" person or family member, as one does not know better, seemed frustrating for participants. Moreover, the use of the phrases "my goodness, I don't know" and "idiotic" together may also signify that she herself finds is difficult to accept her experience when *she* does not know something, and further, may see herself as immature or stupid.

Sub-theme: Struggling to open up to worldly others

As participants felt alienated and cut off from their loved ones, participants felt an imperative to connect with and forge new friendships. However, this sense of being cut off from their loved ones and religion contributed to a sense that they were not able to be understood by others. Participants initially found themselves in an uncomfortable space of being all alone, nursing wounds of being cut off from their loved ones and former way of life. Coming into contact with others, and wanting to make friends, participants struggled to build rapport and open up to others. New friendships often took years or decades to build; many participants also related that they lacked the ability to be in a relationship at all. In particular, participants felt misunderstood by others because of their perception that others could not understand or empathise with their past experience or beliefs as a JW. Knowledge of the JWs was so foreign to these new friends that participants felt that they could not communicate the gravity of what they experienced:

I think it's really difficult for people that haven't been in it to understand that you honestly believe in an Armageddon because it sounds so far-fetched. Um, I think you know a lot of

them are quite comfortable with a, 'Oh you're a Christian and you kind of believe in heaven', or something very vague and esoteric. (Stephanie, 706-713)

Stephanie above describes a struggle to connect others who do not have an insider's perspective on the JWs. Her use of the word "honestly" could be interpreted that she may feel that others think she is lying, and that they would truly not understand. Further, her description that they are "quite comfortable" may imply that others may find it uncomfortable if she was to explain the degree of her belief and further, that she does not want to upset their comfort level. Her perception of their understanding ("Oh you're a Christian and you kind of believe in Heaven") could also be seen as vague or far removed as the majority of the JWs, although they believe in heaven, actually believe that their future lies in an earthly paradise. Also, the JWs believe they are the *only true* Christians, and so, to ring-fence them with other Christian denominations through a broader belief in Christianity may have been interpreted as a lack of understanding or worse, dismissive.

Despite no longer wanting to be associated with the religion, the past associations which former members held also appeared to exist as a barrier to connecting with others:

So there was always a point, um with the, with the friendship, but you know, well if it was you have to explain, 'Well actually I had a background as Jehovah's Witness' and they say, 'I didn't know' and then they don't understand how huge that is, how **massive** that is to have that in your background. So some probably there is a, there is a barrier, there's a barrier with in terms of developing deep friendships with people unless they've had a background in it and they're more understanding (Beth, 593-603)

Beth describes her connection to her past (as a JW) by employing the words, "how huge" and "how massive". This was interpreted to mean that Beth feels misunderstood and that others do not grasp how significant it is to her in the present, creating separation between them. Her repetition of the phrase "there is a" could also be seen as a hesitance or withdrawal from this relationship. Beth and Stephanie's extracts both highlight that they felt this gap could not be bridged without having a *lived experience* of the religion.

Participants' sense of feeling misunderstood and withdrawing from relationships also appeared to relate to a sense of shame and embarrassment in relation to others about their past.

> It can be easy to pretend it never happened and that's a real temptation as well because it I know I felt a lot of shame about ever being involved with it, while I was in it and afterwards. I didn't wanna, I don't want anyone to know. Um, but the more people I tell, the more I find that actually people are kind of like really interested to hear about this and like this isn't, they don't have, they're not casting any shame on me. They're actually like, 'Waaaow, how are you so social? [laughs]' Um, it's like, how, how is it watching TV for the first time? I'm like, 'Well, I always watch TV' but […] (Paul, 2146-58)

In this extract, Paul describes an ease with which he can pretend that he does not feel ashamed associated with once being a JW. Paul explains his tendency to withdraw and hide this knowledge from others. His use of, "I didn't wanna" followed by, "I don't want" shows that this experience is being experienced in relation to the past and the present. Hence, Paul may be experiencing and continuing to experience shame in relation to his past and he may be resisting this. At first glance, it may appear that Paul no longer feels ashamed about his past and that others don't see him this way; others appear to him as being amazed and astonished, almost in disbelief as to how he has become so social. Their question of "how is it watching TV for the first time?" and his timid reaction, could be interpreted that Paul may instead be experiencing a form of alienation and timid discomfort with others. Through this lens, his laughter could instead be understood as his *own* form of amazement that they have believed him and his ability to open up easily. These experiences of embarrassment, hiding and pretending seemed familiar to participants not only once they left the JWs, but also recalling the shame they felt as a JW. One participant linked her feeling of difference to the following:

> You feel very different as well because you don't have the birthdays and the Christmas [pause]. Especially after Christmas when everybody goes back to school and everyone's like talking about what they've got and you kind of [pause] try to back away a little bit cause you don't want to get involved in any conversations cause you were a bit embarrassed, but you don't want to let it show that you're embarrassed. You have to pretend that you don't care. (Stacey, 735-744)

As the JWs don't celebrate Christmas or birthdays, Stacey describes her experience of not receiving any gifts and how she felt different in relation to her peers at school. The pause, and her statement that she tries "to back away a little bit", highlights a sense of embarrassment and withdrawal. Further, her statement that "you have to pretend that you don't care", highlights the imperative to hide this embarrassment from others. Hence, although participants seemed to be negotiating a transition to living in this new world, the sense of distance was also as a feature which existed since their time as a child growing up in the religion.

Sub-theme: Finding solace through speaking the same language as ex-JWs

Once having physically left their congregations and being cut off from their family and friends, participants found themselves isolated and alone. During these times, participants were yearning for support from like-minded others. Around this time, they also seemed to become more open to researching articles online about the JWs, although were hesitant to do this alongside fears of being labelled an apostate by the religion. It is also noteworthy that prior to the widespread use of the internet, there was very little information for individuals to access concerning the religion. Hence, older participants in their forties or beyond initially had no facility in which they could speak to others who also left. For this reason, such participants did not access any online sharing platforms until years or decades later. Still, participants seemed to find an important form of kinship in speaking to former JWs about their experience. Sometimes this happened years after leaving, and almost always, this was done via the internet.

All participants showed a desire to connect with former JWs. Participants seemed to want to relate their own stories of being in the religion and to find support during leaving. This seemed to both give participants hope that they can negotiate the experience successfully, and simultaneously provide a space in which difficult experiences could be understood "from the inside". This seemed to exist almost like a lifeline for support during particularly difficult moments with families or when they were being shunned. The strong sense of kinship and closeness could be seen through verbs such as "our" or "we" and could be seen in the following

extract where Paul discusses his experience of meeting someone who had also left the JWs when he was first out:

> We just, we just bonded over this mutual experience and, and to just be sitting with a friend, eating food and drinking beer for the first time in a few weeks like was like I was, I was on the verge of tears just kind of having a friend, let alone the fact we were talking about our experience, you know. (Paul, 1043-1052)

Paul's sentiment that he was on the "verge of tears" highlights his sense of feeling truly alone without any friends while almost being able to feel connected to another. His use of "let alone the fact we were talking about our experience" highlights his disbelief, as if such a situation would be impossible in his mind before this point (i.e., what was unimaginable to him could have been shared with another). "Let alone" in this context could also be understood as a feeling of being alone without such kinship. Hence a shared and mutual connection was a resource which only appeared through former JWs or with media authored by former JWs. One reason for this was the complex nature of interpersonal dynamics with former family members and friends, together with understanding their former JW identity and belief system:

> Again, somebody who hasn't been in it, to comprehend why your brother doesn't talk to you but you still think he is quite a nice person. So I don't think I've ever really had any support in it until, maybe my um one of my sisters children, she never got baptised or anything into it, so she's out of it, she's probably the only person in the family or anywhere really that understands um that really understands the situation and we are very good friends (Stephanie, 758-770)

What does Stephanie mean when she says, to "comprehend why your brother doesn't talk to you but you still think he is quite a nice person?". She may be perceiving that others would see her brother as a bad person and that any reason for this lack of communication is unjustifiable. Thus, Stephanie feels they cannot understand how *she* justifies the situation. Later on, her statement that her relative is the "only person in the family or anywhere really" and her repetition of the word "really" highlights that being truly understood is a rare experience in the world for her. Two participants, Paul and Beth, paralleled this connection to those who come from the same "cultural background". One of them (Beth) explains it in this way:

I do find it that the people that I'm closest to, are ex-Witnesses, so, so although I do have lots of friends who aren't witnesses, it's like [pause] it's like it's from a different cultural background. So my cultural background is being a Witness umm just the same way yours is from Trinidad. So when you meet people from Trinidad to speaking the same language in many ways, and so that's how it is. (Beth, 582-590)

Beth relates that friends who aren't witnesses come from a different cultural background, while those who were former witnesses are from *her* background. One interpretation is that this was brought up to help me, the interviewer (and/or the reader) understand the significance of once being part of the JWs. It is so important that she sees herself as one whose identity strongly identifies with their country or culture of origin. This embodied sense of "speaking the same" seems to be related to the flourishing of the connection felt when speaking with ex-Witnesses. She later remarks:

I mean, even in this interview, if you hadn't had told me that you'd once been in it, it would have made it more difficult. I was be like how on earth am I going to explain what this is like, what is this research about? (Beth, 672-677)

She uses the phrase, "how on earth?", highlighting the perceived impossibility of explaining to, and possibly connecting to another who hasn't had a similar experience. Beth's statement that "what is this research about?" shows her sense of being totally lost without the foreknowledge that she knew I had about the religion and the difficulties of leaving. Hence, the process of *explaining* leaving was seen as a negotiation related to the phenomenon. During one of the interviews, I had asked one participant (John) about if the process of explaining itself was difficult. This was his reply:

Yeah. Yeah, get very difficult yeah. Yeah unless, unless someone else has been through it and they know it as well. (John, 668-670)

Although John's answer may appear first as unremarkable, it warrants a closer look. First, he agrees that it does get very difficult. But then, he says it isn't difficult if the other person has been *through* it and *knows* it. His use of "it" in this case may refer not simply to the religion's beliefs and practices, but also knowledge of the difficulty of leaving. The resonance which John

experiences with other ex-JWs like myself, hinges on (a) experience of the JWs; and (b) holding knowledge about that experience. Hence, although coming into contact with ex-JWs seemed to provide solace, it may have also paradoxically hindered John's ability *to explain* or talk about his leaving experience in some way.

Theme 3 – Held captive to a death sentence

Experiences of leaving the JWs involved several themes which clustered around being judged based on wrongdoing with the penalty of death. Being *destined to die* describes a deep fear which participants carried about dying at Armageddon for leaving the religion. *Wrestling with tormenting guilt* involved a struggle to reconcile a feeling as though they were fundamentally wrong or flawed and were deserving of death in some way. *Dismissing Jehovah* involved an ambivalence about Jehovah, who was once seen as a comforting father, but was now was characterised as an evil destroyer of non-believers. Participants' *disenchantment with their future hope* encapsulated the disappointment and ramifications of losing a certain future in a paradise earth.

Sub-theme: Destined to die

Leaving the JWs involved the turbulent and conflicting position of being condemned to die at Armageddon as a JW but now no longer trusting this belief. Many participants described that they understood their anticipation of dying at Armageddon as a "learned response" or "irrational fear", and that it was not going to happen. Despite this belief, participants appeared to carry a lingering and deeper terror of Armageddon. Related to this latter feeling, was a deep sense that they were deserving of death at Armageddon and that they were to blame for this fate:

> I thought Armageddon was going to come you know and I was going to die, and that I was worse than somebody who didn't know about the truth as it were. (Kate, 205-210)

Kate's comparison of her own condition to "somebody who didn't know about the truth" may refer to ones who did not have a chance to learn about JW doctrines in any way and thus, are not ultimately accountable at Armageddon (WBTS, 2016b). Being "worse" than these ones may

indicate the degree to which this blame is experienced as deserved, as a form of self-loathing. Compounding this conflict, was the fact that participants felt they were held accountable for passing this fate onto their children. Kate's added sense of responsibility and persecution accompanying it could be seen later when she reflected this related to her new-born:

> 'What have you done, you've bought another life into this world, this world that is doomed and again Armageddon could happen at any moment and you've left, you've left the religion umm that's gonna save you', and so in some ways I kind of condemned her to death. (Kate, 317-322)

Participants found themselves associated with a doomed world which was carded for destruction. Kate's sentiment that it "could happen at any moment" highlights a sense of sudden foreboding, anxiety and an inability to prepare for this. The "saving" or redeeming power of the religion in light of this destruction also reveals the protection which believing offered participants. Once this protection had been foregone by leaving the religion, participants felt doomed and destined to die at Armageddon, no longer deserving of life. Turning this on its head we may also ask, what was Kate experiencing in the present which she needed protecting from? The beginning of this extract may provide a clue when Kate laments, "what have you done". Hence, she may be experiencing a form of guilt, regret, and fear about her actions which she is persecuted by. Further, the use of the word "again" may highlight the repetitive and persisting nature of this mental persecution.

For some participants, this deep worry was experienced when *signs of the last days* or *signs of the times* appeared. The JWs believe that such signs or events (e.g., earthquakes, wars etc.) signal that the end of this world and Armageddon is fast approaching (WBTS, 2008a).

> You see something on the TV, I don't know, earthquakes or something like that, that would be a you know a sign of the times, and you'd suddenly think, 'Oh my goodness'. You know there would be the rational point side of you would think, they'd always been earthquakes, it's just a natural event and you can go through the whole kind of scientific explanation, but then there's another kind of core part of you, 'it is one of the signs though and you know…' (Stephanie, 266-276)

Stephanie here describes experiencing both the "rational point side" of her in contrast to a more "core" part of her. What may also be implicit through her use of language is that a side exists on an object with points, whereas the word core is often used in reference to a sphere (which has no sides or points). Implicitly, a side may also be visible from the outside, whereas a core part is not as easily observable and is deeper. This may relate to how Stephanie experiences the core part of her, not only that she believes that end is indeed imminent, but that she is a certain distance from it. Moreover, the use of the word "just a natural event" could be seen as a form of self-reassurance to counterbalance this struggle. Another interpretation is that her feeling could also be likened to a form of earthquake *itself*, as a sudden and violent movement of an uncontrollable force which has the potential to cause ruin.

Participant's sense of struggle with death and particularly, the idea of *impending* death seemed to lie alongside this sense of blame and disapproval. One participant, John, relates a seemingly implicit wish to not continue to live:

> It's a tough call, but I've already, I've already resigned myself to dying, and once I'm dead that's it thank God. (John, 952-954)

> Um, so yeah, there's been a period of, over these, since I've left, I have been doing things like a bucket list as it were, where I can just go and do it. Just do normal things as normal human being without being judged or being it, it being frowned upon (John, 996-1002).

Here John uses the phrase "thank God" perhaps to indicate his gratefulness about the finality of death. This may imply that he foresees a future based on continuing torture or destruction and will be relieved when he is spared by it. In the same paragraph, he describes doing a "bucket list", which is often associated with beliefs about a coming death. His description of wanting to do these things "without being judged or being it", together with his earlier sentiment thanking God, may signify a sense of *not wanting to be* judged or disapproved of, and needing permission to live as a normal person.

Associations with being destined to die at Armageddon also began at an early age for participants through the many books they remembered when they were growing up. One such book, *My Book of Bible Stories,* provided pictures and explanations for children about various

Bible characters. Three participants remembered this book during their interviews, one of them related the following:

> Um, and if you look at the pictures in there, that was a children's storybook of people being killed and the ground opening and women screaming and falling into crevices in the ground and buildings, you know, high skyscrapers, collapsing peaks, bodies coming off. I grew up with that! So imagine you've got little two or three-year-old on, on, on, on your knee and it's, you know, 'Oh, these are all the naughty people that are going to die'. And then on the other half of the page, you've got the little picture of a lovely green, lush paradise. So right from a young age you're given these [pause] *awful* pictures of, of death and destruction and of course as a child, you, you, you grow up, you grow to fear that. So that in itself I think is a form of abuse. I don't think children should be looking at at things like that. But I did the same with my children. My children had the Bible story book and there's a picture in that of umm, I bet you'll remember if you were, you were brought up in it oh umm of Noah's flood and there's a woman on the rock holding a baby obviously about to drown…(Stacey, 702-725)

Stacey describes a scene of a little girl on her mother's knee reading the story of Noah's Ark. She then recalls the graphic and horrific scenes of death and destruction depicted (see WBTS, 2004). Stacey's sense of utter shock and disbelief with exposed being exposed to this could be seen through the phrase, "I grew up with that!". She also admits, "you grow up to fear that" while repeating the word "you" four times prior, showcasing that she may still be in dread of this death. Her sentiment that children should not be looking at such images, followed by her own confession that she did this to her own children, highlights her own sense of blame. Her seeing a woman on a rock holding a baby about to drown, could also be interpreted to encapsulate the isolating and terrifying position of being both the responsible mother and powerless child. Her sentiment that this woman was "obviously about to drown", shows that she knows and feels that she *will* die, and lose her life if she chooses to live outside the Ark. This is in line with published literature by the religion which exhorts that "just as Noah and his God-fearing family were preserved in the ark, survival of individuals today depends on their faith and their loyal association with the earthly part of Jehovah's universal organization." (WBTS, 2006, p. 22).

Hence, it could be interpreted that participants felt that being outside of this Ark (or saving power of the religion) rendered them destined for death.

Sub-theme: Wrestling with tormenting guilt

The experience of leaving the JWs involved participants encountering a fierce form of guilt which participants were plagued by. Although participants seemed to live more authentic lives where they felt more freedom to make their own decisions, leaving was also seen as a rebellion which precipitated anguish. This enduring guilt seemed to torment participants, being somewhat unable to reconcile their decision in light of the ensuing breakup of their family and circumstances:

> And I would kind of provoke that within them potentially, although I feel like I escaped a cult, I mean that's how I I view it, I also paradoxically feel a lot of guilt for what I did to my parents you know cause I know they believe it 100%, 100% yeah. (Kate, 264-269)

In the above extract, we can see although Kate seems to view herself as escaping, she simultaneously experiences severe guilt for inciting the anguish her parents are experiencing. It is also noteworthy that she feels responsible for her parent's response to her. With this, the use of the word "paradoxical" may show her inability to reconcile this anguish, relating it to the absolute nature of her parents' belief. The knowledge that her parents could *only* believe in the JWs, as a resolute belief, also seemed to intensify this guilt.

Participants also seemed tormented by guilt while performing acts which they deemed as "wrong" or belonging to the category of transgressions. The ultimate form of wrongdoing, leaving itself, was therefore seen as precipitating a more severe form of guilt. Paul here discusses the to and fro behaviour of "fooling around sexually" and confessing, followed by the guilt he experienced:

> I got baptised, but not before we went to a Judicial Committee another three times, I think. Um, because essentially, we never stopped fooling around sexually um. Each time we got

caught we might have taken a break and then kind of things resumed, and each time we resumed there was fierce guilt. (Paul, 178-184)

In particular, Paul's guilt presented itself or rather, intensified during the period in which he was fooling around sexually. He referred to this guilt as "fierce", likely referring to its violent and frightening nature. "Taking a break" in this context was thus interpreted to mean not only a break from having sexual relations but also the guilt which was fundamentally tied with these actions. Further, his use of the word "might have" highlights a sense of timidity or fear about fully admitting that he did not want to follow this guidance or rather, was unable to. This sense of wrestling, and the reasons for leaving or performing "wrong" actions was seen through attempts to make sense of their guilt mentally, often leading to confusion:

> Then I would feel bad maybe, if I am challenging it. I'm not meant to get it because maybe I am a goat instead of a sheep…well maybe I am challenging it because I want to find something wrong because I don't want to do it, you go around this kind of guilt loop in your head um. (Stephanie, 92-95)

Stephanie above begins by feeling bad for challenging teachings associated with the religion. She then seems to implicitly ask herself the question, "Why am I challenging it?" with two outcomes, either she is a goat, or she does not want to do it. Confused as to which of these two outcomes is "right" (or indeed both of them), Stephanie experiences questioning as a seemingly never-ending "guilt loop". This metaphor brought to my mind the idea of a circular treadmill, one that one cannot get off of, and therefore was seen as trapping participants. Together with this, Stephanie's believed that she may be a goat and *fundamentally* a bad person. This metaphor, of goats and sheep, is also interpreted by the JWs as distinguishing God's chosen people (who will inherit everlasting life) from wicked ones who will be destroyed at Armageddon (WBTS, 1989). Hence, Stephanie's use of this metaphor could also be seen to relate her being deserving of death. This seemed to be further described later in her interview:

> If you don't believe or do what they say is the thing to do then you're fundamentally really a bad person, you are not worthy of an afterlife or what have you you know, resurrection or whatever or, going through Armageddon whatever it is, um and that you are literally being

controlled by the Devil. I mean it's not nice things to believe about yourself is it? (Stephanie, 983-990)

Stephanie in this extract laments believing that she is fundamentally a bad person, being unworthy of any afterlife, and perhaps even deserving of death. The last statement also provides a clue that in addition to being taught these things, she also experiences these things in relation to *herself* and described them as "not nice". In this way, Stephanie may be experiencing herself as "bad" and wrestling with her own degree of badness in "being controlled by the Devil". This embodied sense of guilt associated with Satan (or badness) was seen in other participants, albeit more subtly:

> You know I know of individuals that are, you know, they're even worse than people, you know, it's it's it's something very difficult. (John, 830-832)

John here describes knowing individuals who are "worse than people". His repetition of the phrase "it's" three times also shows he may be hesitant and afraid while also highlighting that he is experiencing this difficulty now (it *is*). Thus, "individuals" was interpreted as a device which includes John himself. More speculatively, "worse than people" could also mean that John possibly despises these ones and that they may not refer to *people* but rather, to wicked spirit forces or creatures.

Being tormented by guilt was seen as a phenomenon where participants remembered the fallout which they took some responsibility for causing. This strong sense of responsibility was also passed onto their children, who too were deserving of death. One example of this could be seen in the extract below which describes a discussion and last time Kate was able to see her parents:

> I started just these silent tears, and she kind of looked at me and sort of said, 'Why are you crying?' And then my dad said, 'Why are you crying because you're the one that's broken this family up, we can't have anything to do with [Kate's daughter]. But if you come back to the truth, and you know it's the truth, we can be restored the family and that's what we want.' And so that was kind of like a reality check, because basically she came under my umbrella of guilt, she was going to die at Armageddon and that I had to do something about about that. (Kate, 398-408)

The strong sense of blame during Kate's crying is also extremely evident and was seen as a wrongdoing against the closest members of one's inner circle, members who held the hope that the person would "come back to the truth" or "return to Jehovah". Kate seemed to remember and experience an overwhelming form of guilt and bloodguilt for being responsible for her daughter's future death at Armageddon. In view of the foregoing, this "umbrella of guilt" seemed to cover her parent's response to her (which was seen as justified), her own decision to leave, and the blood guilt for her daughter's future death. This was accompanied by intense emotional agony and the plight from the families of participants to "return to Jehovah".

Sub-theme: *"Jehovah makes Hitler look like a pussy cat": Dismissing Jehovah*

Fears of death and destruction were seen in the context of Jehovah, the originator of Armageddon. Leaving the fold involved an imperative to negotiate the status of their relationship with Jehovah. All participants related that this relationship had changed through leaving; however, participants had varying opinions and feelings about if Jehovah still existed, and if he did, if he still cared for them. This type of questioning appeared to reflect a sense of ambivalence about the existence of Jehovah and how he saw them. Further, participants appeared to struggle to reconcile Jehovah's love in light of leaving and distanced themselves from him within the process.

Many participants experienced severe distress in leaving and viewed their once loving creator as abandoning them in their time of need. In response, participants experienced anger and in some cases rage against God:

> But I go the atheist mentality of if God doesn't exist but I'm sorry but fuck you. That's my opinion towards God, I can't get on board with there being a loving creator up there anymore. I think if there was a creator, he created us for fun, he's buggered off, he doesn't give a damn anymore. I don't believe there is some force up there guiding, caring about the world. (Sophie, 242-250)

At first, Sophie begins by saying that she has adopted an atheist mentality now followed by, "I'm sorry, but fuck you". Her sense of rage here is described together with an apology, which may

show ambivalence or even regret for saying it. Her statement that he "doesn't give a damn anymore" highlights that previously she may have felt that she was cared for by him. Hence, participant's former knowledge of Jehovah as a "loving creator", one who they felt cared for them for years as a JW, seemed to relate to a strong sense of abandonment they encountered when leaving the fold. Although it can be argued that Sophie choose to not believe in God, it seems more apt that she *cannot* believe in him for what he has done. The strong sense of attributing responsibility to Jehovah for their current experiencing meant that participants in some cases dismissed Jehovah or viewed their relationship as broken. In one interview, I asked John (a participant) if this relationship still existed for him. This was his reply:

> If there is a God, I would probably say it's broken. I've not prayed since leaving, I've not read a bible since leaving. (John, 969-972)

Like Sophie, John's reply first questions the existence of God. He also goes onto describe the relationship as "broken". This break or separation from Jehovah could also be seen through his lack of prayer or bible reading, two activities associated with building faith as a JW (WBTS, 2015b). This sense of ambivalence about Jehovah was seen in other participants who went onto debate the validity of his existence. Participants' dismissiveness appeared alongside a strong sense of injustice in their current condition, now perceiving Jehovah as a destroyer or murderer:

> Even if it is true, I think I'd rather die with the people that I know and all the things I like in this world, than live forever with a load of people and a God that just wants to destroy people that believe in him willy nilly. I think that, you know that's a pretty big act of carnage isn't it? You're meant to have this loving, merciful God but if for some reason you don't believe a book that was written thousands of years ago, who knows why you can't understand it or where you live as such that you'd never be placed to really embrace that message, or you live in a strong Muslim country or something like that, and you would just be annihilated. (Stephanie, 183-196)

> When I was a witness and you know, people get emotional when they think of like Hitler for killing was it 3 million Jews? That's nothing compared to what Armageddon is supposed to be going to do, Jehovah makes Hitler look like a pussy cat doesn't he? (Stacey, 633-639)

In the above extract, Stephanie characterises Jehovah as a "God that just wants to destroy people"; this is contrasted with her ideal that "you're meant to have this loving, merciful God". Therefore, Stephanie may be struggling to understand or justify how a once loving, merciful God can perform such acts of carnage. She then goes onto to list reasons as to why this should not be done, which could be compared a defendant arguing their case as to why they should not be given a death sentence, or why this was unjust. Hence, ambivalence and withdrawing from Jehovah was seen in the light of not being able to justify Jehovah's actions which were now seen as unjust and cruel. Equally, Stacey's comparison of Jehovah to Hitler as a pussy cat was interpreted a hyperbole symbolising Jehovah as the ultimate murderer embodying cruelty and violence. Her hyperbole also serves to describe how unjust or unfair such a God would be and seems to invite a reply or confirmation that this is the case. Therefore, participants asking of various rhetorical questions, appeared as an imperative to prove that Jehovah lacked justice and was cruel. Participants also talked about Jehovah's lack of intervention in the midst of their diminishing mental health:

> One thing we're taught is that Jehovah was loving, so how would it be that he would think that that is acceptable to isolate somebody so much that it causes you know depression, suicide, all those things? (Hanna, 1237-1241)

Hanna here asks a similar question about Jehovah's sense of justice. She also seems to be trying to understand Jehovah's *thoughts* in order to make sense of his actions. Her use of the word "causes" implies that Jehovah is primarily or wholly responsible for the despair which she, as a disaffiliate, suffers from. Jehovah's perceived action "to isolate somebody so much" may also highlight the abandonment and loneliness which Hanna and others struggle to come to terms with. Hence, as a whole, leaving was seen as an experience which created an absence of Jehovah, which formerly preserved the mental health of participants who once depended on it.

Some participants attempted to reconcile their ambivalence about Jehovah leaving them through a new belief. Here Paul describes feeling "lucky" about his new belief in an organic and evolved universe:

> We might be the only intelligent life in the universe, you know, and like how, how precious that gift is from, from this like universe that doesn't actually give a shit if we exist or not.

And yet how lucky we are to be one of those, one of those things instead of being put here because someone, you know who's bored or needed worshipers or you know, whatever, whatever it is he is, whatever his reason was, it doesn't matter the very fact that it's completely reasonless. (Paul, 715-725)

On one hand, Paul describes how precious the gift of life is, but then almost paradoxically, describes this gift as coming *from* a universe that "doesn't actually give a shit if we exist or not". Paul also appears to characterise Jehovah as self-serving or petty, while providing multiple reasons for Jehovah's actions which may equally emphasise uncertainty about Jehovah. His repetition of the phrase "whatever" could be interpreted as a growing frustration or dismissing attitude in struggling to justify *why* ("it's completely reasonless") Jehovah created us and perhaps, him too. In this way, participants like Paul appeared to be experiencing a form of uncertainty, and growing frustration which necessitated their finding a reason for their very existence. With this, he may be experiencing a feeling of liberation from this sense of uncertainty in his choice to believe in a universe without an agenda, rather than in relation to Jehovah.

Sub-theme: Disenchantment with future hope

In navigating their leaving experiences participants became disillusioned and disenchanted about their esteemed future in a paradise on Earth. Participants became disheartened when they realised this was not fully true and accordingly took steps in their lives to come to terms with their new view of the future. Part of this was the feeling that they may die in this "system of things", and an imperative to reconceptualise their future:

I guess when you've been brought up with such a high expectation of you're going to live forever in this paradise, and never grow old and you know, this big romantic fairy tale and then it's not true, it's like, I'm a bit let down…I guess lots of people lose faith in heaven or whatever they've been brought up with then they do the same kind of thing. But when I was younger, I really really really believed it so and I suppose, based I don't know based on I just really hoped it was true and really really thought it was true. And to think, well no it's not, I just think 'Ohhhh it's not', you just kind of have to reframe your whole life I guess. (Stephanie, 1238-1261)

Stephanie begins by describing her once promised future as a "high expectation" and "big romantic fairy tale". This sense of looking forward and being in expectation of paradise seemed to relate to the disappointment participants experienced. "I'm a bit let *down*", Stephanie remarked, which contrasts with her language as having a "high" expectation prior. She then seems to explain the *degree* of her belief in a paradise as different to others who lose faith in heaven – this was seen through the word "but" and the repetition of "really" five times. Realising that this wasn't true may have also left Stephanie lacking a purpose or unsure as to how to proceed, since as a JW your purpose involved trying to make it into paradise (WBTS, 2008b). In this context, Stephanie's uncertainty, seen through her use of the words "I guess" and "I suppose", is more understandable as an existential plight. Later in the interview, she further went on to describe how this has coloured her perception:

> I do find it difficult to think about the future and stuff I think that's just ingrained in me now to a certain extent um I don't know maybe I will feel differently one day. (Stephanie, 1104-1107)

The difficulty in thinking about the future is clear in the above extract. Stephanie's use of "I don't know" again here underscores a strong sense of uncertainty about the future. She relates that this is ingrained while also leaving open the possibility that she may feel differently. Hence, wanting to feel differently about the future amidst uncertainty was seen as a core aspect of disenchantment. Participants' sense of meaning seemed contingent on Armageddon happening as a JW. Now finding themselves challenging the Armageddon belief, participants struggled with feeling as though their lives had significance. Beth relates the following:

> The meaning in life was for me a belief that Armageddon was coming and there was going to be a new system. So finding me and if I must be honest, sometimes I struggle with that, sometimes I think it's just ridiculous except I have a sort of basic fundamental belief that this is, this is not it at the end, but that could be um just thinking 'I can' and I think, 'this can't be it', and I don't know what […] (Beth, 905-914)

Beth above describes drawing meaning through her belief in a "new system" in paradise. She then uses the phrase, "finding me" which was understood that "me" may have been lost in some sense once paradise was questioned. Further, her use of the phrase, "if I must be honest"

highlights a tension with being honest or authentic about the nature of her relationship to this future. Her view of this tension or hope about paradise is also perceived as ridiculous; this was interpreted as a difficulty in accepting her own will or longing for paradise to come true. Finally, the conflicting nature of disenchantment and strength of will to overcome this difficulty could be gleaned through the phrases, "I can", and "This can't be it".

Salient in understanding how participants negotiated this is understanding that as a JW they felt that they will be reunited with their dead loved ones in paradise. They also believed that there will be no sickness, old age, or death in addition to freedom from fear, violence and crime (WBTS, 2008b). In response to such beliefs, and the uncertainty which leaving disposed them to, one participant related needing to re-grieve her deceased parent:

> Um, the fact that everything that I thought was right, the way I live my life, everything I did was around Jehovah's Witness, Jehovah's Witnesses and our values and everything else. And that I, I don't, I don't believe that Armageddon is coming anymore. I don't believe in the paradise. I don't believe I'm going to see my dad again in the paradise. That is devastating. So again, like you almost have to grieve again because you, you don't know what's going to happen in the future. (Hanna, 272-282)

Hanna moved from a state of being certain about seeing her father again in paradise to re-grieving over his death. This seemed to make her former grief seem only partial, needing to mourn again for now not being able to re-connect with him in the future. The degree of this damage was described as a "devastation" and could be likened to a kind of present-day disaster which is happening now. Although Hanna insists on one hand that she does not believe in the paradise, her use of "almost" indicates that her grief may also only be partial, as that she may still be uncertain about her future (i.e., "you don't know what's going to happen in the future"). Notwithstanding this, participants' sense of uncertainty and doubt about if paradise was true was enough to warrant renegotiating a sense of connection to their current life, in Hanna's case this was re-mourning her father's death. Hanna also went to explain how her JW beliefs influence her current perception of death and getting older:

> And I think as well sometimes, you know, I was very, because we're taught not to worry about anything. You're not to worry about the future, not to worry about what's happening

in the world, because Jehovah is going to step in and do something about it. You then have to start worrying, because you've never worried about it before. I had to then think, 'Well, what am I going to do in the future as they get older?' I've never had to worry about getting older because I didn't think that the new system is coming. So it's been a whole [pause] like rolling stone and things that have, I've had to take into consideration, which I never did before because of the new system was coming. (Hanna, 284-298)

Hanna begins by explaining her belief not to worry about the future as all her needs of health, food and work will be provided by Jehovah in paradise (WBTS, 2008b). Her sudden and increased anxiety immediately grips the reader through the phrase, "You then have to start worrying". The extract above also highlights that the change of such a core belief had immediate and severe consequences for Hanna. The need for Hanna to "take into consideration" her own feelings, thoughts and decisions relating to her mortality seemed no easy task. Indeed, the inertia and effort required to shift these entrenched beliefs could be likened to a "rolling stone", and the knowledge that with this effort they would be able to construct a new life for themselves.

Summary

In summary, leaving the JWs was seen as a difficult and destabilising experience which required participants to negotiate key aspects of living. Leaving offered participants the chance in which they can live their own truth with their own moral principles and greater authenticity. Although it offered participants these opportunities, it exposed participants to difficult new "truths" about the world while needing to find new forms of meaning and purpose in the absence of the religion. These activities were approached with both curiosity and threat and was paralleled in how they saw others. Finding themselves as aliens in a foreign land, together with the deep scar of rejection by their loved ones meant participants were apprehensive about forging interpersonal relationships. Lost connections were equally seen in relation to Jehovah, their former loving creator, who was seen as abandoning them and carding them for death at Armageddon. Still, participants found semblance in relating with former members which eased the blow of leaving and provided a space in which they could be understood.

Reflexivity

This section was abridged from the original submission in order to honour the anonymity and sensitivity of those involved in this research.

Reflexivity requires an awareness of the researcher's contribution to the construction of meanings throughout the research process. According to Mason (1996), "the researcher should constantly take stock of their actions and their role in the research process, and subject these to the same critical scrutiny as the rest of their data" (p. 6). This is further accentuated by the hermeneutic stance of IPA which regards the position that one can remain outside of the subject of their research as an impossibility. In attempting to shed light on my own position, I employed Willig's (2013) definition of reflexivity which differentiates between reflexivity which is *personal* and *epistemological*. These will each be considered separately.

Personal reflexivity

Personal reflexivity involves engaging with the ways in which our own beliefs, values and wider aims in life have shaped the research (Willig, 2013). Husserl (1954) believed that one's personal beliefs and assumptions should be identified and suspended, through the rule of *epoché* or "bracketing" in order to reach the essence of a given phenomenon. I view this stance as arduously challenging in investigating any given phenomenon, far less for one in which I have an intimate history. Hence, rather than attempting to ward off or create a barrier between my own position and that of the participant, I chose to place emphasis on *how* my values and beliefs shaped the collection and interpretation of the data (Finlay, 2014).

Holding my position lightly throughout interviews and analysis I felt allowed me an opportunity to be fully aware of participants' experiences. With this, I felt it was worth a closer look at my motivation for wanting to do this research, making sure that I was not merely performing "me-search" but instead deeply engaging in "research". Merleau-Ponty (1962) highlighted cultivating curiosity as a phenomenologist may indeed be challenging as it often unsettles the habitual patterns of one's thinking. Therefore, reworking parts of my own experience were important to

recognise, it helped engender clarity about "what was mine" (the researcher) and "what was theirs" (the participants). It also reminded me of many different aspects of how their leaving experience was so different to mine. Overall, I felt that this kind of engagement allowed the uniqueness of each participant experiences to shine through while complementing this with my own knowledge about the context of the religion's beliefs and practices.

Although I felt that the intimate knowledge I was exposed to as a JW offered me a unique perspective, I also felt that there was much work to be done in terms of managing this contextual knowledge. This was particularly the case when it came to the various symbols and meanings associated with the JWs which was a challenge throughout the analysis and when discussing the findings. At these junctures, I found it very useful to draw on the concept of *imaginative variation* which Giorgi (2009) suggests as a method in which researchers may actively utilise their past experience in order to engage with the data of participants. This involved seeking possible meanings by utilising the free play of the researcher. This also formed part of the hermeneutic process which seemed particularly fruitful during times when participants would reference metaphors which I felt was related to the JWs. This process can be illustrated by engaging with this extract:

> The mum sat down and said, 'We were just going to watch this program, do you watch TV as a Jehovah's Witness?', and so I was kind of like yeah I haven't got two heads and a tail or anything like that, but is just kind of that sense of not fitting in, sense of being weird kind of was very alive really, and not having anybody I felt like I could confide in. (Kate, 186-194)

In the above extract, what came to my mind was an image I was consistently faced with as a JW, that of a wild beast possessing seven heads and a tail being ridden by a harlot (see WBTS, 1988). With this mental image, I asked myself curiously if Kate was experiencing herself as a kind of dangerous monster, harlot, or even as Satan the Devil, that is, as something evil; these questions formed part of my process of imaginative variation. With this, Moustakas (1998) highlights that this process may further involve seeking meanings through a change of reference, or approaching the phenomenon from different or divergent perspectives, roles or functions. For example, how did Kate imagine how her partner's mother saw her? How did her perception (of her mother's reaction) relate to her own sense that she could not confide in anyone? Did she perceive her

mother's reaction as leaving her? If she was in front of something with two heads and a tail, what would that be like for her?

I remained curious as to these many meanings; how I kept making sense of them was through a key question I pondered on: what was it about this image, at this time, that made it appear to my mind when reading Kate's narrative? This helped me sift through what our lenses or interpretations had in common as it were. I realised that it was twofold – it was the sense of dangerousness involved but also that it was something foreign, so foreign that it appeared as totally out of this world, almost mythical. I also possessed the knowledge of what this image mainly symbolised in my own mind from my background – that is, false religion (the harlot) and those alienated from God. Hence, I asked myself if this too could this be what Kate was experiencing, a kind of alienation from God? Although I was curious about this, this aspect did not seem to be grounded in Kate's words. Hence, only the sense of alienation and dangerousness which I interpreted formed part of emergent codes. This process helped me manage the tension between my past experience (and held knowledge) of being socialised as a JW with my present experience of Kate and her "data". As a whole, I felt that the process of bracketing and imaginative variation, while continually checking the "groundedness" of my interpretations allowed me both to manage and utilise my own "data" in honouring the life-world of the eight participants.

Epistemological reflexivity

In addition to managing my own tensions, I was also required to engage with how the design, methodology and methods of the research shaped the data and findings – what Willig (2013) refers to as epistemological reflexivity. This kind of reflexivity also explores alternatives to these choices; for example, if different research questions or designs were utilised, to what extent would these produce a different understanding of the phenomenon? (Willig, 2013). Such questions should rightfully engage with our deepest assumptions about how we conceptualise knowledge and its priority with regard to research. As a CoP researcher, this challenged me to admit that my inquiry, which is aimed at progressing the discipline and the knowledge it creates, is not value-free. Understanding how the methods and choices shaped this knowledge was even

more critical to be transparent of as I have chosen a methodology which emphasises the co-construction of meaning.

Several epistemological insights were gleaned by thinking about the application of the methods and their potentials. This led me to revise certain methods and making them fall more closely in harmony with my philosophical assumptions. An example which evidences many of these challenges can be seen in how I developed the interview protocol, where I initially decided to pose the following question to participants, "Could you tell me why you wanted to take part in this study?" Introducing the interview through such a question I thought may have revealed the motives of participants in volunteering for this study. Upon closer examination though, this question and its approach revealed several epistemological and methodological problems.

Firstly, my wanting to know the *bias* they bring to the study, implicitly defines that I may be outside of these biases, and further, that an underlying objective reality exists. Secondly, asking *why* favours an analysis of aetiology and omits the experiential quality of leaving, which my study chooses to focus on. In constructing my language through these means, the phenomenological essence of their experience remains in the background, unilluminated. Finally, and perhaps the greatest threat I thought, is that my approach here may have led to the participant feeling as though they were required to justify their position, even defensively, in relation to volunteering for the study. "Is this suspicion conductive to IPA which validates the participant's experience of being in the world?" I asked. Further, am I prioritising my knowledge over theirs, and placing myself in a privileged or "right" position as a researcher in relation to them? These questions helped reveal that the form of questioning I was employing actually *challenged* their experience of leaving, even of being and reality. In order to rectify this and bring their embodied experience closer to the fore, asking broadly about their experience of leaving was put as the central and opening question.

Shifting my attitude and focus in this way could also be seen during the analysis and writing up phase of this project. In this activity, I realised I was trying to be "very certain" about the knowledge produced by this thesis. I did this by constantly shifting around clusters of themes over and over again, and really struggling to come up with a final set of themes. Indeed, the

whole process seemed like it was a never-ending process in which I felt overwhelmed and confused. With the help of my supervisor, I soon realised that my need for certainty and my drive to construct almost objective themes was more akin to a nomothetic, rather than idiographic approach. This brought the realisation that it was more important to catalogue how I chose certain themes over others, how I combined themes, and what was potentially being lost in the process. This, in turn, moulded the findings of the research; I felt it not only contributed to greater rigour but also served to honour the personal and unique qualities of the eight participants. With this, I revised and reconsidered how I framed my whole approach to the inquiry, reworking various aspects of my own position and the language which I used to produce the research findings.

Over the entire project, I also found myself reflecting on aspects of previous studies, and how the JWs as a group were characterised. Many individual commentaries exist on the JWs and almost all of them tend to depict the religion as harmful, and the various policies (such as shunning) as damaging. In turn, those who leave the religion are often labelled as "victims". Implicitly, I asked myself if this meant that the religion or its followers were seen (and portrayed) as victimisers, persecutors or attackers by scholars? How would JWs who read such material respond? Pondering on these implicit assumptions made me question what it would be like for an active JW to read my report.

For these reasons, I found it necessary to clarify at certain points that this thesis seeks to illuminate what it is like for those who leave, rather than as a statement against the group or its beliefs. Furthermore, an empathic approach was taken towards the religion and its adherents; therefore, the language which was used throughout this thesis reflected this position. In remaining sensitive to JW readers in particular, I additionally chose to primarily reference literature provided by the WBTS when referring to the beliefs of the JWs. This I felt would contribute to the credibility and trustworthiness of the study. Moreover, the doctrines of the religion also change over time with new interpretations (see WBTS, 2011); therefore, JWs who read this report would be able to source from where and when claims of knowledge were made so to as to avoid any confusion.

Being mindful of how I went about investigating the phenomenon also involved thinking about the impact of the research professionally within the field of CoP (Kasket & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011). In interviewing former JWs through an insider's perspective, together with my training, I felt I was in a unique position to provide some insights about working therapeutically with those who leave high-demand groups. Although I was admittedly hesitant to do this at first, I felt that clinicians who read the analysis and discussion may be unsure about how this knowledge may aid them in working with ex-members of high-demand groups. Reflecting more on this, I felt it was important to clarify and provide more specific guidance on how clinicians may utilise some of the findings of this study. This was in harmony with the function of phenomenological knowledge, which is able to inform, complement, and provide knowledge to existing counselling practice (Wertz, 2015).

Discussion

Overview

This piece of research sought to answer the question: how do former JWs experience leaving the religion? The analysis, in line with the ethos of phenomenology, investigated and provided an interpretive account of the data which focused on subjective lived experience. With this in mind, it may also be important to note that the analysis and what follows does not seek to investigate Jehovah's Witnesses nor their beliefs or practices. Although these areas formed parts of participants' accounts, this is not the primary focus. Instead, *how* these beliefs were interpreted, and what it meant to them and their experience of leaving were relevant to answering the research question. Although there exists a debate on if such accounts can be trusted or are truthful, this piece of research does not speculate on matters of "accuracy" of participants' depictions of reality. This is because the primary focus is on the *meaning* of leaving the JWs which is seen as a situated interpretation (Heidegger, 1962).

In order to safely honour the experiences of former JWs in this study, any engagement with the extant literature was "bracketed" to make sure that the findings arose from the "ground up". The findings of the analysis will now be discussed in the context of the wider literature on high-demand movements, giving special attention to studies which recruited former JWs. Where this information was scarce, or the findings were so nuanced, other relevant areas of psychology and sociology were used to supplement the interpretations made. It is important to note that the findings are also discussed primarily through psychological, rather than sociological lens since this aspect has been lacking from the literature. Following this, I will discuss the implications of this study for counselling psychologists and other mental health professionals. Finally, I will conclude by providing provide a critique of the paper and offer some avenues for future research.

Discussion of master themes

Chancing one's own truth

Chancing one's own truth involved a desire to leave "the truth" which was conceptualised as the only correct and right way to be in this world. The encounter of outsiders to this truth, coupled with exposure to various lifestyles, choices, and experiences appeared to influence or even fuel the desire to leave. This finding is supported by many sociological studies which highlight that the roots of disaffiliation lie in the allure, freedom, and attraction of pleasures of this-worldly lifestyle (Davidman & Greil, 2007, Hookway & Habibis, 2015; Shaffir, 1997). These outside or other-worldly resources afforded participants an escape and freedom from the lifestyle proscriptions imposed on them as JWs. Associating with those outside the religion also reinforced a budding sense that having fun is actually possible outside the religion. This developing potential for the majority of participants began while they were still in the religion and seemed to increase as leaving the religion loomed. An interesting question then is if participants required these resources or bonding experiences in order to leave the religion?

Many scholars have found this to be true, that is, that disaffiliation commonly occurs when alternate social networks or identities become available and are utilised (Bromley, 1991; Coates, 2013; Ebaugh, 1988). Coates (2013), who studied former members of NRMs found that such alternate identities can ease the exit process as individuals anchor their sense of self in an separate "other". However, unlike the participants of Coates (2013), this study's participants were able to leave even in the absence of such identities. Nevertheless, participants used the interaction with others to experiment with the world outside their religion, feel connected, and this, in turn, engendered a curiosity and willingness to explore experiences outside the religion. These findings harmonise with Bromley's (1991) argument that the act of creating links with outsiders – family, friends and employers is an indicator of distancing from the religion and bridges a transition to the outside world. Further, most participants began to engage with outsiders while still attending congregational meetings as a JW – actions which often require constant management (Ebaugh, 1988). This milieu of engaging covertly with non-JWs while

appearing as good-standing JWs may have allowed participants to access secular pleasures and relationships while being secured by the moral doctrines and communities in which they existed.

The desire to leave the religion was seen alongside retrospective accounts of deprivation as an active member. Similar to many studies of disaffiliation, religiously based warnings or proscriptions were slowly experienced as more and more limiting. In light of this, many studies of former members of JWs or NRMs constructed the desire to leave or exit as a "way out" or "path to freedom" (Hinderaker & O'Conner, 2015; Holden, 2002a; Hookway & Habibis, 2015). For the participants in this study, encountering the secular world seemed to contribute to an awareness of being deprived historically as a JW. This was seen during times when participants perceived others as able to freely take part in pleasurable activities such as celebrating birthdays, having sex outside marriage, or furthering their passions through tertiary education or advancing their careers. Considering this, it could be argued that the costs of membership (and thus, disaffiliation) is significantly higher for those who are born into the religion than for those who convert, as the former do not possess the *lived experience* of early socialisation. Hence, strong experiences of deprivation could be unique to born-in members, as they harboured a deprivation or "missing out" relative to their peers – these appeared to contribute to their seeds of discontent and resentment towards the religion post-leaving.

Moreover, participants in this study went further to recapture experiences which they perceived as being taken from them. Hence, I extend the above line of reasoning by Hookway and Habibis (2005) and Holden (2002a) that participants *merely* wanted to gain freedom from their JW lifestyle, but that they also aimed to "make up for" or counterbalance experiences which they were robbed of as JWs. In other words, their deprivation or a lack of experiencing as a Jehovah's Witness was constructed as damaging, so damaging that participants were "going further than people who had just been brought up in an ordinary environment" (Kate, 297-299) in order to compensate for what was missing. How can we further understand the psychological processes behind deprivation and compensation for former members?

The process of deprivation and compensation was primarily captured through the metaphor and act of rebelling. The word "rebellion" comes from the Latin words *rebellis,* meaning "to rebel,

revolt" and *bellare*, meaning "to wage war". I posit that this kind of response can be likened to a form of *psychological reactance*. The academic literature defines reactance an "an unpleasant motivational arousal that emerges when people experience a threat to or loss of their free behaviors." (Steindl, Jonas, Sittenthaler, Traut-Mauttausch, & Greenberg, 2015, p. 205). This state aims to restore one's freedom through cognitive and behavioural efforts, accompanied by the experience of emotion. Reactant individuals, unlike those who are helpless, feel able to change an unpleasant situation, that is, the threat to their freedom. Brehm and Brehm (1981) also added that individual differences in *reaction proneness* exist which represents the propensity to experience reactance across a variety of situations. Although claims cannot be made of the traits of participants in this study, indeed participants were very motivated to exercise the freedom threat, for example, in seeking out prohibited or discouraged activities by the religion or by going back to university. But how might psychologists understand the various components of reactance and how does this relate to the experience of leaving?

Although reactance is a relatively new concept, Dillard and Shen (2005) posit that it may either represent a form of "counterarguing" (e.g., a rejecting attitude toward authority) and/or be conceptualised as negative affect in the form of anger. Their counterarguing hypothesis suggests that individuals respond to messages that threaten their freedom with unfavourable cognitions about the message (i.e., counterarguments). The affect hypothesis suggests that it may instead be related to anger, harmonising with descriptions of reactance as a form of hostility and aggression (Berkowitz, 1973; Brehm & Brehm, 1981). Rains (2013) attempted to delineate the interaction between these hypotheses through the meta-analysis of 20 studies. He found that an intertwined model in which reactance is conceptualised as a latent factor, with anger and counterarguing serving as indicators, was the most adequately supported model.

Although more studies are needed to replicate these recent findings, they demonstrate that reactance may involve a complex interplay of counterarguing accompanied by the experience of anger. I posit that these features were seen as part of the process of rebellion from the JWs. The broad labelling of the religion by participants – as a "dangerous cult" which robbed them – could be seen as demonstrating both counterarguing and anger (or hostility). Harmonising with this was my own experience of participants in interviews as often seeking reassurance or attempting

to find concordance with me on arguments criticising the Watch Tower Society. Their forceful language also evidenced this by employing the terms "should", "must", and "need" – terms which have been linked with heightened reactance (Steindl et al., 2015). Anger is also not the only emotion related to reactance, but also self-determination, where the individual may feel empowered to transform their experience (Van Petegem, Soenens, Vansteenkiste, & Beyers, 2015). The enhanced determination of former members may relate why this study's participants were propelled to enter tertiary education, advance their careers, or explore areas which they were not able to as JWs.

Theories of reactance and self-determination also predict that reactance may have an emotional cost (as manifested in internalizing problems) as it may alienate people from their personal values and preferences (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Van Petegem et al., 2015). When this study's participants were confronted with moral decisions, they exhibited ambivalence in trying to balance new experiences with the religious guidance which they were familiar with. These findings harmonised with narratives of former members of high-demand groups which revealed various dissonances and the strain on one's identity post-leaving (Berger, 2015; Davidman & Greil, 2007; Hookway & Habibis, 2015; Lalich & McLaren, 2010). In this study, and in response, participants were torn as they searched for a new moral compass, attempting to make sense of their identity and the world around them. This process, characterised by uncertainty and loss, may have represented the emotional cost of leaving while negotiating the threat to their freedom. Admittingly, the participants in this study were seen as in the midst of this process, not resolving it completely as conflicts still existed with the former JW beliefs which they held dear. In this way, and similar to the former JWs in Hookway and Habibis' (2015) study, the eight participants "were able to cut themselves free from the constraints to lifestyle freedom but not from the interdictions of their past moral and belief frameworks." (p. 10).

An outcast in a foreign world

Participants experiences of being an outcast, embodying alienation and rejection, were seen in all accounts of leaving the JWs. Alienation as a psychological concept is only briefly touched upon within studies on disaffiliation, most of these understanding the concept through a sociological

lens (Berger, 2015; Davidman & Greil, 2007; Lalich & McLaren, 2010). Both Berger (2015) and Davidman and Greil (2007) described former members of the Haredi Jews as "aliens" who lacked social scripts and a language with which to guide their exit process. Studies recruiting former JWs also described leaving as an isolating and traumatic process in which individuals lack secular social support (Holden, 2002a; Hookway & Habibis, 2015; Lalich & McLaren, 2010). Undoubtedly, the participants in our study also felt that they lacked support and struggled in not knowing what to do in social situations; however, unlike the participants of Berger (2015) and Davidman and Greil (2007), they possessed a language by which they could readily communicate with others.

Of these studies, Lalich and McLaren (2010)'s study of former JWs who identified as homosexual may be apt for comparison purposes in order to understand alienation. The authors used the framework of Goffman (1963) to highlight that former JWs used alienation as a solution to an internalised form of stigma related to their homosexuality. Moreover, this alienation process was found to facilitate several self-destructive behaviours in an attempt to terminate their JW identity, contributing to depression and suicidal ideation. Although Lalich and McLaren (2010) exclusively focused on homosexuality, their study highlights that the process of alienation may relate to depression, damage to the self, and further that this process relates to the individual's ability to survive. The loneliness, depression and helplessness which often accompanies alienation (Williams & Nida, 2011) were also present in the experiences of participants in this study. Equally, what seemed pertinent to this study's findings was that former JWs did not feel as though they could truly be *understood* by others, feeling threatened in their presence as an outsider. Since studies regarding alienation are scarce within the psychological literature, sociological studies will be used at this juncture to understand this experience further.

Within the sociological literature, alienation as a concept was first popularised by Marx and Durkheim who discussed it as a state produced by the ravages of modernisation which separate the individual from the products of their labour, their community, and ultimately, themselves (Johnson, 1973). Seeman (1959) used the contributions of Marx and Durkheim to recognize and construct five prominent features of alienation: normlessness, powerlessness, meaninglessness,

isolation and self-estrangement.[4] Each of these features will be considered in turn, aiming to break down the psychological processes which may underlie this particular phenomenon related to leaving.

Normlessness exists when the social norms which govern individual conduct are no longer effective as rules to regulate behaviour (Seeman, 1959). This could be applied to those who are ostracised from high-demand groups such as JWs as they often provide scripts in which members can use to conduct themselves according to specific community standards. Given the lack of secular support structures for leavers of such groups, many face difficulties navigating the non-religious culture without a sufficient social script. Applying this to this study, former members found that their JW beliefs were no longer effective when confronted with new social encounters (i.e., birthdays etc.). As participants could not identify with "worldly" people, especially initially, they lacked reference points which may have contributed to alienation. Therefore, leaving may have meant losing a sense of being "normal" or not being able to appropriately fit into a larger community with norms they could identify with. This loss of social identity may explain the need to bridge this gap via a newly constructed (or augmented) social identity made up of norms and rules. Drawing on the experiences of ex-JWs may have also supported this identity-bridging process (Lalich & McLaren, 2010), validating their beliefs about how a normal or ex-JW can function in the world.

Seeman (1959) characterised meaninglessness as "a low expectancy that satisfactory predictions about the future outcomes of behaviour can be made." (p. 786) while powerlessness refers to the sensed ability to *control* outcomes, rather than to predict them. Leaving the JWs was seen to be contributing to both of these dimensions, as participants grappled with being rejected and excommunicated by their families, friends and congregation members. Participants questioned their own meaning and worth, while this also impacted their future ability to trust others in relationships. This echoed the research conducted by Buxant and Saroglou (2008) which highlighted that disaffiliates from NRMs often impact relationship confidence after leaving the

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[4] Seeman later added a sixth element (cultural estrangement), although this element does not feature prominently in later discussions of his work.

movement. Within this study, struggles in relating to others or being shunned appeared as one of the most painful aspects of leaving the JWs, if not the most. Within the psychological literature, being shunned or isolated is seen to diminish one's sense of self and is conceptualised as an act of relational aggression (Lewin, 2000; Tanaka, 2001). Further, the process of separation is violent and damaging to both the victim of shunning on whom it is inflicted, and those who inflict it.

For counselling psychologists, the meaninglessness and powerlessness which participants experienced (as part of shunning), deserves important attention as the former JWs in this study were separated and cut off from their early attachment figures. These attachment figures are normally one's parents, but may also refer to grandparents, loved ones (Bowlby, 1960), or even congregation members in whom children feel they can trust growing up in the religion. Robertson (1970) who examined children in hospitals, built upon the work of Bowlby and found that children progress through three stages in being separated from their caregivers – protest, despair, and denial[5]. In the protest phase, the child is visibly distressed and often cries angrily until reunited with the mother. If reunited with the mother at this stage, they will "usually be quite difficult for a time as though punishing the mother for going away" (Skynner & Cleese, 1993, p. 110-111). If the distress goes on for longer, the child then begins to withdraw and starts to lose interest in everything – this is the despair phase. In the detachment phase, the child now seems more interested in their surroundings rather than their own mother and shows behaviours associated with not caring when she visits. Robertson (1970) found that following this stage, the child appears to maintain distance in their relationships with others, being shallower and more untrusting.

Although early attachment dynamics were not measured within this study, I posit that the process of excommunication and separation may have a similar impact in terms of the *features* of distress for the adults in this study. Features of protest could be seen through the judgement and rejecting stance which former members attributed to their close relatives, God and the religion itself.

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[5] Bowlby (1960) called the denial phase "detachment", although the phases by all accounts are qualitatively similar (see Alsop-Shields & Mohay, 2001).

Despair was seen through feelings of withdrawal, unwantedness and abandonment, while detachment could be seen from the fear and wariness with which they approached relationships in the outside world. These features may have impaired their status as worthy or significant, as feelings which were attributed to their caregivers may have been disavowed (Lewin, 2000). The arduous reconciliation process of the former JWs in this study also reminds us of the protest and yearning of the child who is trying to get their caregiver to return. This may have related to the powerlessness of participants in not being able to predict that others would support them or rather, not reject them in the future. In this way, shunning may have disposed participants to a loss of "faith in humanity" (Tanaka, 2001, p. 471), significantly impairing the forging of close relationships following leaving.

The struggle to identify with the dominant values of society or rather, with what are perceived to be the dominant values of society, Seeman (1959) refers to as *isolation*. Hookway and Habibis (2015) commented that the experience of not taking part in politics, birthdays, and Christmas while believing in shunning and door-to-door evangelising may brew experiences of difference and isolation from those who are not JWs. The confines of the JW community, separated from close relationships with outsiders may thus be the only culture which the leaver knows. Moreover, the religion often reiterates that members should remain "no part of the world" and that the world's values are the pursuit of pleasure, material things and following the desires of one's heart (WBTS, 1992). When members leave the religion, such values do not immediately or magically change. This means that leavers do not immediately possess the resources with which to understand the meanings and traditions of the world which they now found themselves in.

The cultural contrast that participants now found themselves perceiving, between them and "The World", seemed to contribute to the sense of being an alien whose home or connectedness-to-the-world existed somewhere else. In response, and similar to what Dyason (2015) noted, participants had to learn to successfully act their new role in secular society as they actively managed the information that acquaintances knew about them and their pasts. Understandably then, participants referred to ex-JWs whom they met as coming from the "same culture" and speaking the same language as them. Connecting to others from the same cultural background may have also allowed them access to a community in which values can be *mutually* shared,

explored and honoured as part of their religious heritage. Papadopoulos (1999) refers to this kind of resource as a "storied community" which provides a "coherent narrative which are essential ingredients of resilience and offers a transitional space which can act as a secure base" (p. 330). Locating themselves in this collective set of narratives may have both anchored participants while providing a transitional space to access different meanings about the world and themselves. This transitional space could thus be likened to a habitat in which former members can both be themselves and access the resources required for them to flourish.

Perhaps the most elusive of all these features, and one which may lie at the heart of the leaving experience is self-estrangement, with what Seeman (1959) describes as the psychological state of negating one's own interests – in looking for activities which are extrinsically satisfying, rather than intrinsically satisfying. It was recognised earlier that participants sought to gain experiences which were truly wanted, but could their escape from the religion paradoxically dispose them to a form of self-estrangement? In other words, what were participants *estranged from* within their self, if anything at all, through their contact with the secular world? Considering an example from one participant, Kate, may help us shed light on how and what participants were experiencing related to this kind of self-alienation:

> Um and then that kind of began some difficult years of kind of who am I, what am I, what am I doing? I tried to to do normal things for Carrie like birthday parties and things like that but it was just like [pause] I don't agree with these birthday parties [pause] I don't [pause] I don't get it, it's pagan, but my beliefs [pause] (Kate, 417-424)

Kate seems to be clearly held back by her former beliefs, exemplifying a conflict which participants experienced as an internal tug-of-war. Although her willingness to proceed can be seen through her "trying", she was held back by her JW beliefs which she appears to experience some difficulty *leaving*. This angst and uncertainty about doing, also relates to how she experiences her sense of self (i.e., who am I? what am I?). This tug-of-war between aspects of participants' sense of self could be seen as representing self-estrangement; but is it possible to further understand what may mediate or relate to this process?

Johnson (1973) notes that at the level of its essence, alienation signifies a separation or distance between entities. Still, he goes onto comment that this does not capture its full meaning, what is equally central to understanding this concept is the anguish accompanying the separation and the relief which is accommodated through the interposition of distance. With this in mind, leaving may have on one hand been a relief for participants, as they could freely attend formerly warned-off activities (such as birthday parties) without the encumbrance of their former beliefs (and the judgement that comes with it). At the same time, partaking in these new experiences may have created anguish for participants, as they were no longer secured and comforted by the knowledge which their former JW identity provided (i.e., the knowledge of right and wrong). Further, knowing what is right and wrong also secures the certainty and position of former JWs in that they are "being right" and not "wrong" about their view of the religion and engaging intimately with the world.

Hence, the freedom which participants sought to achieve, could be interpreted as only partial freedom, as it was also a freedom from what they had known, leading to insecurity and decision-making anxiety. This underscores my own experience of the individuals I interviewed; some seemed to actively expound certain standards of the religion, while at the same time being unable to divorce themselves from the psychological impact of the knowledge it provided. This echoes Holden's (2002b) commentary on JWs who leave, stating that "once the process of breaking away has begun, defectors often find themselves torn between the need to develop a new identity on the one hand, and the fear of relinquishing the doctrines they have held so dear on the other." (p. 7). Further, this study posits that the fear of relinquishing their former beliefs is related to the *fear of losing the knowledge of right and wrong* – knowledge which afforded participants a certainty about "knowing" and "being", a knowledge which may have contributed to their own self-estrangement.

Leaving the JWs may also not have even been the catalyst for this kind of self-estrangement. Another hypothesis may be that this inner tension may have existed in their former lives as JWs; the experience of leaving may have simply ignited this or made them more acutely aware of it. Dyason (2015), in studying disaffiliation from the Exclusive Brethren, found that in their former lives former members felt different to people outside the group and that when they were younger

they had not realized the significance of this – only with age came the realisation that they were "weird" or "unusual". These retrospective insights highlight that being a foreigner, or even outcast, may not be unique to those who leave but may be an experience which participants are unaware of while in the religion. Further, JW values such as self-sacrifice, where members actively forgo or suppress their own motives and desires (WBTS, 2014), are actively encouraged by the religion and inculcated in those who are born-in into it. Weishaupt and Stensland (1997) suggested that self-sacrifice is a characteristic of high-control groups such as the JWs where members give up their own interests in favour of group activities. If this hypothesis is true, participants may have been estranged from their own voice from an early age, a voice which may have comprised of their own wants, values, and stances on what constituted right and wrong. Notwithstanding this speculation, the aforementioned analysis highlight that leaving is a complex and challenging experience which brings the imperative to negotiate one's position in the world or separation from it.

Held captive to a death sentence

The theme of being held captive to a death sentence encompassed the metaphor of being wrong and being deserving of punishment culminating in death. This death was seen as an embodied fear of the future, of dying at Armageddon, and a sense of anxiety about when this would happen. Apocalyptic fears appeared to be most intense when it was triggered by events deemed as "signs of the times", signs that Armageddon was approaching or was imminent. Such fears were paralleled in studies which recruited former JWs who disaffiliated from the religion (Hookway & Habibis, 2015; Lalich & McLaren, 2010; Weishaupt & Stensland, 1997). Weishaupt and Stensland (1997) found that the most common fears reported by former members were fears of death and destruction of the world by God at Armageddon; fear of abandonment was also common. Similar to the born-in members of Lalich and McLaren's (2010) study, participants were afraid of destruction at the hands of Jehovah and that this could happen at any time. Even for those who left the religion decades ago, the dread and sudden anticipation that Armageddon was looming were still alive in them. These findings highlighted that although former JWs may have physically left the religion, the ingrained nature of the Armageddon fear continued to haunt their lives.

Although the aforementioned studies highlighted that such fears are a feature of leaving the JWs, there seemed to be a dearth of researching explaining the phenomenon. Despite this, various studies considered the relationship between religiosity and death anxiety; this was used to supplement this gap in the literature. Powell and Thorson (1991), who studied these concepts found that participants with high intrinsic religious motivation demonstrated much lower scores of death anxiety than their counterparts. Harding, Flannelly, Weaver and Costa (2005) who surveyed members of the Episcopal Church found that religiosity was negatively related to death anxiety and positively related to death acceptance. The findings of these studies suggest that those who exhibit less religiosity (disaffiliates) may experience greater death anxiety and lower acceptance of death. Moreover, beliefs in God and a future afterlife were negatively correlated with death anxiety in Harding et al. (2005)'s study; this suggests that those who lose their belief in God or an afterlife may experience greater anxiety. Indeed, this was the case of almost all participants in this study, who challenged the idea of a loving creator and a future Paradise on earth.

Despite these contributions, participants in this study did not merely experience existential death anxiety, that is, that life was coming to its natural conclusion. Rather, they held the belief that life was going to end through a damaging and destructive apocalypse at the hand of Jehovah[6], its executor. These depictions included mental phenomena associated with destruction and annihilation. Thus, the experience is closer to a fear of *being killed* or *punished,* rather than a fear that life was simply coming to an end. Participants also felt that they were somehow deserving of this kind of death. This could be understood through the metaphor of a criminal who has committed acts of wrongdoing and is going to pay the ultimate penalty for their actions – death. With this metaphor in mind, participants endured a tormenting guilt associated with wrongdoing, this was seen as one of leaving's most enduring aspects. This harmonises with the findings of studies that recruited former JWs, reporting guilt as a distressing feature of post-Witness life

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[6] Jehovah's Witnesses believe Jesus is the executor of Armageddon although this is on the authority of Jehovah who has given it to him.

(Holden, 2002a; Hookway & Habibis, 2013; Lalich & McLaren, 2010; Nica, 2020). How can we understand this fear and the associated guilt of participants in the context of disaffiliation?

One means of understanding participants increased fears can be seen in the context of being ostracised or cut off socially. Lalich and McLaren (2010) commented that being disfellowshipped as a Jehovah's Witness is "tantamount to being dead" (p.1310). These sentiments relating to death were also echoed by Weishaupt and Stensland (1997), and indeed for most social creatures, ostracism leads to death (Gruter & Masters, 1986). The question then is if the experience of ostracism makes death more *psychologically* salient. Steele, Kidd, and Castano (2015) investigated this claim by measuring death-related thoughts of participants who were randomly assigned to either an inclusion or exclusion (rejected) condition. All participants then completed an online game of ball toss (known as the Cyberball paradigm, a game used extensively in ostracism research), followed by the completion of a word-stem puzzle which can be solved with either a death-related word or a neutral word. They found that participants who were assigned to the exclusion condition completed more puzzles with death-related words those than assigned to the inclusion condition. Although Steele and colleagues (2015) did not capture the extent to which participants actually felt excluded, their results suggest that that ostracism and social rejection may lead to enhanced accessibility of death thoughts.

If the findings of Steele et al. (2015) are sound, is there a means by which this happens? Terror management theory proposes that the feeling that one is a valuable member of a meaningful universe or social entity may temper the dread of death (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986). As the inevitability of death becomes more and more real, they will instinctively attempt to suppress it by leaning towards external support or a worldview defence in order to cope. These may evidence themselves as death-related cognitions, severe phobias, or desperate actions all of which contribute to self-esteem and the cultural worldview defence (Greenberg et al., 1986; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel, 2004). In identifying with a social entity, or religious group, individuals may also feel a sense of belonging and connection with others, feelings which may buffer against death anxiety. This feeling of belongingness may also be related to the meanings which people derive from (and ascribe to) their community and beliefs. Hence, if a member was to lose these connections, they may be experiencing a kind of "social

death" which is synonymous with a death of their role or value within their family and religious community.

Notwithstanding this, fears of being murdered (or annihilated) have equally been the subject of psychoanalytic community, who seek to understand the individual's internal psyche (see Langs, 2004). Freud (1919/1957) in his primal horde thesis describes the murder and usurping of a possessive father by his sons, who go onto to feel a burning sense of guilt, fearing retribution. Freud went onto posit that a key factor in fearing death is one's own unconscious wishes of violence, a condition which arises out of one's childhood environment. In turn, these death wishes evoke consequent guilt and condemnation by the person's moral conscience (referred to as the *super-ego*). With this backdrop, Langs (2004) states that being loved by one's conscience may be "equivalent to staying alive" (p. 33-34) while being hated by it is what causes the fear of death. Hence for Freud, the fear of death is seen as a form of unconscious self-hatred or the fear of one's unloving, persecutory conscience. Although this offers insight into what is happening intra-psychically, Freud did not focus or consider the external or environmental sources of death anxiety contributing to these conditions (Langs, 2004) and so these interpretations can only be considered speculative.

The various lenses which were used to understand the meanings behind participants' fear of death (or being killed) may provide several insights for the participants in this study and former JWs who are in the process of leaving the religion. Although a full consideration of death anxiety is not in the scope of this study, some tentative avenues could be suggested for future research. Firstly, the fear of being killed may be related to losing the contribution or protection from the religion, their own families, and Jehovah – this may have represented a social and psychological "death" for participants. Secondly, the experience of being hated, persecuted and cut-off by these parties may also represent a process of "killing" which is representative of a dynamic the leaver has with themselves, that is, that they are persecuted and hurt by their own conscience for wrongdoing they have committed (i.e., fierce guilt). Through this lens, leaving the religion could be seen as a severe form of rejection, representing a disavowal of their own identification with the religion including all its associations to family, loved ones, ideals, and a cherished future. If these interpretations are sound, leaving could be conceptualised both as a process of

identification with the rejecter or persecutor (the self that is doing the leaving) and as a victim of abandonment (the self that is being left).

Being deserving of death also meant that participants experienced themselves as "fundamentally" wrong or flawed. This could be seen through the process by which participants attributed the response of their families (to their leaving action) as their own fault. In some cases, this was evident even when their family's response elicited severe rejection, despair or abandonment. Friedson (2015), who noted this characteristic of former JWs, commented that what is implied in this kind of self-criticism is the belief that the suffering of others (or of oneself) is within one's own control. She goes onto to argue that this may contribute to feelings of guilt, shame, and self-depreciation in those who believe they have morally failed. Implicit too in this argument is the role of the individual's own conscience or position of knowing right from wrong, which mediates their identification. For example, if the person has committed some "wrongdoing", there must exist a belief that this particular action is wrong or bad – and further, that if they have committed that action that *they are* wrong or bad (not that they simply experience emotions such as fear, guilt, disappointment etc.). McBeath and Greenlees (2016) highlight that high-control groups facilitate this guilt-evoking sense of disappointment which often accompanies an apparent freedom, noting that they are one of the most insidious characteristics of such groups.

Themes related to death, guilt, and wrongdoing were also seen in the ambivalence which participants held about Jehovah, their once loving Creator. Participants used extremely powerful language in describing Jehovah as an unloving killer responsible for their current distress. We remember Hanna's sentiment that "one thing we're taught is that Jehovah was loving, so how would it be that he would think that that is acceptable to isolate somebody so much that it causes you know depression, suicide, all those things?". Indeed, participants felt that Jehovah had abandoned them, and was even punishing them for leaving. This harmonises with insights from Lalich and McLaren (2010) who also found that "inside the private worlds of gay and lesbian Witnesses exists a harsh, exacting, and all-knowing Jehovah who is angered and horrified by their very existence." (p. 1313). Davidman and Greil (2007) also found that ultra-Orthodox Jews held a fear of being punished by God following their exit.

Scholars have documented significant correspondence between images of God and images of the self. According to these studies, individuals who envision a benevolent and loving deity tend to have higher levels of self-esteem while those who experience God as remote have higher levels of shame (Benson & Spilka, 1973; Pollner, 1989). Recent extensions of attachment theory also highlight that God is often regarded as an ideal attachment who serves as a haven of safety during times of distress or discomfort, and a secure base for environmental exploration when times are not as stressful (Granqvist, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2010). As seen previously, the threat of, or separation from such an attachment figure will mean increased anxiety for an attached individual. The JWs, according to Holden (2002b), have an extremely personal relationship with God; hence, separation from him through the leaving act may have contributed to significant anxiety about how they would cope without him. Perhaps not surprisingly, attachment relationships – both secular and religious – have been linked with distress in ways that are highly consistent with the findings of this study (Bowlby, 1960; Bradshaw, Ellison, & Marcum, 2010; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Distress was evidenced through participants' overt expressions of anger, confusion, and longing, behaviours associated with anxious and avoidant attachment styles (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Although our study did not measure attachment styles, leaving the JWs may have meant the loss of a significant attachment or secure base in whom former members struggled to relate to.

Participants deep sense that Armageddon could still happen and that they were out of favour with Jehovah meant that they were also faced with death in this world one way or another. Disenchantment was a core feature of leaving and was present in studies which recruiting ex-members of high-demand groups (Davidman & Greil, 2007; Hookway & Habibis, 2015; Lalich and McLaren, 2010). Davidman and Greil (2007) commented that Haredi Jews are taught that living with restrictions are ultimately more rewarding because their sacrifice will result in the coming of Moshiach, the Messiah. In a similar way, the JWs believe that their service to Jehovah will be rewarded with life on earth in a paradise in which they will eventually be restored to perfection. The religion also teaches that the paradise hope can help its members deal with the death of close family as have the hope they will see the person again (WBTS, 2016e).

In view of these beliefs in an afterlife, it may come as no surprise that participants had to reframe their lives or go through a process of re-grieving for their dead loved ones once this belief was called into question. Therefore, losing the paradisiac hope could be seen as means by which participants negotiated their own mortality, by grieving, by looking after themselves, rather than through the belief that it is God will solve such problems. Holden (2002b) supports this view and contends that the belief in a paradise by the JWs is "a means by which they are able to combat their own uncertainty and to consign their opponents to a future holocaust." (p. 11). Although his view is stinging, he conceptualised the paradisiac hope as a form of psychological resistance which serves to counterbalance uncertainty in the future. This holds more explanatory power for the participants in this study who were disposed to greater uncertainty regarding their future. However, it is unclear if leaving contributed to these feelings, or if participants uncertainty about the future was instead a feature which contributed to their leaving the religion (or both).

Attempting to understand the essence of disaffiliation experiences

In summarising the above findings, leaving was seen as a complex process in which former members attempted to gain independence from the religion. The religion was seen as a one-stop-shop providing a coherent worldview, social support and emotional security for participants. In further synthesising the themes and thinking about the experience of the participants more holistically, I became aware of being drawn to the notion of leaving as a reaction to loss. As part of this process, three features in particular stood out and seemed to relate to one another. These were gleaned through a subjective process of intuiting, ring-fencing, and re-checking. These were: (a) powerlessness to loss; (b) reactance; and (c) estrangement. I posit that the features of powerlessness and reactance may contribute to an experience of estrangement – this I feel could be a starting point for future research. These three areas could be envisaged not only as core experiences of leaving but also as a dynamic which exists between the leaver and their attachments to the religion – their self, family, friends and their God Jehovah. Each of these aspects could also be seen across the themes of this study and each will be considered in turn.

Powerlessness to loss primarily refers to powerlessness in response to core experiences of loss, deprivation, and unworthiness which leavers struggle to come to terms with. For the participants

in this study, this involved losses associated with relationships (family, friends and Jehovah), a future paradise, and losing a moral compass or belief system. The sense of powerlessness implicitly associated with these losses was seen in participants grappling in not knowing what to do, or how to act in order to regain a sense of meaning in life over their exit. The strongest of these losses appeared as the "scar" of rejection participants experienced in relation to their closest family members. The view that participants held – that if "my own family don't love me and accept me then no one can" – was related to their being unlovable or unacceptable as a core condition of self-worth. This unacceptableness could also be seen through their wrestling with guilt, that is, that they were deserving of punishment because of being "fundamentally wrong". The powerlessness and deprivation they experienced as JWs are also important features which led to the decision not to return to the religion.
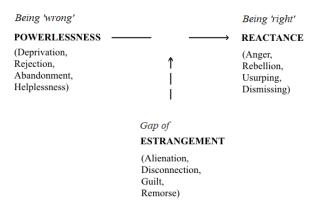
Perhaps to cope with this condition or position, participants felt they needed to risk leaving, to depend on new forms of knowledge, relationships, and security to provide hope, meaning, and direction to their lives. This area I refer to as *reactance*, as it is seen only as a reaction to losses and threats to their freedom. For example, the search for a new moral compass (or normalcy) may have validated and reassured a new belief system which participants were searching for – one which may provide a sense of power by which they can fit into and master their actions or the world around them. French and Raven (1959) refer to this as *expert power*, a base of power associated with knowledge consumption and one which relates to being unable to cope or "not knowing".

Important in this regard is not simply the fact that participants reacted to powerlessness, rejection and deprivation, but also *how* they reacted. Participants dismissed Jehovah and often reacted to rejection by their families with rejection themselves, or confusion as they struggled to justify the actions of their former loved ones. With this, participants seemed to move from being helpless and lost about the world to gaining more power through their assertiveness to challenge the religion in its various forms. Increasing their knowledge about the religion, and often labelling it a "cult" in the process, all seemed to be tied to actions associated with seeing the religion and Jehovah as wrong and implicitly regarding themselves (or their position) as "right". Still,

although the reactance which participants exhibited allowed them to disengage (or even negate) themselves from the religion which threatened their freedom, it also had emotional costs.

The sense of reacting to these costs or losses may relate to the identity position of becoming an "ex" and the negation of what one formerly was. Ebaugh (1988) concludes that "becoming an ex is a unique role experience because identity as an ex rests not on one's current role but on who one was in the past" (p. 180). The sense of empowerment which participants exhibited was felt to relate to this new role, that is, the identity which allowed them to renounce and disavow their former beliefs. This was observable through my own feelings during interviews that participants were trying to ingratiate me (or find concordance) in order to strengthen this identity or rightness as an ex-JW. J. M. Smith (2011) highlights that adopting the label of an ex, although admittedly difficult in the beginning stages of exiting, can also be an important step to developing a new self-concept and sense of self-empowerment. I would like to add to this, highlighting that experiences of great loss, anger, and rejection from their former close-knit circle may be so disempowering and hurtful, that various forms of security may be necessary for leavers to traverse the difficult emotional terrain.

At its essence, the kind of reactance needed to leave one's entire support system including one's family, friends, and community may have led participants to experience a form of alienation or even, "death" from their split-off former identity. In other words, freedom from the religion may have also meant illusory freedom, or rather *detachment,* from powerlessness, deprivation, rejection and earlier experiences which are important and meaningful as part of their life history. If these embodied experiences are alienated or forgotten, it may have disposed leavers to an experience of estrangement where they feel like alien resident – disconnected, weird, and not being able to be understood in a world which they cannot relate to.

Being 'wrong'

POWERLESSNESS ——————→ **REACTANCE**

(Deprivation, Rejection, Abandonment, Helplessness)

Being 'right'

(Anger, Rebellion, Usurping, Dismissing)

Gap of

ESTRANGEMENT

(Alienation, Disconnection, Guilt, Remorse)

Figure 2. Conceptualisation of leaving the JWs as a three-fold process.

To summarise these positions, individuals who left the JWs may have done so not just to regain a sense of freedom or to explore their curiosity, but also to escape a sense of deprivation or powerlessness as a JW. Leaving the JWs may have also meant escaping from the unworthy position of being rejected by one's closest family members and loved ones including Jehovah. Still, for mental health practitioners, it is unclear if becoming more knowledgeable and averting this sense of wrongness may be a form of coping or instead, a form of resistance. One interpretation which the author posits is that becoming "right" and leaving their past identity behind may have contributed to the estrangement gap which participants experienced in regard to themselves and being in the world. Through this lens, participants' sense of being misunderstood by others is more understandable, wanting to reconnect with those and perhaps even themselves by reaching out to former JWs who might aid them.

Implications for counselling psychology

This research provides an extensive reflection on disaffiliation experiences which will likely resonate for many people who have left or are in the process of leaving the JWs. Through this, it is my hope that that clinicians will develop a level of curiosity and compassion about those who leaving high-demand religions more broadly and the experience of leaving itself. It was also felt that more specific guidance, in harmony with the findings may be of interest to clinicians and those within the field of CoP. This was provided as various studies have highlighted areas of

mental conditioning in religious affiliates and disaffiliates but do not elucidate any means of exploring these areas (see Weishaupt & Stensland, 1997).

This guidance represents my sincerest attempt to help those who are struggling with leaving their religion and provides some areas which may warrant consideration. It also represents my own epistemological stance in prioritising the subjective experience of participants and refraining from dictating to the client what they should and should not do (Mearns, 2002).

Sensitivity to rejection and powerlessness

The sensitivity to experiences of being rejected together with the alienation which participants experienced means that these may be salient experiences which former members of high-demand groups struggle with. The act of shunning of former members by friends and family seemed particularly harmful to the participants in this study. Therefore, those who are ex-communicated may be particularly sensitive to being rejected, abandoned or ignored by others. In this vein, clinicians want to explore the various losses of the client in the wake of leaving. This may entail the loss of connection with family, friends and Jehovah. Important in this regard is appreciating the client's response to rejection, that is feelings of grief, hurt, powerlessness, and loneliness.

The clinician may also want to be sensitive to the client's experience of *doing the leaving* (e.g., reactance, anger etc.). For example, does the client feel that they caused their family's treatment of them? If so, what is this experience like for them? Such questions may facilitate an open exploration of their own felt responses to leaving. The clinician may also not want to assume that leaving or the shunning policy of JWs is solely responsible for any personal trauma, as this study illuminated that some of these features (e.g., deprivation, alienation) may have equally been present while former members were affiliated with the religion and not necessarily as a *consequence* of leaving. Coming to terms with reconciling these feelings may help the client traverse a difficult landscape from dependence on the religion and the need to maintain aspects of their JW identity.

Exploring wrongness, rightness, and uncertainty

Since the former JWs in this study were sensitive to being wrong or right, these aspects may be a fruitful avenue to explore therapeutically. This would involve an exploration of what their *response* is to being wrong or right in its different forms (i.e., physical, mental, emotional and verbal). For example, how does the person feel if they do something they perceive as wrong or right? What do they perceive will happen if they are wrong about something? Participants in this study felt as though they were fundamentally bad or evil, or that that they will be destroyed at Armageddon, but individual meanings may not be limited to these. This study highlighted that meanings also may refer to perceived reactions (and associated responses) within the context of a relationship to their loved ones or to how God sees them. Exploring such motivations, and the feelings that accompany them may help the client to recognise these reactions as authentically felt within themselves and their relationships.

The participants in this study described wanting to hide or withdraw during times when they were wrong or unsure. Clinicians will thus want to be mindful of when these kinds of reactions evidence themselves within the therapy room itself (e.g., through missed sessions, withdrawal etc.). In such circumstances, it is recommended the clinician may want to refrain from being explicit and providing directive counsel; it was felt that this may be harmful to this client group for several reasons: (a) it may reinforce the "wrong" or "bad" status of the client; (b) does not allow them to tolerate or explore their uncertainty and the various meanings associated with being wrong or right; and (c) fosters a dependency on the therapist (who is "right") which may be likened to Watch Tower guidance or congregation elders. Instead, the aforementioned exploration may loosen this dependency and may help the client to discover parts of themselves which are uncertain, helpless and may not know what to do – parts which seemed to trigger discomfort for the participants in this study.

Although how each clinician deals with this may vary, exploring such areas seem particularly relevant for those who have left strict religious upbringings. One reason for this may be because of the lack of ability of such ones to tolerate ambiguity, instead "painting everything in black and white, right and wrong, good and evil" (Hartz & Everett, 1989, p. 208). Consistent exposure to

this kind of environment may foster a strong expectation to be knowledgeable and certain in all matters. Loosening the strong need to be right in their decisions or view of others may also have a positive impact on client's ability to feel vulnerable and authentic, instead of identifying with an ideal self (Rogers, 1961; Kohut, 1971). It was felt that integrating and reconciling these kinds of feelings, that is, those associated with their own worth, may help the client feel more connected, transparent and less estranged from themselves.

Strengths, limitations, and evaluation

Since Henwood and Pidgeon (1992) laid the foundations for evaluating qualitative research, several different guidelines for assessing validity or quality have been put forth (Finlay & Evans, 2009; Elliot, Fischer & Rennie, 1999; Yardley, 2000, 2015). Although scholars like Finlay and Evans (2009) emphasised rigour, relevance, resonance and reflexivity, I instead chose to make use of Yardley's four criteria (Yardley, 2000), who suggested pluralistic guidelines which have also been endorsed by Smith et al. (2009) as a way of evaluating quality regarding IPA research. This was coupled with specific guidelines from J. A Smith (2011) who posed more IPA-focused criteria.

The four criteria suggested by Yardley (2000) for assessing quality in qualitative research are the paper's sensitivity to context, its commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and its impact and importance. She highlights that assessing the sensitivity to context can take many forms for researchers. This may include taking account of previous knowledge within the phenomenon and analytic methods, in addition to the socio-cultural and ethical context of the research. My consideration of the context of the research can be seen in the efforts taken to review the literature on disaffiliation from high-demand movements, together with specific literature concerning the beliefs of the JWs. Still, the thinness of the literature regarding disaffiliation from the JWs limited my ability to determine the reliability of the findings based on the paucity of comparable research. Considering this, particular importance was placed on accuracy, taking great care to respect the differing perspectives regarding the JWs or even specific policies of the religion such as disfellowshipping. This study also has relevance to those who are active JWs, and therefore, attempts were made to be explicit about the beliefs of the

group by referencing literature directly published by the Watch Tower Society or by providing apt contextual information about their beliefs.

Important in respecting the sensitivity to context is the sophistication of the interpretation of the data, particularly as regards phenomenological inquiry, as this is meant to inquire beyond our taken-for-granted assumptions and explanations. In accomplishing this, the specific application of phenomenological inquiry was delineated within the methodology section, as well as some history of the categories and the distinctions applied to Jehovah's Witnesses. Unexpected findings which greatly veered away from my own experience of leaving the JWs (i.e., apocalyptic fears, shunning etc.) were also actively pursued and accounted for.

The sociocultural, ideological and ethical context of participants and data were also scrutinised as regards participants being born-in members of the JWs (who exited) and what this might involve. For instance, were the responses of participants grounded in a context in which it was important for them to represent the religion as a cult or demonise it? Would they use the opportunity to provide hope to those who are also disaffiliating from the religion? Ethics was also considered regarding power imbalances and if participants felt I was an "expert" or was "right" in regard to the subject, especially as there is a lack of knowledge about the psychological effect of leaving this group in particular. Across the stages of the research, a sensitivity to participants' experiences could also be seen through focused placed in constructing an appropriate interview schedule, understanding their own experiences through how former members approached the interview situation, and perhaps most importantly, the consistent self-reflection in order to bracket my own experiences.

Yardley (2000) highlights that commitment denotes the researchers' level of engagement, including their personal involvement with the topic. The commitment to the research could be evidenced by my effort taken to familiarise myself with research on disaffiliation and the many hours spent watching films, reading literature relating to NRMs, and reflecting on my own stake in the research. This at times required significant effort as it required the understanding of specific beliefs of religions with which I was not familiar and how they may or may not have impacted on the process of disaffiliation. J. A. Smith (2011) also highlights that a commitment

regarding IPA should also relate to the participants themselves; I felt this was manifested through the care held during interviews, in being mindful of how acutely disaffiliation impacted each participant in their life. At times this was also important when participants asked about my own beliefs or process, or on where they could seek further help. Being sensitive and paying attention to these needs I felt emphasised my commitment to their unique process of leaving while drawing on an ethos embedded in the values of counselling psychology.

Rigour, according to Yardley (2000), refers to the adequacy of the sample and analysis in its ability to satisfy the research question comprehensively. Eight participants were able to form a small, homogeneous sample which was able to answer the research question adequately (J. A. Smith, 2011). Although most participants were from a White British background, there was diversity among them related to sexuality and age. Although this is the case, the experiences of the eight participants are not meant to be inclusive of all possible meanings to do with leaving the JWs or high-cost groups.

Another reason for a lack of generalisability is that almost all of the former members who were recruited in this study were actively disfellowshipped or excommunicated. This seemed to be intrinsically tied to findings regarding the psychological features of ostracism and the JWs. Although this is the case, most NRMs do not shun former members. Therefore, leaving the JWs or groups considered high-demand may be considered a fundamentally different set of experiences at the level of its essence. Moreover, the rejection and alienation which arose out of excommunication may also be more severe for those born into the religion because of the severing of early attachments who still belong to the religion. Future studies may, therefore, want to make this aspect of their data collection transparent as some studies did not disclose whether their participants were born-in members or converts; this also limited the connections which were drawn.

A second reason for the lack of generalisability was that the participant pool was gathered from a single support group of former-JWs. As the aim of this group is to support ex-JWs, individuals who join the group may be seeking support or suffering mentally. This implicitly may have meant that those with positive experiences of leaving the JWs (i.e., those who are thriving and

not in need of support) or those who do not want to identify with the "ex" label may not have been recruited. Moreover, this may have influenced the general nature of leaving experiences in this study, which were described as painful and challenging. Therefore, this research was not designed to provide a comprehensive analysis of the lived experiences of those who have left the JWs.

Rigour could also be observed through the process of data analysis, reflexivity and commentary. My supervisor, who was the observer for this thesis, was provided with the interview schedule in addition to the revised version which incorporated feedback. Given the constraints on time, it was felt to be too impractical for my supervisor to examine all of the analysed transcripts (200+ pages); thus, one fully analysed transcript including my own reflexive reactions was submitted. During the writing up of the analysis and the discussion chapters, some personal problems were encountered; thus, breaks were taken in order not to rush or jeopardize the quality of the findings. Once the analysis was complete, the advice of J. A. Smith (2011) was heeded, who suggested to evidence each theme with three or more extracts per theme, as per an eight-person study. My supervisor received the full analysis and feedback was received which allowed for risks in the aforementioned reflexivity to be mitigated.

Transparency relates to how well the documented the stages of the research process are described (Yardley, 2000); arguably one of the most important aspects of this piece of research considering my prior involvement with the JWs. I have attempted to be as open and transparent as possible, including how the interview schedule was developed, a description of the interview process, together with how I encountered participants as well as my own beliefs and reactions. In advocating Heidegger's phenomenological stance, my beliefs and values were made explicit so that my position could be understood, rather than remove any futile attempts at removing these. Some personal challenges which were relevant to the research topic were also encountered during the writing up of this research; these I have attempted to discuss as openly as possible to allow future researchers to weigh up to what extent my own position may have impacted the findings of the study.

Finally, the impact and utility provided by a piece of research is a factor which differentiates high-quality research from a merely plausible analysis (Yardley, 2000). In particular, the contribution of this piece of work can be seen primarily in the aims of understanding the unique experience of leaving the JWs through a psychological, rather than purely sociological lens. In this regard, a variety of considerations related to disaffiliation experiences were revealed, in particular, related to the theoretical constructs of rejection, self-estrangement (Seeman, 1959) and reactance (Brehm & Brehm, 1981). This kind of focus was felt to contribute to new understandings of disaffiliation, where its complexity is enhanced and can be further clarified through future research. An attempt was also made to combine the findings of this research with suggestions for clinical practice to improve this study's utility (Swanson, Durham, & Albright, 1997), especially as former members of high-demand groups are an understudied population. Although I have earnestly endeavoured to meet Yardley and Smith's criteria, it is worth highlighting that ultimately, the value, originality or contribution of a piece of work can only be seen through one's subjective eyes. In view of this and in harmony with the phenomenological spirit of this study, I would invite the reader to consider the degree to which they themselves feel the study's contributions are valuable.

Future research

This qualitative study informs promising future research directions in the psychological and sociological fields of disaffiliation, religion, and mental health. Firstly, the spoken language of the experiences of former members is the only method of data collection used in this research. During the analysis, many images and scriptures from the Bible in addition to key publications of the Watch Tower Society were referred to by participants. Most of these were familiar to me, and at times, various images from these publications also arose in my mind during the analysis which was thought-provoking. Further, the use of analogies, metaphors and illustrations feature heavily in the teachings of the JWs; unsurprisingly, these were employed frequently by the participants in this study. An analysis of the religious texts which highlight these images, metaphors and analogies associated with JWs may be an avenue which future researchers can use to enhance the findings of the study. Further, methodologies such as discourse analysis may offer an opportunity to understand the social ideas which may underpin this content (Willig, 2013a). This

may help scholars to understand how the understanding of "leaving" or "disaffiliation" (i.e., related to power or authority) is constructed socially amongst JWs and former JWs, and what these assumptions carry. It could be argued that analysis from this lens may be just as informative, leading to strong interpretive findings.

In addition to applying methods and strategies which can capture further meanings, there were several more specific areas which might be of interest to scholars. Firstly, ex-members described feeling fundamentally wrong, together with strong feelings of guilt. Although existing research has noted these feelings of guilt and their impact on well-being (Fenelon & Danielson, 2016), this study drew attention to the deeper exploration of how these negative emotions interact with the concept of self, which calls for future work to focus in this emergent area. Additionally, participants in this study reported how the activity of searching for a new moral compass was a key feature of their reconstruction process; therefore, studies should also investigate the qualitative facet of this specific reconstruction strategy and its implications for ex-members.

Descriptions of leaving also involved a sense of weirdness, uncomfortableness and at times feeling threatened because of being in the outside world. This generated much curiosity in myself about the exact nature of the meanings being generated. As this study represents only an initial attempt to capture the experience of leaving, these more nuanced features could not have been probed. Still, the experience of alienation seemed to strike at the heart of the leaving experience of former members, and thus, future studies may want to flesh out this aspect. Important too regarding alienation, was that a few participants mentioned that only decades later they sought out counsellors; hence future studies may want to investigate issues such as participants' relationship to help, especially in the absence of support from God, or family. This may be particularly important as the JWs admonish their members to seek help through prayer and regular Bible reading rather than seeking out therapists. Although this has been the subject of research on mainstream religions (Pargament et al., 1992), studies which looked at this aspect for leavers of NRMs or high-demand groups are lacking.

Conclusion

This in-depth exploratory study captures the impact of leaving the JWs and reveals the processes through which former members make sense of their experience. While distress was widely reported by former members, more central aspects related to loss, rejection, and fears of death. The study also raises several issues relevant to this client group. The findings support wider research into the impact of social ostracism, rejection, guilt, and alienation. It also highlights the value of phenomenological research in understanding the way knowledge mediates the distress which former members experience. Although participants struggled with widescale losses, their resilience will no doubt resonate and provide a tender "you can" to others who are disaffiliating. Indeed, to go wrong in their own way was felt to be better than being right in someone else's:

> It's like going up a hill, really, really steep hill that's very, very hard work but when you get to the top, the views are amazing and it's gorgeous up there, but it's a really steep hill to climb to get to it. And these people throwing stones at you on the way and pushing you over and pushing you into holes, and that's what it feels like. You're like nope nope, I'm going I'm going (Stacey, 571-581).

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Appendices

Appendix A – Glossary of terms

This is a selection of the terms used in this report which are relevant to the JWs; the list was adapted from the definitions provided by Holden (2002b).

Apostacy

The rejection and opposition of the published doctrines of the WBTS.

Armageddon

The imminent war between Christ and Satan. At Armageddon, the present system of things (including wicked ones) will be destroyed and Jehovah's new kingdom will be inaugurated.

Anointed, The

The group of 144,000 "chosen ones" of Revelation 14:1-3 who are to rule with Christ for the duration of his millennial reign. The term is synonymous with the "Little Flock".

Babylon the Great

"The world empire of false religion" which the society regards as all non-Witness teachings ("mankind alienated from God").

Bible Study

A study of the Society's doctrines usually in concordance with a publication of the WBTS.

Dedication

The spiritual commitment to Jehovah and the Watch Tower society preceding baptism.

Disassociation

The voluntary removal of oneself from the Society and the congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Disfellowshipping

The expulsion and excommunication of a baptised member of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Elder

A male person in a position of authority appointed to take the lead in overseeing the congregation.

Field Service

All activities related to the preaching work carried out by unbaptised publishers and baptised members of Jehovah's Witnesses.

God

Although anything that is worshipped can be termed a god, this reference is mainly used to refer to Jehovah, the Almighty and creator of the universe.

Governing Body

The ruling committee of the WBTS composed of men who are believed to be used by God to direct the work of Jehovah's Witnesses. Practices and beliefs of the Witnesses are based on decisions by the Governing Body.

Great Crowd

The majority group of Jehovah's Witnesses who look forward to an everlasting future in paradise following Armageddon.

Holy Spirit

The invisible energising or "active" force that Jehovah uses to accomplish his will.

Jehovah

The personal name of the Almighty God. The name is used as an English translation of the Hebrew name "Yahweh". Other descriptive titles include "Sovereign Lord", "Creator", "Most High" and "Father".

Jesus Christ

The name and title of the Son of God from the time of his anointing while on earth.

Judicial Committee

A tribunal of Elders who address complaints and handle accusations of wrongdoing within the congregation.

Kingdom

A royal government, particularly in reference to God's sovereignty represented by the royal government of his son, Jesus Christ.

Kingdom Hall

The official place for congregational meetings of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Last Days

The time period between Christ's invisible return in 1914 and Armageddon, also referred to as the "end times". In this period, events marking the "end of the world" would take place in the lead up to Armageddon. These include: large-scale war, famine, earthquakes, increase in crime, and others.

Meeting

One of two weekly congregational gatherings, usually at the Kingdom Hall.

Millennium

Christ's thousand-year reign which will begin following Armageddon.

Paradise

Parklike or Eden-like conditions following Armageddon.

Publisher

A baptised member who has made a public dedication to Jehovah and takes part in evangelical work.

Resurrection

The process of being bought back to life after death. This may be either in spirit (as in the case of the 144,000) or in flesh (on the earth).

Truth, The

The Witnesses collection of beliefs, or a term used by members when referring to the Society itself.

Satan

Jehovah's adversary, who turned against Jehovah. In 1914, Satan was cast out of heaven and has corrupted the world since. He will be tortured in an abyss during the millennial reign of Christ, and released briefly at the end of it (when he will make a final attempt to deceive the nations), and then annihilated.

Sign of the Times

Events which would occur which marks the end of the worldwide system of things via Armageddon. These include wars, crime, food shortages, earthquakes and others.

Society, The

Abbreviation of the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society.

System of things

A period of time in history characterised by a course of events or distinguished by some prominent feature.

Unbaptised publisher

An unbaptised member of the congregation who engages in preaching work and is working towards baptism.

Witnessing

Evangelising work.

World, The

A term used (often disparagingly) by Jehovah's Witnesses when referring to secular society.

Appendix B – Participant recruitment adverts

Recruitment advert (Initial post on Facebook) - March 2018

Hi All,

I am looking for volunteers interested in taking part in a research study on the experience of leaving Jehovah's Witnesses. The study is being undertaken as part of a doctoral thesis at City, University of London.

If you choose to take part, you will be asked to participate in a 60-90 minute interview at a later date about your experience of leaving JWs and how you feel it has affected your life. The interview itself will be held at City, University of London and all data collected from the interview will be completely anonymised and confidential.

If you are interested in taking part (and/or would like more information about the study) please do message me separately. Thanks all.

Andrew

Recruitment advert (Second post on Facebook) – October 2018

Hi All,

I am looking for a few volunteers interested in taking part in a research study on the experience of leaving Jehovah's Witnesses. The study is being undertaken as part of a doctoral thesis at City, University of London.

If you choose to take part, you will be asked to participate in a 60-90 minute recorded interview at a later date about your experience of leaving Jehovah's Witnesses and how you feel it has affected your life. The interview will be held at the campus of City, University of London or in a suitable location which you would feel comfortable in. It is worth noting that all the data which is collected from the interview will be completely anonymised and confidential.

If you are interested in taking part (and/or would like more information about the study or interview) please do message me privately. Leaving Jehovah's Witness has also been part of my own experience 10 years ago, and I'm very interested in hearing the stories of how others have experienced leaving. I myself will be conducting the interviews.

Thank you,
Andrew

Appendix C – Participant information sheet

An exploration of the lived experience of leaving Jehovah's Witnesses

INFORMATION SHEET

We would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether you would like to take part it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of this study is to understand how former Jehovah's Witnesses experience leaving their religion. In particular, the aim is to illuminate specific themes which emerge through participant experiences. The study is undertaken as part of a DPsych (2016-2019) in Counselling Psychology at City, University of London.

Why have I been invited?

You have been invited as you are an adult who has left Jehovah's Witnesses, having once been raised and baptized into the religion. You are one of 6-8 individuals selected from the Ex-Jehovah's Witnesses group on Meetup.com who qualify for the study.

Do I have to take part?

Participation in the project is voluntary, and you can choose not to participate in part or all of the project. You can withdraw at any stage of the project and avoid answering questions which are felt to be too personal or intrusive. You will not be penalised or disadvantaged in any way if you choose to do this. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

What will happen if I take part?

Your participation would involve an audio-recorded interview lasting approximately 60–120 minutes. In the event that this is not enough, you may be asked to take part in a second interview. The interview will take place in a private room on the campus of City, University of London. Following this, your data will contribute to a doctoral thesis in Counselling Psychology. If you would like to request a copy of this, please make this known to the researcher before or after your interview (but before Sept/2019).

What do I have to do?

You would be asked to take part in an audio recorded interview discussing your experience of leaving Jehovah's Witnesses. The interview will involve questions pertaining to the leaving experience, and how it affected your identity, life and relationships.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

There is a possibility that the interview may cause some psychological discomfort. If this happens, and/or you feel that you would not like to talk about certain topics, or do not feel comfortable at any stage of the interview, you have the right to make these known to the interviewer and/or stop at any time. You may

also have your data withdrawn at any stage of the interview (or up to one month after). If you do not feel comfortable and would like further help or support during or following your interview, several appropriate resources will be provided to you.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

There are no direct benefits to you personally for taking part in this study. However, you may find it helpful explore your experience of leaving with an engaging and accepting listener. The research will contribute to informing others of the various features and challenges of leaving Jehovah's Witnesses. It may help clarify common beliefs, biases and challenges that others may have when working with such individuals. The research also seeks to give a voice to the silent majority, making contributions to the wider community about the impact of fundamentalist beliefs on one's mental health.

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

Your information will be used only for the purposes of this research project. Only the primary researcher will have access to audio records, however the research team will have access to the anonymized (transcribed) data. All names and identifying details will be anonymized and kept confidential and protected. During interviews, information may need to be passed on if disclosures of criminal activity, violence, abuse, or harm are made. Records will be stored on the servers of City, University of London. All data, including audio recordings and transcripts will be encrypted, stored securely and destroyed by the primary researcher once research requirements are fulfilled.

The only restrictions on confidentiality would relate to any situation where reporting of violence, abuse, self-inflicted harm, harm to others or criminal activity is required to protect you, or others. This information may be shared with social services, and/or local authorities under UK legislation.

If you decide that you do not want to take part in this study after the interview has been conducted, you have one month from the date of your interview to request this. In the event the project is abandoned before it is completed, all records will be destroyed.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

Once complete, the results of this study will be made available the Open Access repository of City Research Online, and then in ETHoS, the British Library's thesis discovery service. The thesis may also be published in academic journals. Throughout the use of data collected, anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained. If you would like to receive a copy of this final thesis, please make this known during the research interview or after through an email to one of the researchers (see below for contact details).

What will happen if I don't want to carry on with the study?

You are free to leave if you choose not to participate in part or all of the study, and that you can withdraw at any stage of the study without being penalized or disadvantaged in any way. If you would like to withdraw your data from the study, this will be facilitated provided this is requested up to one month after your interview.

What if there is a problem?

If you have any problems, concerns or questions about this study, you should ask to speak to a member of the research team. If you remain unhappy and wish to complain formally, you can do this through the University complaints procedure. To complain about the study, you need to phone 020 7040 3040. You can then ask to speak to the Secretary to Senate Research Ethics Committee and inform them that the name of the project is: *An exploration of the lived experience of leaving Jehovah's Witnesses*

You could also write to the Secretary at:
Anna Ramberg
Secretary to Senate Research Ethics Committee
Research Office, E214
City University London
Northampton Square
London
EC1V 0HB
Email: [Redacted]

City, University of London holds insurance policies which apply to this study. If you feel you have been harmed or injured by taking part in this study you may be eligible to claim compensation. This does not affect your legal rights to seek compensation. If you are harmed due to someone's negligence, then you may have grounds for legal action.

Who has reviewed the study?

This study has been approved by City, University of London Psychology Department Research Ethics Committee, Approval Code: PSYETH (P/L) 17/18 25.

Further information and contact details

Andrew Aboud
Primary Researcher
E-mail: [Redacted]
Phone: [Redacted]
City, University of London, UK

Dr. Jacqui Farrants
Research Supervisor
E-mail: [Redacted]
Phone: [Redacted]
City, University of London, UK

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

Appendix D – Participant consent form

An exploration of the lived experience of leaving Jehovah's Witnesses
CONSENT FORM

Ethics approval code: **PSYETH (P/L) 17/18 25**

Please initial box

1.	I agree to take part in the above City, University of London research project. I have had the project explained to me, and I have read the participant information sheet, which I may keep for my records. I understand this will involve the following: • Being interviewed by the researcher • Allowing the interview to be audio recorded • Making myself available for one further interview should that be required	
2.	This information will be held and processed for the following purpose(s): to explore how former Jehovah's Witnesses experience leaving the religion. I understand that any information I provide is confidential, and that no information that could lead to the identification of any individual will be disclosed in any reports on the project, or to any other party. However, I am aware that if I disclose information that a child or vulnerable individual is being seriously harmed, confidentiality and anonymity cannot be guaranteed. Finally, no identifiable personal data will be published. The identifiable data will not be shared with any other organisation.	
3.	I understand that my participation is voluntary, that I can choose not to participate in part or all of the project, and that I can withdraw at any stage of the project without being penalized or disadvantaged in any way.	
4.	I agree to City, University of London recording and processing this information about me. I understand that this information will be used only for the purpose(s) set out in this statement and my consent is conditional on the University complying with its duties and obligations under the Data Protection Act 1998.	
5.	I agree to take part in the above study.	

_____   _____   _____
Name of Participant   Signature   Date
_____   _____   _____
Name of Researcher   Signature   Date

When completed, 1 copy for participant; 1 copy for researcher file.

Appendix E – Participant interview guide

1. What was the experience of leaving like?
   Prompt: catalysts; events triggering questioning; features of exit journey.

2. What was it like when you first left? And now?

3. Did you receive any support or help when leaving?

4. Did leaving affect your existing relationships? If so, how?
   Prompt: new relationships

5. What have you noticed about yourself since leaving the JWs?
   Prompt: How have others experienced you, within and outside the JWs.

6. Do you still call yourself a Christian? Why/why not?
   Prompt: How you perceive and experience yourself; any aspects of identity which changed.

7. What are your thoughts on God? Meaning of life?
   Prompt: has your relationship with God changed? If so, how?

8. Do you think there is anything I missed?

Appendix F – Participant debrief form

An exploration of the lived experience of leaving Jehovah's Witnesses
DEBRIEF INFORMATION

Thank you for taking part in this study. Now that it's finished we'd like to tell you a bit more about it. The research aims to explore the experience of leaving Jehovah's Witnesses for those who were part of the religion since birth and baptised. You were asked to take part in an interview which aims to understand your unique experience of leaving, in addition to how it affected your identity, life and relationships.

The study is part of a doctoral project in Counselling Psychology (2016-2019) at City, University of London. Your participation will contribute to the body of knowledge around leaving Jehovah's Witnesses, and may help to clarify issues support services may have when engaging with former Jehovah's Witnesses. If you have been affected at all by this research or any of the questions that you were asked, then please contact the following support groups and helplines:

Mind Helpline   0300 123 0039 (Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm)
Provides advice and support to empower those experiencing mental health problems.

Samaritans Helpline   116 123 (free 24 hour helpline)
Confidential support for people experiencing feelings of distress of despair.
You may also wish to contact your GP if you feel concerned about any arising issues.
We hope you found the study interesting. If you have any other questions please do not hesitate to contact us at the following:

Andrew Aboud
Primary Researcher
E-mail: [Redacted]
Phone: [Redacted]
City, University of London, UK

Dr. Jacqui Farrants
Research Supervisor
E-mail: [Redacted]
Phone: [Redacted]
City, University of London, UK

Ethics approval code: **PSYETH (P/L) 17/18 25**

Thank you again for taking part in this study.

Regards,
The Research Team

Appendix G – Approved ethics form

**Psychology Department Standard Ethics Application Form:
Undergraduate, Taught Masters and Professional Doctorate Students**

This form should be completed in full. Please ensure you include the accompanying documentation listed in question 19.

Does your research involve any of the following? *For each item, please place a 'x' in the appropriate column*	Yes	No
Persons under the age of 18 *(If yes, please refer to the Working with Children guidelines and include a copy of your DBS)*		X
Vulnerable adults (e.g. with psychological difficulties) *(If yes, please include a copy of your DBS where applicable)*		X
Use of deception *(If yes, please refer to the Use of Deception guidelines)*		X
Questions about topics that are potentially very sensitive *(Such as participants' sexual behaviour, their legal or political behaviour; their experience of violence)*		X
Potential for 'labelling' by the researcher or participant (e.g. 'I am stupid')		X
Potential for psychological stress, anxiety, humiliation or pain		X
Questions about illegal activities		X
Invasive interventions that would not normally be encountered in everyday life (e.g. vigorous exercise, administration of drugs)		X
Potential for adverse impact on employment or social standing		X
The collection of human tissue, blood or other biological samples		X
Access to potentially sensitive data via a third party (e.g. employee data)		X
Access to personal records or confidential information		X
Anything else that means it has more than a minimal risk of physical or psychological harm, discomfort or stress to participants.		X

If you answered 'no' to <u>all</u> the above questions your application may be eligible for light touch review. You should send your application to your supervisor who will approve it and send it to a second reviewer. Once the second reviewer has approved your application they will submit it to <u>psychology.ethics@city.ac.uk</u> and you will be issued with an ethics approval code. <u>You cannot start your research until you have received this code.</u>

If you answered 'yes' to any of the questions, your application is NOT eligible for light touch review and will need to be reviewed at the next Psychology Department Research Ethics Committee meeting**.** You should send your application to your supervisor who will approve it and send it to psychology.ethics@city.ac.uk. The committee meetings take place on the first Wednesday of every month (with the exception of January and August). Your application should be submitted at least 2 weeks in advance of the meeting you would like it considered at. We aim to send you a response within 7 days. Note that you may be asked to revise and resubmit your application so should ensure you allow for sufficient time when scheduling your research. Once your application has been approved you will be issued with an ethics approval code. You cannot start your research until you have received this code.

Which of the following describes the main applicant? *Please place a 'x' in the appropriate space*	
Undergraduate student	
Taught postgraduate student	
Professional doctorate student	x
Research student	
Staff (applying for own research)	
Staff (applying for research conducted as part of a lab class)	

1. Name of applicant(s). (All supervisors should also be named as applicants.)
Andrew Aboud Dr. Jacqui Farrants
2. Email(s).
[Redacted] [Redacted]

3. Project title.
An exploration of the lived experience of leaving Jehovah's Witnesses
4. Provide a lay summary of the background and aims of the research. (No more than 400 words.)
The research aims to explore the experience of leaving Jehovah's Witnesses for those who were raised and baptised in the religion. Since Jehovah's Witnesses are a fundamentalist religion, most research on disaffiliation (in this scope) used qualitative designs conducted by sociologists. Studies characterised disaffiliation as a period of internal conflicts with doctrine, lifestyle and ethics. Leaving was also cast as a period of fear, guilt and shame. This warranted a reconstruction of identity and social relationships after leaving. Many studies however, did not mention how participants renegotiated their relationship with God (which Jehovah's Witnesses posit as a highly personalised relationship) during leaving. Equally, most studies utilised narrative methodologies with only one study attempting to study the leaving *experience* (Brent, 1990). This single study however did not adequately capture the phenomenon as it provided more of a phased account of leaving fundamentalism, rather than a rich description of the phenomenon.

In view of the foregoing, this study aims to focus on the meaning and experience of leaving through a psychological perspective, with the rigour and application to counselling psychology as a discipline. The research question aims to answer the question: *how do former Jehovah's Witnesses experience leaving the religion?* Jehovah's Witnesses were chosen as only three studies used them as a sample group. Answering the above question will be able to give adequate depth to the phenomenon while addressing how participants negotiated aspects which the literature omitted, such as their relationship with God if indeed this still exists. It is hoped that such research may inform clinicians of the associated meanings and characteristics of engaging with ex–fundamentalists. |
| **5. Provide a summary of the design and methodology.** |

This study utilises a qualitative design rooted in a phenomenological methodology. Data will be analysed using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, Jarman & Osborn, 1999). This perspective departs from existing qualitative research on disaffiliating which utilised narrative or ethnographic methodologies. Unlike narrative analysis, data will not be encoded into a particular plot or chronology, and may offer a chance to capture the phenomenon in more novel and nuanced way. Due to its focus on subjectivity and interpretations of reality, IPA is poised to challenge structural or normative assumptions. Equally, it may help guide quantitative research by indicating the presence of factors involved in disaffiliation, although these must be tentative in suggesting their extent in relation to the participants.

IPA as a methodology places primary concern on lived experience understood through rich engagement with another person's lifeworld. To achieve this depth, a small demographic will be sampled where semi–structured interviews will form the basis for further analysis. The chosen sample will focus on adult Jehovah's Witnesses who were raised in the religion, got baptised, and subsequently disaffiliated. While there are a several variations in methodological phenomenology, an eclectic view is adopted here embracing key elements and not explicitly privileging any particular stance. The aim then in using this methodology is to describe and interpret specific themes which emerge through the experiences of participants, rather than attempt to provide causal explanations of the phenomenon.

6. Provide details of all the methods of data collection you will employ (e.g., questionnaires, reaction times, skin conductance, audio-recorded interviews).

- Signed participant consent form
- Audio recorded (semi-structured) interviews

7. Is there any possibility of a participant disclosing any issues of concern during the course of the research? (e.g. emotional, psychological, health or educational.) Is there any possibility of the researcher identifying such issues? If so, please describe the procedures that are in place for the appropriate referral of the participant.

There is a small possibility that emotional or psychological issues may be disclosed during interviews or identified by the researcher, although this is not anticipated. If participants do become distressed, they will be given the opportunity for audio recording to be switched off, or to take a break or stop the interview entirely.

The information sheet and consent form will also include restrictions on confidentiality which includes any situation where violence, abuse, self-inflicted harm, harm to others or criminal activity is reported. They will be made known those these forms that this information may be shared with social services, and/or local authorities under UK legislation in the event of risk of harm.

If only the participant is distressed, this will be mitigated firstly through the therapeutic experience of the researcher. Additionally, details of support and counselling services local to each participant will be provided following each interview. Participants will also be given the phone numbers of Mind or Samaritans and will be urged to visit their GP if they have concerns. Several other service numbers will also be on hand, but not offered unless any specific risk presents itself. Contact details of the researcher and supervisor (University email addresses and phone numbers) will be given for further information.

8. Details of participants (e.g. age, gender, exclusion/inclusion criteria). Please justify any exclusion criteria.

Inclusion criteria
- Adults aged 18 or above, resident within the UK
- Ability to give informed consent
- Capable to participate in a semi-structured interview
- Born into Jehovah's Witnesses, with subsequent baptism
- Disaffiliated from the religion more than 6 months ago

Exclusion criteria
- Participants under the age of 18 - These were previously studied already (Hookway & Habibis, 2015)
- Participants known to the researcher in a personal or professional capacity – This may interfere with the data presented during interviews, and with interpretative data by the researcher. Equally, this may mean there a risk of these participants feeling coerced into participation.
- Participants not sufficiently robust to take part will be excluded through informed consent. These willalso include the following categories of participants:
  - Participants deemed actively distressed or vulnerable

	o	Participants deemed inappropriate or unsuitable to participate for ethical reasons such as heavy medication or lack of cognitive capacity

9. How will participants be selected and recruited? Who will select and recruit participants?

Participants will be recruited by contacting individuals through the ex-JW support group in the UK through Meetup (.com). Meetup is an online social networking website/mobile application that facilitates offline group meetings in various localities around the world. It allows members to find and join groups unified by a common interest, such as politics, religion, health, careers or hobbies.

Participants will be recruited through an initial Meetup event organised by the primary researcher. At this time, respondents who would like to take part in the study will be initially screened for suitability (through inclusion and exclusion criteria), to provide them with information about the study, and to answer any questions. This will be done by the primary researcher. Respondents who meet these criteria will then be selected on a first come first serve basis. Following this verbal agreement with potential participants, they will then be given the participant information sheet. After this, they will be given a two week cooling off period after the time the research was presented in which they may withdraw from partaking in the project. If they then still wish to take part, a date and time will be mutually agreed over email/phone and a suitable room on the Campus of City, University of London will be booked for the interview.

10. Will participants receive any incentives for taking part? (Please provide details of these and justify their type and amount.)

 No incentives will be given for taking part; it is not predicted this will be necessary.

11. Will informed consent be obtained from all participants? If not, please provide a justification. (Note that a copy of your consent form should be included with your application, see question 19.)

 Informed consent will be obtained for all participants.

12. How will you brief and debrief participants? (Note that copies of your information sheet and debrief should be included with your application, see question 19.)

Participants will be briefed by providing information about what taking part would involve and the topics that would be covered. This will be done primarily through the information sheet and consent form, but also verbally before interviews at the Meetup.com event and/or over the phone. To respect privacy, participants will be informed that interviews will be confidential and asked beforehand if any subjects are off-limits. They will also be informed of their right to not reveal personal information, take a break, or withdraw at any time without giving a reason for doing so. Participants will also be informed of the limits of confidentiality, that is, that is, information with appropriate services will be shared if a participant or others were at risk of harm or violence or criminal activity is present. Measures will also be put in place to provide appropriate support when necessary. Contact details and those of support and counselling services local to each participant will be provided following each interview.

Once the interview is complete, participants will be debriefed and asked about how they found the interview and if they have any further questions. The will then be thanked for their time and their contribution to the research. Participants will be debriefed by providing information on the aims of the study, and the debrief information sheet will include phone numbers of support services, so that the participant knows who to contact in case they have raised any concerns. Finally, contact details of the researcher and research supervisor (university email addresses and phone numbers) will be provided in case of further questions after the interview.

13. Location of data collection. (Please describe exactly where data collection will take place.)
All data collection will take place within the UK, on City, University of London campuses.

13a. Is any part of your research taking place outside England/Wales?		
No	X	
Yes		If 'yes', please describe how you have identified and complied with all local requirements concerning ethical approval and research governance.

13b. Is any part of your research taking place <u>outside</u> the University buildings?		
No	X	
Yes		If 'yes', please submit a risk assessment with your application or explain how you have addressed risks.

13c. Is any part of your research taking place <u>within</u> the University buildings?		
No		
Yes	X	If 'yes', please ensure you have familiarised yourself with relevant risk assessments available on Moodle.

14. What potential risks to the participants do you foresee, and how do you propose to deal with these risks? These should include both ethical and health and safety risks.

The main ethical/safety risk is that taking part may be potentially distressing to participants, although this is not anticipated. This will be mitigated in the following ways:

- Vulnerable adults will not be included in this study, and interviews will be held on campus.
- Only individuals who disaffiliated more than 6 months ago will be considered.
- Information will be given about what taking part would involve and the topics that would be covered, so that potential participants could make an informed decision about taking part.
- Participants will be asked beforehand if any subjects are off-limits and they will be made aware that they could ask for a break at any time.
- During interviews, I will be mindful to be sensitive and not excessively intrusive, being informed by my therapeutic training.
- Contact details (University email addresses and phone numbers) of both researchers will be given should any participant want further information.
- With this, details of support and counselling services local to each participant will be provided following each interview.
- Finally, information with appropriate services will be shared if a participant in the unlikely event of risk of harm to themselves or others.
- Once the interview is complete, participants will be debriefed and asked about how they found the interview and if they have any questions.

15. What potential risks to the researchers do you foresee, and how do you propose to deal with these risks? These should include both ethical and health and safety risks.

The main risk of safety is that of physical harm to the primary researcher. To ensure this safety, the researcher will meet each participant in a public location, on site of City University, London. Prior telephone contact will also provide an opportunities to assess the respondent's suitability and their circumstances. A security contact will also be informed before I go into interviews, and once the interview is complete after roughly the amount of time (2 hours). Rooms will be pre-booked for interviews and a mobile phone and personal alarm will be kept on hand at all times during interviews, in case of any emergency or threat of abuse. If I feel that any situation is becoming unsafe, I will immediately extract myself. Personal safety will be prioritised over

collecting research data. The layout of interview rooms will also be pre-arranged so that access to exits and phones are clear of obstacles. Relevant security numbers will also be placed on quick dial on my phone to ensure speed of getting attention.

The ethical risk of personal psychological distress is also possible, especially considering the researcher has experience of disaffiliating from Jehovah's Witnesses. It hoped that any distress/discomfort of the researcher will be protected against through appropriate use of personal therapy and supervision. Reflective notes will also be maintained throughout the project and particularly following interviewsto protect for this, as well as data which is generated through analysis.

16. What methods will you use to ensure participants' confidentiality and anonymity? (Please note that consent forms should always be kept in a separate folder to data and should NOT include participant numbers.)

Please place an 'X' in all appropriate spaces

Complete anonymity of participants (i.e. researchers will not meet, or know the identity of participants, as participants are a part of a random sample and are required to return responses with no form of personal identification.)	
Anonymised sample or data (i.e. an *irreversible* process whereby identifiers are removed from data and replaced by a code, with no record retained of how the code relates to the identifiers. It is then impossible to identify the individual to whom the sample of information relates.)	**x**
De-identified samples or data (i.e. a *reversible* process whereby identifiers are replaced by a code, to which the researcher retains the key, in a secure location.)	
Participants being referred to by pseudonym in any publication arising from the research	**x**
Any other method of protecting the privacy of participants (e.g. use of direct quotes with specific permission only; use of real name with specific, written permission only.) *Please provide further details below.*	

17. Which of the following methods of data storage will you employ?

Please place an 'X' in all appropriate spaces

Data will be kept in a locked filing cabinet	
Data and identifiers will be kept in separate, locked filing cabinets	**x**
Access to computer files will be available by password only	**x**
Hard data storage at City University London	**x**
Hard data storage at another site. *Please provide further details below.*	

18. Who will have access to the data?

Only researchers named in this application form	x
People other than those named in this application form. *Please provide further details below of who will have access and for what purpose.*	

19. Attachments checklist. **Please ensure you have referred to the Psychology Department templates when producing these items. These can be found in the Research Ethics page on Moodle.*

	Attached	Not applicable
*Text for study advertisement	X	
*Participant information sheet	X	
*Participant consent form	X	
Questionnaires to be employed		X
Debrief	X	
Copy of DBS		X
Risk assessment	X	
Others (Interview protocol)	X	

20. Information for insurance purposes.

(a) Please provide a <u>brief</u> abstract describing the project

This project aims to explore the lived experience of former Jehovah's Witnesses who have disaffiliated from the religion. 6 – 8 adults living in the UK will be recruited from the Ex-Jehovah's Witnesses meetup group on Meetup.com. Participants will be screened to be deemed sufficiently robust to take part in the study, prior to participation. All participants will be members who have been raised as Jehovah's Witnesses, baptised and subsequently disaffiliated. Data will be collected from semi-structured interviews which will provide the necessary data for further analysis. Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999) will be used as the epistemological approach to analysing participant data. Several emergent themes will be generated, shedding light on the phenomenon. It is hoped that the study will be able to clarify common beliefs, biases, and challenges that others including clinicians may or may not have when

engaging with ex–fundamentalists. Further, it may help give a voice to the silent majority, as well as informing the ongoing debate about if religious beliefs themselves are indeed helpful rather than maladaptive to one's mental health.

	Please place an 'X' in all appropriate spaces	
(b) Does the research involve any of the following:	**Yes**	**No**
Children under the age of 5 years?		X
Clinical trials / intervention testing?		X
Over 500 participants?		X
(c) Are you specifically recruiting pregnant women?		X
(d) Excluding information collected via questionnaires (either paper based or online), is any part of the research taking place outside the UK?		X

If you have answered 'no' to all the above questions, please go to section 21.

If you have answered 'yes' to any of the above questions you will need to check that the university's insurance will cover your research. You should do this by submitting this application to insurance@city.ac.uk, before applying for ethics approval. Please initial below to confirm that you have done this.

I have received confirmation that this research will be covered by the university's insurance.

Name ……………………………………………. Date……………………………

21. Information for reporting purposes.		
	Please place an 'X' in all appropriate spaces	
(a) Does the research involve any of the following:	**Yes**	**No**
Persons under the age of 18 years?		X
Vulnerable adults?		X
Participant recruitment outside England and Wales?		X
(b) Has the research received external funding?		X

22. **Final checks.** Before submitting your application, please confirm the following, noting that **your application may be returned to you without review** if the committee feels these requirements have not been met.	
Please confirm each of the statements below by placing an 'X' in the appropriate space	
There are no discrepancies in the information contained in the different sections of the application form and in the materials for participants.	X
There is sufficient information regarding study procedures and materials to enable proper ethical review.	X
The application form and materials for participants have been checked for grammatical errors and clarity of expression.	X
The materials for participants have been checked for typos.	X
23. Declarations by applicant(s)	
Please confirm each of the statements below by placing an 'X' in the appropriate space	
I certify that to the best of my knowledge the information given above, together with accompanying information, is complete and correct.	X
I accept the responsibility for the conduct of the procedures set out in the attached application.	X
I have attempted to identify all risks related to the research that may arise in conducting the project.	X
I understand that **no** research work involving human participants or data can commence until ethical approval has been given.	X

	Signature (Please type name)	**Date**
Student(s)	**Andrew Aboud**	**29/10/2017**
Supervisor	**Dr. Jacqui Farrants**	**9/11/2017**

Appendix H – Master table of themes for the group

I'd look at other people and think, 'God what goes on in your head and what's it like to have your own life and your own thoughts that you can just you know do what you like with and that kind of blew my mind really (Sophie,

Themes	Line Number
A. Chancing one's own truth	
Wanting to live a different truth	
Kate: Even though for me then it was the truth, it wasn't the truth that I wanted	138-139
Sophie: But um it was uh the first time I think I went, 'This is my life' I am making choices for me	712-713
Stephanie: I didn't think it was the truth as it were. They never seem to sort of have satisfactory answers to some of the questions I had, so I kind of started losing faith in it all	37-40
Stacey: If you're in it properly and you do a lot of studying, when you realize it's not true, you just can't do it	950-952
Beth: If I'd had had free reign I would have gone off to college and done whatever I wanted	197-199
John: I suppose I just wanted to live a normal life, do things that I wanted to do, go where I wanted to go. Um and make my own decisions	979-982
Paul: I just didn't want to be part of the church anymore	575-576
Deprived of a wanted life	
Kate: I felt to some extent I was kind of trying to have the experiences that I hadn't have	239-240
Sophie: I didn't get the education I wanted, didn't have the job I wanted, you know do anything I wanted	307-309
Stephanie: when you're a teenager you want to fit in, you want a fun group to hang out with, and they you know they were. So, it was obv- it was a big part of my decision at the time to leave	157-160
Stacey: It's not what you wanted out of life	350
Beth: I have ultimately been robbed of because of being a Jehovah's Witness	1046-1047
John: If I was in the organization, you know, you can't, you can't celebrate birthdays and Christmas, Halloween, Easter. Umm you know, you can't watch violent sports. You can't watch violent movies.	1019-1023
Paul: I kind of, usurped all of this um stories I've got from being in the church…I've reclaimed them!	2060-2061
Searching for a new moral compass	
Kate: That kind of began some difficult years of kind of who am I, what am I, what am I doing?	337-338
Sophie: I was very confused for a long time umm about what I believed…I kind of thought it was really important for me to work out my religious beliefs and what I believed	187-196
Stacey: Oh my goodness, I don't know what to do, because the way when you brought up in the witnesses…everything you think and everything you do is, is put	373-380

through that JW filter, isn't it. And it's all, everything is, or what, what what would Jehovah want me to do? What would the congregation want me to do?'

John: When I first started to celebrate Christmas and birthdays and Easter and Halloween, it was, it was all very raw and really nervous, I wasn't too sure	556-559
Paul: I actually decided to make my own principles…because as soon as I decided to make my own principles, it was like I was empowering myself to make my character whatever I wanted it to be	1692-1697
Hanna: It's just kind of finding in your moral compass because your moral compass has been set to Jehovah's Witness standards, and then when you realize that that's actually not right, you then have to find your own moral compass	215-220

B. An outcast in a foreign world

Alienated as a dangerous outsider

Kate: I haven't got two heads and a tail or anything like that, but is just kind of that sense of not fitting in	156-157
Sophie: I felt like such an outsider	303
Stephanie: -I think I've always felt I'm a bit different to everybody else, I think being raised a witness makes you feel that way.	1060-1062
-They would think I was some kind of satanic plant	528-529
Stacey: I was quite reclusive when I left. I wouldn't even go out for a walk just in case some Jehovah's Witnesses were going past	1020-1023
Beth: They introduce something like this, just to be different. They used going from door to door just to be different. You know, everything, things just to be different therefore it must be right and then they stick with it. And my goodness how people feel when they realise that they are just prey, horrible.	1004-1010
John: I think what was important for me…was to obviously find myself again as a person, and re-establish a life that that felt normal and realistic…I just hope I can view it like that as well.	1175-1180
Paul: I was a bit of a lone wolf always, you know, like I had never believed in the church, so I kind of, I've become very well train- very well trained myself to keep to myself.	820-823
Hanna: Um, that was kind of like a a new thing, like making friends who weren't Jehovah's Witnesses and I thought, 'Oh, they don't seem as bad as what I thought what I'd thought they'd be', so it was a really sort of strange kind of feeling that something just wasn't adding up	85-90

Burdened by the scar of rejection

Kate: It's the trauma of what's happened at a relational level, it's like this deep knowledge that your parents, your blood can reject you, and that feels like a really deep scar	708-711
Sophie: If my own family don't love me [tears up] and accept me then no one can, and I still struggle with that	766-768
Stephanie: To cut somebody out your family for something they did when they're a teenager, I find it pretty abhorrent	396-397
Stacey: I've been very angry that that people can just throw you away like a piece of litter just cause you're not the same religion as them	1308-1311
Beth: I've lost many friends, people who I thought was, we're friends who've cut me off, totally	166-168
John: Mentally and emotionally it's, I would probably say I'm scarred by it… it is difficult, if you've got ties within, with parents or brothers or sisters or aunties or	1058-1059

uncles...that's the, that's the burden. It's the shunning, the shunning process, which is the most difficult part of the process

Paul: Like here I was losing my family, my friends and then my wife	948-949
Hanna: You make new friends everything, but it's no replacement for like your family. So, yeah. So I'll always go through rough patches when it's really sad	1061-1064

Struggling to open up to worldly others

Kate: I didn't feel like I could open up to anybody and I felt like the weird one	143-144
Sophie: I really struggle to just kind of, I do really struggle to trust people, I really struggle to open up to people	760-762
Stephanie: Partly embarrassed, it's really difficult for people that haven't been in it to understand	700-701
Stacey: You kind of [pause] try to back away a little bit cause you don't want to get involved in any conversations cause you were a bit embarrassed	739-742
Beth: There's a barrier with in terms of developing deep friendships with people unless they've had a background in it	600-603
John: I was quite a closed book… because if, because you can be judged, which is the problem	768-774
Paul: I was completely incapable of being in a relationship, umm in that I was completely incapable of expressing myself still and very much felt like I had to hide everything	1554-1555
Hanna: It took a little while I suppose to like feel comfortable making friends with people...because you're so like, right you get to the point, and then it be like 'right do you want come round for coffee?' [changes tone] 'Umm nooo I dunno about that', you know what I mean?	996-1002

Finding solace through speaking the same language as ex-JWs

Kate: There were two ex-Jehovah's Witnesses there. I felt like *everybody* that I knew was speaking a different language, then I had met two people and it was just like coming out of some kind of wilderness and they spoke my language	382-385
Sophie: they're so much support groups for ex-JWs it's everywhere, so now is a great time to come out	423-425
Stephanie: She's out of it, she's probably the only person in the family or anywhere really that understands um that really understands the situation	757-759
Beth: my cultural background is being a witness umm just the same way yours is from Trinidad. So when you meet people from Trinidad, to speaking the same language in many ways, and so that's how it is	587-591
John: so the ex-JW group, is it sort of like a little arm in terms of sort of a little bit of support and help um when needed	702-705
Paul: We just bonded over this mutual experience…I was on the verge of tears just kind of having a friend, let alone that we were talking about our experience	1048-1052

C. Held captive to a death sentence
Destined to die

Kate: I thought Armageddon was going to come you know and I was going to die	170-171
Sophie: oh my god Armageddon is going to come. I'm gonna die, that was in the back of my mind	192-193
Stephanie: You see something on the TV…that would be a you know a sign of the times, and you'd suddenly think, 'Oh my goodness'	266-269

Stacey: Right from a young age you're given these [pause] awful pictures of, of death and destruction and of course as a child, you, you, you grow up, you grow to fear that	713-714
Beth: 'That's what we believe is gonna happen at Armageddon, people are going to die with fire coming out of the sky'. And as I said it I felt, 'I hate this message so much, I hate this message of destruction so much.'	517-521
John: I've already resigned myself to dying, and once I'm dead that's it thank God.	952-954

Wrestling with tormenting guilt

Kate: I also paradoxically feel a lot of guilt for what I did to my parents	215-216
Sophie: So everything now just feels *wrong*	954-955
Stephanie: You go around this kind of guilt loop in your head	94-95
Stacey: I had the feelings of guilt that I'd raise my children in it. I mean, I'd been raised in it	149-150
John: I know of individuals that are, you know, they're even worse than people, you know, it's it's it's something very difficult	829-832
Paul: Each time we got caught we might have taken a break and then kind of things resumed, and each time we resumed there was fierce guilt	181-184
Hanna: And it was very much, you felt, I felt guilty all the time as well, and I'd never come across that before. Um, I felt guilty all the time.	101-104

'Jehovah makes Hitler look like a pussy cat': Dismissing Jehovah

Sophie: I'm sorry but fuck you…that's my opinion towards God	243-245
Stephanie: I'd rather die with the people that I know and all the things I like in this world, than live forever with a load of people and a God that just wants to destroy people	182-185
Stacey: Jehovah makes Hitler look like a pussy cat	637-638
Beth: I'd still believe in God. I'm not sure if I would call him Jehovah	686-687
John: If there is a God, I would probably say it's broken	969-970
Paul: Being put here because someone, you know who's bored or needed worshipers or you know, whatever, whatever it is he is, whatever his reason was, it doesn't matter	720-724
Hanna: One thing we're taught is that Jehovah was loving. So how would it be that he would think that that is acceptable to isolate somebody so much	1237-1240

Disenchantment with future hope

Kate: I don't want to be this saintly person that lives forever with all these saintly people'…I don't think I realised how the ideology would kind of…make me hurt	114-117
Sophie: there was a part of me that still very much, well hold on the Bible does say you know you are not going to inherit God's kingdom	365-367
Stephanie: This big romantic fairy tale and then it's not true, it's like, I'm a bit let down	1228-1229
Stacey: you're always taught to pray aren't you for the paradise, for the kingdom to come	659-661
Beth: The meaning in life was for me a belief that Armageddon was coming and there was going to be a new system	905-907
Paul: I'm gonna get in and get put into this paradise. And now all of a sudden I was just this little man in this big city full of people	1006-1009
Hanna: You almost have to grieve again because you, you don't know what's going to happen in the future.	280-282