

LIFE AFTER SOCIAL DEATH: LEAVING THE JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES, IDENTITY TRANSITION AND RECOVERY

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The Jehovah's Witnesses (JW) religion is a fundamentalist Christian sect that believes humanity is living in the biblical "last days." Known for rejecting politics, holidays, and unnecessary social interactions with nonbelievers, the faith fosters a tight-knit community. This study explored what happens when people leave this group, focusing on three key factors: how they left (method of exit), how invested they were in the religion before leaving (prior religious commitment), and how they found support/community after leaving (post-exit group identification). The study surveyed 554 former JWs; the group had a nearly even mix of those raised in the JW faith and those who joined later, had an average age of 37 years, and 62% of participants were women.

How They Left (Method of Exit): The study identified two main ways people leave the JW community. Some are disfellowshipped, meaning they're forced out for breaking the rules. Others leave voluntarily, either formally disassociating or quietly "fading away". Surprisingly, those who left voluntarily reported feeling more ostracized than those disfellowshipped. The researchers suggest that this may be because those who left voluntarily weren't expecting the level of ostracism they experienced compared to those who were disfellowshipped and so the ostracism felt more intense.

How Committed They Were (Prior Religious Commitment): The study found seemingly conflicting results when it came to outcomes for ex-JWs that were more committed to the religion before leaving. On the one hand, they found that the more emotionally and socially invested someone was in the JW faith, the more they experienced stronger feelings of ostracism and had a tougher time rebuilding their self-esteem after leaving. However, those who were deeply committed prior to leaving also tended to do better when it came to transitioning their identity post-exit. The researchers suggest that it may be because someone's ability to fully invest in/commit to religion may have equipped them with the ability to fully invest in building a new identity afterward. This finding seems to challenge previous research indicating that greater commitment leads to increased difficulty during and after disaffiliation, highlighting the need for further investigation to better understand this relationship.

What Support They Found (Post-Exit Group Identification): People who found new, supportive groups, online or in person, generally reported better outcomes, including improvements in several aspects of mental health and a stronger sense of identity. However, results were mixed – for some, connecting with post-JW support groups negatively impacted self-esteem and led to higher rates of depressive symptoms. These paradoxical findings may reflect the challenge of leaving a religious organization that provides a clear sense of purpose and opportunities for meaningful contributions, which many find fulfilling and supportive of self-worth, and transitioning to communities or groups that lack a unified purpose. This finding may also reflect the negative unconscious stigma that ex-JW may continue to hold about associating with the ex-JW community (who are perceived negatively by those still in the faith), causing internal conflict.

After reading this synthesis, here's a discussion question to consider: Thinking back on your own experience of religious exit, which of these factors affected you the most: (1) the way you left (2) how committed you had previously been or (3) the groups you connected with after leaving. Feel free to 'reply all' to share with the group!

Q&A WITH THE AUTHOR: DR. HEATHER SPOONER

Q: What motivated you to pursue this research?

A: I was born and raised as a Jehovah's witness. I was 100% a believer and spent the first 48 years of my life being as good a JW as I could be. I 'pioneered' from school, dedicating most of my working hours to the preaching work – knocking on people's doors to try to convert them to being JWs, so that their life would be saved at Armageddon. We were taught as JWs that if we didn't preach to people and give them opportunity to become JWs then we would be "bloodguilty" when they were killed at Armageddon, and then we would not survive Armageddon either. Whereas, if they had rejected the message, then we were not bloodguilty, because at least we had tried.

Years went by and my sister, brother and I all married in the JWs (you must marry 'in the Lord'). We raised our children to be JWs. Research shows that most people remain in the religion in which they were raised so this is no great surprise. I raised my children to be good JWs and they too pioneered when they left school. It is not a pleasant activity, but you do it out of obedience to God and love of fellow man. Years passed, and my sister, who was in an abusive marriage, decided to leave the JWs and flee her JW husband with her children. She ended up leaving the religion and I was told to shun her. This was very difficult, and I felt what I now understand as 'moral injury', which is going against our own internal sense of right and wrong. It felt wrong to shun my sister. The first seeds of doubt were planted. Then my best friend was disfellowshipped. This was clear cut, and I was not allowed to talk to her. I was taught from infancy that you don't talk to disfellowshipped people. I had now lost my sister and my closest friend. I started to ruminate that if any of my children left the JWs or were disfellowshipped that I could not shun them.

The seeds of doubt in my mind began to grow. For the first time in my life, I had to shun people very close to me and I didn't like it. At the same time, circumstances and events in my family life and extended family, of hypocrisy in the religion became very clear. Unacceptable behaviour was tolerated if your father was an 'elder'. Bad behaviour was brushed under the rug for some, whereas my friend was disfellowshipped and lost her whole social circle and family, and I had to shun my sister for simply leaving the religion. She too had lost us as her family. It felt so unfair. My health started to decline, and I began to experience 'panic' attacks when getting ready to attend the religious meetings at the kingdom hall (church). I knew I had to get out or I would fall prey to some strange auto-immune illness that I had seen others develop, and so I slowly but surely started researching, for the first time, my own religion. This is viewed as apostasy, and I knew I had crossed a line. I expected a lightning bolt from heaven to strike me down- but it didn't. I bought a beautiful leather-bound King James version of the Bible and started some deep research. This I know now, was a clue that I would go on to become an academic researcher.

After I had left the JWs I went to university to study psychology. JWs are strongly discouraged from higher education, and now I know why. In university you are taught to think critically rather than just accepting what you're taught. The JWs want you to unquestioningly believe and accept everything they teach- even when they change their own doctrine. After leaving the JWs, I re-established friendships with people I had lost contact with over time, those who had also left or who had been disfellowshipped. I apologised to anyone I had shunned. They were surprisingly forgiving and admitted that all exJWs shunned people in the past.

I started to think about the processes of leaving religions such as JWs. I wondered about the differences in psychological wellbeing between those who had left through choice and those who had been disfellowshipped. I decided to do my BSc dissertation project on this topic. I was interested in 1. The difference in identity transition from JW to non-JW leaving through choice compared to being disfellowshipped. 2. The difference between being raised JW as opposed to being converted to the JWs. 3. How retained belief affected identity post-exit (or how people vary in their retention of JW beliefs despite no longer being JW). My dissertation was successful, and I went on to publish this. It's called "Grieving the Living: The Social Death of Former Jehovah's Witnesses".

I then completed my PhD over the next three years and published another paper "Life after Social death: Leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses, identity Transition and Recovery". My supervisors and I decided that we wanted my research to take a positive approach to recovery, rather than focusing on the negative. We wanted it to be recovery focused.

Q: Were there any findings you would highlight?

A: 1. I had some interesting findings in my qualitative research for my PhD. Firstly, that being 'disfellowshipped' (it is now called 'removed') caused more deleterious impacts to mental wellbeing than leaving the religion voluntarily. This makes sense, as voluntary exit means that it is a persons' choice whether to leave a religion or not, whereas being disfellowshipped is something that is forced upon you in most cases, and strongly associated with 'sin'. I did also find however, that whether a person was disfellowshipped or left voluntarily- being shunned was the norm. It was the responses to shunning that seemed to be mediated by exit path.

2. I found that people needed the exJW community to serve as a bridge to the outside world, and that this positively impacted a persons' sense of wellbeing, self-esteem and belonging. Belonging to social media groups of like-minded people who had been through similar experiences of shunning was really helpful in starting to build a new social identity away from the religion. It is also a place where people can 'tell their story' and be heard by people that actually understand what that feels like.

3. I also found that people who converted to the JWs in adulthood and then left coped much better with identity transition than those who were born and raised as JWs. This highlights the impact of childhood indoctrination, where a person's identity is strongly tied up in their whole being. Like ivy round a tree, it is difficult to separate a person's identity from their religious identity, they are one and the same. The first piece of research I had published explained that a born and raised JW often feels like they have no identity when they are disfellowshipped. "who am I when I am not a Jehovah's witness? - I am no-one" was a response of one of my participants.

4. I also found that it is important to purge the JW identity. A lot of JWs struggle with life on the outside. Celebrating Christmas, Birthdays, Easter, and a whole host of celebrations were viewed as wrong. Eating a sausage with blood in it, betting on the lottery, smoking a cigarette and sex outside marriage are all viewed as sinful and very difficult to engage in for some former members. I therefore recommended that it is good for a person to slowly purge that identity. Do the things that were formally forbidden (if you want to of course). Some of my participants tried different faiths to purge that identity away from themselves.

5. Finally, I found unpicking the doctrine very helpful. Some of my participants exhibited what I call a 'death row mentality'. They still believed that Armageddon was coming and that they would be

destroyed. This death row mentality is so damaging to mental health, and some former JW's are constantly checking the news for signs of the end (as we were trained to do as JW's), only this time, they are on death row, waiting to die. It is tragic! This is why it's so important to unpick the doctrine- like a tightly sewn tapestry, this can be difficult with beliefs and behavioural so firmly entrenched. For me, buying a mainstream bible (I chose the King James version) was helpful. I checked all the verses in the JW bible that had been changed from mainstream ones. This helped me a lot to unpick the doctrine I had been raised on.

Q: Were there any findings that surprised you?

A: Yes, in my first study, I was surprised that people who left of their own free will described more shunning than those who were disfellowshipped. However, on thinking about this more deeply, I suppose this makes sense. When you consider that being disfellowshipped is an act of discipline from the JW's, usually because the person has committed some kind of perceived sin- then being shunned when you haven't done anything wrong will be perceived as grossly unfair. In an Awake magazine (one of the JW publications) in 2016, an article said that "no one should be forced to worship in a way he finds unacceptable or be made to choose between his beliefs and his family". And yet my research indicated that this happens all the time when people leave the JW's. They lose their family because the family cuts them off, they do indeed choose between their beliefs and their family. This is also my personal experience. I left the faith in 2016 and lost my daughter the same year when she cut me off for leaving. I lost my mother, brother, my cousin, my nephew and nieces and a lifetime of friends. In 2020 my mother died of Covid. She had been shunning me for quite some time, and this doctrine robbed me of my final years with my mother. Every time I asked to visit her, she said "I will only see you when you return to Jehovah". This shows how JW's conflate worship with their belief system. It is difficult for them to accept that anything other than the JW religion is an acceptable way to worship. I visited my dying mother in full PPE and have no idea if she even knew I was there, but I had to say goodbye.

Q: What were the main challenges/limitations you encountered when conducting your research?

A: Being older was a challenge- I left the religion in my 40's and sought a university education. This meant I had to catch up with technology, while completing an undergraduate degree and then a PhD. Another challenge is the knowledge that doing research in the JW community is viewed as apostasy. This is the worst sin a JW can commit, and it's very difficult to cope with that. I know that my work, along with that of many others helps people recover from shunning and social loss, and this is really important to me.

I also believe that highlighting shunning in the academic literature may eventually lead to the JW organization adjusting their policies on shunning. Whether that be because they don't want this to reflect badly on them as an organization, or because they realise how damaging and unchristian shunning is, I don't know. But what I do know is that the shunning needs to stop because it is literally killing people. I came across so much suicide in my research I was shocked. Suicide was not a question I was pursuing or even asked about, but it came up time and time again. Some participants had actively tried to take their own life, while others had lost sons, brothers and others to completed suicide, all following disfellowship. Others suffer with severe anxiety and depression because of the loss of wellbeing after being cut off by their own families. Therefore, although the JW's will view me as an apostate for highlighting the damaging effects of shunning, I know that this education is very important. This too, is why my research focused on identity transition post-exit in

a positive light. I did not want to focus on the negative, but rather how former JW's can recover, build a new identity and build new social connections outside of the religion. The exJW community is a beautiful thriving place and is a haven for those who have nowhere to turn. Here they will find people who have been through the experience of shunning and loss, but have rebuilt. So although I love my work, the sacrifice is huge. Although I miss my family greatly, the gains outweigh the losses. Religious freedom is priceless, especially for my other children who now can live authentic lives away from the strict boundaries the JW religion imposes. Life is good.

Q: How might future research build on your findings?

A: There is much to do. I would like to focus on the religious imagery used in JW publications. Particularly those in children's publications. I was raised on a diet of scenes of people screaming, falling into fiery chasms in the split open earth (those who will not survive Armageddon), juxtapositioned against pictures of paradise, playing with lions and tigers in a park-like garden (the promised paradise reward for the faithful JW's). The pictures in my books as a child used to terrify me, and I still have them to remind me what I have left behind, and what I have saved my children from.

I am currently co-writing a book chapter that looks at the experiences of LGBTQ+ former JW's and how they navigate their identity outside their former faith.

I am also involved with the charity "faith to Faithless" a subsidiary of Humanists UK. It was founded in 2015 to raise awareness of apostasy and support those who have left religion in the UK. They provide training to frontline services and safeguarding professionals to help them understand the harmful consequences of particular religious practices (such as Ex evangelical Christians, ex JW's, ex-Muslims, ex-Ultra-Orthodox Jews and others).