'You're going to go into some really dark, dark places in your mind.' Loss and disillusionment of being shunned from the Jehovah's Witness community and its impact

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"You're Going to Go into Some Really Dark, Dark Places in Your Mind."

Loss and Disillusionment of Being Shunned From the Jehovah's Witnesses Community and Its Impact

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Abstract

Being shunned from a tight-knit religious community, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, may be a traumatic event. The accounts of twenty-one participants, qualitatively analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis, elucidate the extent to which religious shunning impacts an individual's life. Two dominant themes emerged from the data: "losses due to shunning" and "rebuilding of self post-shunning." This article will explore the impact that being shunned has on the participants' lives, considering its psychological consequences and daily challenges. The article will then discuss the positive aspects which may characterise the experiences of those shunned from the Jehovah's Witnesses community.

Keywords: religious shunning, Jehovah's Witnesses, betrayal, family bonds, regained autonomy

Introduction

The Jehovah's Witnesses are a tight-knit religious community that frowns upon forming social bonds with people outside the community (Blankholm, 2009). As such, for most of its members, the community represents their entire social lives. A public shunning announcement in the presence of the community represents a crucial point in the individual's life, as being shunned results in a complete disconnect from the community. Shunning might result from the disciplinary processes implemented by the Jehovah's Witnesses community, which aims at determining the gravity of a sin committed by a member and their level of repentance. Allegations of misconduct (such as sexual immorality, drunkenness, gambling, domestic violence, and apostasy) may require review by a judicial committee whose members may deem that shunning is necessary.

When the community shuns a member because it considers the individual's actions falling short of behavioural and moral standards, the whole community denies the individual's existence. The Elders (Jehovah's Witnesses' spiritual shepherds) and the community (including the shunned member's family and friends) actively engage in the shunning. The shunned members become symbolically dead in the eyes of their fellows, and the community treats them as non-existent (Borgstrom, 2017; Ransom et al., 2021). The group and family halt all communication with the former member, avoiding any contact or interactions with the individual.

There is limited research exploring the impact of being shunned. This research's findings resonate with the findings of previous studies conducted on other religious denominations that use religious shunning as a disciplinary measure, such as the Exclusive Brethren (Aebi-Mytton, 2017), Amish (Faulkner, 2017), or ultra-Orthodox Jews (Berger, 2015). This body of research suggests that leaving hight-control, gated, or orthodox communities because of the loss of the community's approval severely affects the individuals' well-being with repercussions on their emotional and social dimensions (Aebi-Mytton, 2017; Berger, 2015; Fazzino, 2014; Fenelon and Danielsen, 2016; Scheitle and Adamczyk, 2010). Therefore, this article aims to further expand the existing knowledge on the subject by specifically focusing on the impact of being shunned from the Jehovah's Witnesses community.

Methodology

A qualitative approach, with the aim of gaining insight into the respondents' lived experiences, guided data collection. The subjective construal and sensemaking of personal occurrences became central to the process of knowing. In this respect, subjectivity and the individual's interpretation of phenomena gave the possibility of uncovering the meaning and essence of religious shunning and its impact on one's life as the participants experienced it (Brysbaert and Rastle, 2012; Higginbottom, 2004).

Participants

Semi-structured, videoconferencing interviews were conducted between February and September 2020 with twenty-one British participants who were officially shunned from the Jehovah's Witnesses community. This section provides collated information on their demographics to preserve the participants' anonymity. Ten of the participants were women, and eleven were men. Their ages ranged from 21 to 61+ years. The sample comprised 43% born into the community, 29% raised following their parents' conversion, and 28% converted as teenagers or adults. The reasons for being shunned ranged from apostasy to marital

infidelity (14%) and sex before marriage (14%). Dissatisfaction (33%) with the community's teachings or policy and joining another religious denomination (19%) were other reasons that led to the participants' shunning.

Procedure

Participants were recruited by posting an invitation on dedicated support groups and forums on Facebook and Reddit. These peer support groups provide a safe space for former Jehovah's Witnesses who might either find it difficult to find tailored support for their experiences or want to seek additional help to that received from mainstream services. Moreover, individuals who have been shunned have limited social networks (Grendele et al., in press), and these peer support groups provide a starting point for individuals to create new social connections.

Face-to-face interviews would have been preferable (Cater, 2011; Krouwel et al., 2019), but to adhere to the UK government's restrictions in response to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the data were collected through videoconferencing interviews. The first researcher conducted the interviews using a semi-structured interview guide, and she audio-taped the interviews. On average, each interview lasted approximately one and a half hours. Participants gave informed consent prior to the interview, and all participants were free to withdraw from the interview at any stage. Following the interview, the interviewer debriefed all the participants, transcribed the rich interview material verbatim, and de-identified it. The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards set by the British Psychological Society's (BPS) Code of Ethics and Conduct (2009; 2014) and received ethical clearance from the School of Human and Social Sciences Ethics Panel of the University of West London.

Analysis

The first author used Reflexive Thematic Analysis to analyse the collected rich data (Braun et al., 2019). According to Braun et al. (2019), the reflexive approach to Thematic Analysis highlights the researchers' active role in producing knowledge where their subjectivity is acknowledged and embraced. The researchers, therefore, become actively engaged in understanding and interpreting data through the lenses of their unique perspectives. The result is "a coherent and compelling interpretation of the data, grounded in the data" (Braun et al., 2019, p.6).

The article presents a specific segment of the findings of a wider study that explored three issues. First, it acquired information about the individuals' journey from becoming a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses community to leaving the group. Second, it catalogued and analysed the impact that shunning has on the individuals' lives. Third, it identified the coping strategies the former members adopted to normalise their new circumstances post-shunning.

Findings

The data analysis led to pinpointing patterns and differences across the participants' accounts and identifying two overarching themes: "losses due to shunning" and "rebuilding of self post-shunning." Each participant's account was unique but there were recurrent aspects across the participants' experiences of shunning. The two overarching themes emerged in each participant's interview.

Losses due to shunning

According to the respondents' narratives, religious shunning is an experience of loss that has a serious impact on their lives. Religious shunning has affected the respondents' social lives, psychological well-being, and in some cases, the relationship the individual perceives to have with God. It also encompasses daily challenges, such as financial and social hardship.

Loss and betrayal of close relationships. The sub-theme "loss and betrayal of close relationships" evidences the substantial adverse impact that the loss of family and friends has on the individual's psychological well-being. For instance, some of the respondents felt betrayed by their families and friends because of the denied opportunity to defend themselves and to explain the motivation that had led them to leave the community:

> Probably a lot of us might have…a kind of sense of betrayal, like, "These are friends, but they haven't really endeavoured to find out why [I left]." And incredulity with the parents-in-law. "Why would they not want to find out why I've made a decision they know I'm not gonna make this decision lightly. Why would they not investigate?" (Samuel).

Although the individuals know the consequences of being shunned, there is a component of shock and abruptness when they finally realise, after being shunned, that the doctrine takes precedence over the individual (Lifton, 1961). The individuals feel hurt by betrayal when the meaningful people in their lives do not value their relationships as much as they thought they did.

The participants' accounts highlight a further aspect of the psychological impact, which is the impact on self-esteem due to being rejected and shunned by their families:

> I genuinely thought it was my fault. I was a bad person, a terrible evil person who deserved to die (Emma).

> I felt worthless. You know what, once it really hit me, I felt like everybody was judging me and talking about me without me being out to defend myself. I felt lonely. Really, really lonely to start with. I'm quite a sociable person anyway. In some ways that made me feel like a child. Like, I remember my ex-husband said to my son, '"Oh, it's basically like, you know, like, if you do something naughty, and you get grounded, and you can't go out, but you can see everybody else playing, and then it makes you realise what you've done wrong...And it would help you not to do it again." And I thought, "Well, perhaps, perhaps that was the best way you could think to explain it to a child," but it makes you feel like a child (Liza).

Anxiety and fearing a negative retribution from God are other adverse feelings that highlight the deep psychological impact of religious shunning on the individual's life:

> Many [who are shunned] are constantly feeling anxiety, because of the teaching always in the background. Armageddon[1] is coming; you're going to be destroyed. You're no good to God; you're in disgrace because you left God. All those thoughts in the background are constantly beating them (Susan).

The data revealed that, although the person physically leaves the community, the group's cultural heritage remains deeply embedded in the individual. Therefore, the healing process involves a redefinition of the self and may be a lengthy process:

> The indoctrination process isn't like a quick brainwash. It's a steady drip-drip over a lifetime…that goes in a lot deeper…And we've often said to people that it's difficult to get out of a cult. But it's more difficult to get the content off a person. It goes in deep, and it lasts a long time (Jacob).

The loss of close friendships led some participants to experience adverse feelings, such as anger, hurt, anxiety, and suicidal thinking:

> I went from being okay to being angry, to having hatred towards them because my freedom from being able to speak to people...had been taken away (Charles).

Based on the participants' accounts, it appears that anger and hatred may be emotional reactions to this new restrictive state. The individual experiences shunning as an imbalance of power. The community imposes its decision over the individual, which limits the individual's freedom, triggering the adverse emotional response.

Depression is another adverse response of being shunned:

> [Being shunned] had a massive impact on my mental health…Obviously, you expect the parents to be always there, no matter what. And it seemed like because I had made my own decision instead of just following along with what everyone else wanted me to do, then that family support was taken away… [I was] very depressed (Angie).

By shunning its members, the community deprives them of the emotional support that family and friends can provide, and the individuals start a solitary and challenging path:

> It was not a great network, like one or two people which compared to how many people you're supposed to have as support as a Witness to go, to go from all that to one or two, it was different (Dylan).

The participants' social networks were drastically affected once they were shunned. The shunning decision deprived the participants from receiving any level of emotional and practical support by their families, which also appears to have further diminished any sense of belonging. The lost feelings of belonging in turn appear to have led some respondents to question the meaning of life. Loss of life's meaning because of losing the social contour is at

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[1] Armageddon is the war of God at the end of time. During Armageddon, according to the Jehovah's Witnesses, all false religions, governments, commercial systems, and all the ungodly people will be destroyed.

times so overwhelming that taking one's own life appears to be a plausible solution (Chen et al., 2020; Steele et al., 2014).

Respondents provide further evidence to support the idea that being shunned thwarts the individual's fundamental needs, compromising their sense of meaning in life, sense of purpose, and enhancing a sense of uncertainty:

> I did do significant reading about Jehovah's Witnesses and what they believed, and I was astounded at the things that I learned about the kinds of abuses that went on in their head office in Brooklyn, New York, and all the flip-flops that they've done...and how many doctrinal changes there were. And I became more and more disillusioned. Eventually I decided that, no, I just could not support it in any way, shape, or form (Rob).

As the consequence of information gathering, some participants experienced a crisis that shook their certainties and beliefs and led them to leave the community. For a Jehovah's Witness, the religious teachings provide a frame of reference to navigate life. Losing the social and belief structure that has given meaning to one's own life is destabilising:

> You don't know where to turn. You don't know what's the truth anymore (Liam).

> It's like that you don't have an anchor to turn to. It's very difficult. Yeah, the trauma is immense (Susan).

Losing the points of reference that the community provides led most of the participants to feel lost. By leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses and its structures, the individual leaves behind a way of living, understanding themselves, and the world; they may experience the inner turmoil caused by facing the unknown. The old certitudes have collapsed, and the individual's future appears uncertain. This crisis is faced alone since the shunned individual has lost the support of family and friends.

The transition from the old paradigm to building a new frame of reference is a process that implies a drastic perspective reorientation. When the individuals successfully transit from old frameworks to new ones, they are the authors of a cognitive revolution. However, at times they experience these periods of transition as unsettling:

> [I experienced] feeling of depression, I mean, I'm sure I had a nervous breakdown. I used to have suicidal thoughts…I mean, when I left, or rather, in that period of inactivity, I often used to shout out and say, you know, "If you're there, Jehovah, just kill me" (Luke).

The experience of feeling lost, alone, and uncertain about the future may be so frightening and overpowering that the individual may wish to die.

Religious shunning may be such a traumatic experience to such an extent that some former members act upon their suicidal thoughts, as the participants of this study report:

> Some ex-Jehovah's Witnesses kill themselves…[Being shunned] is really hard. It's not just losing friends (Liam).

> [The Jehovah's Witnesses] destroy lives, thousands of lives. Not to mention physically, because [some shunned individuals] committed suicide because they couldn't handle anymore (Susan).

This extreme action is because being shunned can put a terrible strain on individuals:

> You're going to go into some really dark, dark places in your mind (Dylan).

Although only some of those shunned consider adopting drastic solutions to soothe the emotional suffering, the effects of shunning are nonetheless long-lasting:

> It's been over two decades. It still does today, it hurts every day. Every single day. It hurts. And nobody understands it...It's emotionally self-isolating (Emma).

Despite the time that has lapsed since the shunning announcement, for some participants the emotional pain remains intense.

Financial and social hardship. The sub-theme, "financial and social hardship," captures the experience of being deprived of the social support and assistance in terms of aid in kind, money, or employment opportunities because of shunning. The religious community could be a source of mutual help and information sharing about employment, business, housing, or healthcare (Bahk, 2002). The acts of shunning by the Jehovah's Witnesses excludes former members from these resources, which may have negative impacts on their well-being.

The implications of being shunned are accentuated further when considering that children can be shunned despite being minors. For those minors who are left without a place to live, the practical challenges escalate as they face the difficulties of providing for themselves:

> I was absolutely unaware that there was any social aid; it never even occurred to me. It sounds stupid now, but generally I had such a limited frame of reference. It never even occurred to me that at 16 I would be entitled to financial or social aid (Emma).

A core factor that exacerbates the challenges shunned minors face in caring for themselves is their lack of awareness in terms of support available outside of the Jehovah's Witnesses community. Because of shunning, the community withholds functional and emotional support from them, and their families may disown them.

Miller (1988, p. 294) identified a possible cause of "tangible economic harm" in being shunned from some gated religious communities. In the Jehovah's Witnesses community, different aspects of the individuals' lives overlap, and members may decide to establish business relationships with other fellows--a decision that increases dependability:

> [Being shunned] was also a problem because my business was largely involving Witnesses. So, most of my income, my income was dependent on the relationship with the Witnesses. And literally that just went, switched off overnight...So, now, we had some big financial problems. The bank did the dirty on us as well. So, my computer, our computer empire, if you like, that all fell apart, and eventually led...to sell the house. So, but I didn't go bankrupt, officially bankrupt. But...we were wiped out. So, we had to eventually move on from a very good income as a Witness and have been in business, really lucrative. So, that was literally just bad time (Jacob).

> After I left, I was still a window cleaner, and much of the people that I worked with were Witnesses. So, again, they, they all cut me off, contracts and things were cancelled (Luke).

These examples emphasise the tight-knit nature of the interactions that may characterise Jehovah's Witnesses' lives. These relationships often extend beyond sharing the same religious beliefs to include business relationships. Thus, shunning is likely to have financial impact on individuals.

Relationship with God. The sub-theme, "relationship with God," highlights the impact that shunning may have on the relationship the individual believes to have with a supernatural entity. The harsh treatment that individuals receive as the consequence of shunning, and the realisation that the foundation of their beliefs is deceptive and manipulative, may compromise their perceived relationship with God:

> I thought, if that was the Truth, and I found it to be a lie, and if that was the best of the best, and I found it to be the worst, then, that's it, I'm done with religion. I'm not interested in religion anymore…I was devoid of any desire to pursue anything to do with the Bible, religion, spirituality (Charles).

Although some individuals do not reject God completely, after the experience of leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses, the relationship they believe having with a supernatural entity is now characterised by an underlying sense of mistrust:

> My relationship with God is not good, not good…I feel as if I don't trust Him, you know, when I sometimes pray, I, I feel as if my prayers are not answered (Rose).

Being shunned often resulted in a change of the respondents' beliefs about God:

> I don't have a relationship with God. And it's not enough to say I'm an atheist. I'm a humanist. I lost [the relationship with God]. I tried. When I "woke up," I got a proper Bible, not a fake one [the Jehovah's Witnesses' Bible]. And I started reading it. After reading Ray Franz's[2] [book], I thought, "Let me go into this. Let's be a Christian. Let me still just love God without the organisation." I got three chapters in, and I thought, "No, I can't do this." I feel personally, He is too cruel for me. I summed it by saying actually, "It's not a very nice person." And I'll leave it like that. I don't need that to be a good person, in fact, I'm a better one.

In summary, this section revealed that shunning is an experience that encompasses several losses, and the effects of being shunned are powerful and destructive. Religious shunning not only has negative impacts on the psychological and spiritual well-being of the shunned person but also challenges the individual's life with practical matters. Following the loss and betrayal of close relationships, the individual may also experience adverse emotional responses, such as anger and feelings of hurt, a negative impact on self-esteem, and suicidal ideation. Furthermore, when members are shunned, they face daily challenges, such as financial and social hardships. These adverse impacts take various manifestations and at times have severe and long-lasting effects.

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[2] Raymond Franz (1922-2010) was a member of the Governing Body of the Jehovah's Witnesses community. He served in this capacity for 15 years. He was then removed from his position and later disfellowshipped because of allegations of apostasy. Franz wrote two books, *Crisis of Conscience* and *In Search of Christian Freedom*, where he shared his personal experiences of the Jehovah's Witnesses and his perspective on the community's doctrines.

The rebuilding of self post-shunning

Religious shunning appears to be a multi-faceted experience. Whilst the participants report negative impacts of shunning as the consequence of the several losses they endured, they also report constructive outcomes because of initiating a post-shunning process towards the rebuilding of self. This section will consider the themes that have emerged from the data: an exploration of new spiritual and faith pathways, a newfound autonomy, the redefinition of their priorities, the creation of a new, more authentic social network, and the prioritisation of family bonds. Lastly, conquering existing fears appears to be a significant milestone towards the emancipation from the community's controlling relationship.

Spirituality. Unlike other respondents who had lost their connection with God, for some participants, shunning did not compromise the relationship they feel to have with God nor shake their faith. For them, believing in God and their faith transcended being a member of a religious denomination:

> Personal faith and church membership are two very different things. They are connected, but they don't have to be together. And so, I'm at a point in my life now where I live pretty much a personal faith rather than church membership (Eric).

As it emerged from the accounts of some respondents, faith in God and religious affiliation are mutually exclusive. Being shunned has not affected their perceived relationship with God, as their faith in God is not dependant on the religious denomination they belong to. Rather, religious affiliation is seen as a pathway that may lead to God, and as soon as they realised that the Jehovah's Witnesses community was not the right place to find God, they left it and continued their quest to find Him:

> To me nothing had changed because…I'd always seen...there is a creator. So, the commitment I made to God when I was 17...I've never changed from that. It's just that I was heading in that direction, and I realised that God wasn't there. And so, I continued on (Samuel).

As the respondents' accounts suggest, joining a religious denomination is now a personal choice compared with their previous experience. By way of example, Grace became a baptised Jehovah's Witness after her parents imposed such a decision on her and her siblings. When she left the community, her search for God led Grace and her husband to embrace another religious denomination. She says:

> A couple of weeks later we got baptised…Because, you know, I felt that I was forced into doing something, back when I was still in [the Jehovah's Witnesses]. So, this was a proper personal decision that I made.

This account highlights the contrast between being forced to be baptised and making a choice. The individual is no longer compelled by others. Rather, the individual willingly choses to join and become a baptised member of a new religious community.

Some of the participants, especially the second or third generation of Jehovah's Witnesses, report having become atheists. For them, accepting and embracing the presence of God according to the Jehovah's Witnesses' teachings was not the result of critical research, but the result of limited and biased knowledge, an assumption imposed by the Jehovah's Witnesses community. As some of them explain, they always questioned the existence of God, but they silenced and ignored their doubts:

I doubted the existence and the involvement of God in human life. So that's one of the things that I was dealing with after sort of having made the decision to leave, I kind of continued to do research on that. And I came to the personal conclusion that I didn't believe in the existence of God (Oliver).

Although some participants report not believing in the existence of a supernatural entity, leaving the community has allowed them to nurture their sense of spirituality, which focuses on one's own inner dimension rather than being the expression of a religious belief:

But in terms of spirituality, like I, I think I would consider myself to be a person who has kind of a sense of spirituality. But I may be sort of in less mainstream ways. So, you know...like, I do a lot of meditation; I've got a lot of benefit from that. And, and I don't mean that I invest in it in terms of like a mystical kind of way. But in terms of a broader term of spirituality, I feel spiritual needs and that through doing meditation, through yoga, that kind of thing (Oliver).

Once the individuals leave the community, they are no longer compelled to simulate other's feelings or worship an entity whose existence they doubt. They are free to explore and express their spirituality according to their own disposition without fearing the consequences.

Autonomy. Although individuals often process being shunned by their families and friends as a traumatic and painful experience, they also start to appreciate various facets of freedom. After many years trapped in a controlling relationship, the individuals enjoy being able to be in charge of their own decisions, and the concept of regained freedom spans across almost all the participants' accounts:

So, there was the freedom, like, you've been under communist rules, and now it's gone, and now I can do whatever I want, and I can be what I want to be (Samuel).

And I'd smile at them [former friends, members of the community], and I'd say "Hello." And then one of them said, "You're not allowed to talk to us." Actually, one of the last times I said, "You are not allowed to talk to me. I'm not doing any wrong. I'm actually free, I can speak and say hello if I want to. You're not." And I don't think they got it...I think they thought I was still under the authority of "you are not allowed to." But no, I'm free and actually I used to feel sorry for them, because I used to think, "They're still in. They are still trapped in that mindset" (Carrie).

According to the participants' narration, Jehovah's Witnesses perceive reality and interact with the world around them through the lens of their beliefs. It appears that the Jehovah's Witnesses, by saying, "You are not allowed to talk to us," are projecting externally their condition of subjection (Baumeister et al., 1998; Freud, 1936). Admitting that they are not allowed to talk to a shunned person would mean acknowledging their state of unfreedom. This acknowledgement would contradict what they believe, namely that the Truth (their creed), according to the community, makes people free. Therefore, members deal with those feelings or thoughts that they cannot accept (because they would deeply shake their certainties or beliefs) by placing them outside of themselves and attribute them to other persons (Freud, 1936). Thus, as it emerges from the accounts of the respondents, the first step in reclaiming freedom involves a retrospective appraisal of the individuals' former lives when in the community compared with their present lives outside of it. What the individuals previously perceived subconsciously or ignored emerges at a conscious level for them to

realise that they were not free and that now they are no longer subjected to a system of control and influence.

The participants are now cognisant of their renewed levels of autonomy:

> Absolutely, 100%, my freedom and being able to think for myself and not being told what to think. And, yeah, being able to do as I please, obviously within reason, but being able to think for myself, not being told what to think, not being in trouble for questioning (Erin).

Individuals fully grasp the controlling nature of the Jehovah's Witnesses' structure with all its tight boundaries only after leaving the community, and finally can comprehend and appreciate freedom. Whilst being members of the community, the individuals underwent a censorship of their thoughts. The community considered the individuals' doubts, questions, and opinions as being poisonous to the point that individuals learn to constrain and condemn self-thinking and critical thought (Foucault, 1995). The community's discouragement of independent thinking leads individuals to accept the leadership's teaching at face value. "There is no motivation towards reflection, criticism and experimentation" (Bauman, 2001, p. 11). Once the individuals are shunned, they learn or regain the ability to think critically:

> When you're raised in the Jehovah's Witnesses, you sort of have this sense of superiority...as if, you know, you have all the answers to the questions...There's an answer for everything. And even if there isn't an answer, or something doesn't seem right, then "Jehovah's gonna sort it out." And it's kind of like, it makes, I think it made me lazy in my mind. I feel much more of a thinking person now. If something confronts me, I consider it rather than dismissing it (Liza).

A consequence of thoughts-censorship is that individuals are silenced and deprived of their voices. However, when they leave the community, they are finally able to express themselves unconstrained.

> I appreciate having my freedom to do what I want. And having freedom of speech. You know, it's, you know, [when in the community] you can't say this, and you can't say that (Gaby).

New opportunities. Another aspect of freedom the participants experienced following shunning is that they are now able to redefine and redirect their priorities. For example, the majority of young Jehovah's Witnesses are prohibited from seeking higher education:

> Something that was really frowned upon was higher education. Amongst the Jehovah's Witnesses, they advised you not to go to university. Their reason is that you'll face temptations. You'll be tempted to try drugs and smoke and party and have immoral relationships, have sex before marriage (Erin).

The official reason in discouraging young members to pursue a degree is twofold. First, the school environment would expose the young member to temptations. Therefore, according to the community, the sooner the individuals leave school, the more protected they are from dangerous influences. Second, higher education is presented as a distraction to more important activities and goals, which the community's leadership deem to be more important. The consequences are as follows:

A lot of Witnesses are self-employed window cleaners and that was what I ended up doing. And I always remember, [non-Witnesses] used to say, "Why on earth you're cleaning windows?"…The idea is that you can do more for Jehovah…you do the bare minimum to make a living, and then the rest of the time you knock on doors (Luke).

Despite craving knowledge, many young members avoid pursuing educational pathways. Nonetheless, following shunning and becoming free from the many rules imposed on them by a controlling leadership, participants regained a sense of power over their lives and some of them decided to get higher education degree:

And being able to do nursing now is the most wonderful thing I found, never found more pleasure in caring for other people (Erin).

I craved education. And I did an access course. And I've been accepted at university (Maggie).

The journey to a new faith…led me to further education, theology courses, and I'm doing my master's at the moment (Luke).

Although the price of the discipline may be high in terms of losses, religious shunning also represents the emancipation of the individuals from the leadership's tight hold. They no longer abide by the community's rules and, consequently, the group's retribution is of no consequence.

New relationships. When the individual loses membership status, friendships within the community abruptly end. However, the participants gain the freedom to choose their friends without any imposition or restriction:

As a Jehovah's Witness, you're only allowed to be friends with people from within the community. The assumption being that people within the community are the only good people. But the truth of the matter is that within Jehovah's Witnesses as a group, there are some really, really great people and there are some really, really terrible people. That is the demographic of any large group. And I no longer choose my friends based on their faith (Eric).

The process of making new connections and establishing new relationships is a process of discovery and unexpected outcomes. Tom, reflecting on his previous associations, says:

What was actually quite scary with hindsight is how they modify your expectations. I'm thinking about the people who I considered to be my best friends, it's very likely that I wouldn't make friends with them these days. Because...in the congregation I grew up in, academically, the most achieving person was...a BT[3] engineer. And he was looked up to, as being intelligent and bright, and the idea that a BT engineer is a paradigm of intelligence, it just amuses the hell out of me.
I'm an intellectual snob. I don't like associating socially with unintelligent people for the most part…And I am surrounded by interesting people who previously I would never have countenance being friends with.

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[3] BT: British Telecommunication

As Tom comments, people outside the community intrigue him. After years spent in an environment characterised by a standardised and narrow mentality and people void of academic achievements, he perceived the new social environment as being stimulating. The respondents' accounts underline the strong influence the community exerts on the individual, modifying and levelling the expectations of its members in terms of friendships. Tom, by defining himself "an intellectual snob," reaffirms his ownership in deciding what kind of friends he wants to surround him. Having submissively accepting the pool of limited and dull connections within the community, shunned participants became actively engaged in selecting their new friends:

> I'm quite a social person…And there's so many times when I wanted to get friends with the other school moms but as a Witness you have to keep others at arm's length. You never go beyond saying "Hello" at the school's gates, never develop your friendships. You know, the first time I thought, "I could be friends with whoever I want to be friends with." I haven't got to think, "Oh, well, they're not Witnesses." So, you know, I started chatting with other moms. It might be a coffee. We've start building our friendship groups with people outside the Witnesses and actually discovering that there are very lovely people out there; people that we were told to not get friends with because they're going to be a bad influence on you. And I've probably got more good friends in my life now than ever before (Carrie).

The individual realises that the worldly people (non-Jehovah's Witnesses), who are so negatively depicted by the community leadership and for this reason avoided and feared, are actually interesting and positive people. For example, Samuel says:

> Human individuality and the variety of people and I think one of the most, the markedly different thing that I appreciated when I first came in and I still love, it was no longer me to classify people as worldly people or Jehovah's Witnesses, so to see all people as a beautiful product of God.

Prioritising family bonds. 'Prioritising family bonds' is another sub-theme that surfaces from the respondents' accounts. When individuals are shunned, they are no longer compelled to adhere to the exhausting and time-consuming routine imposed by the community. The former members may enjoy spending quality time with their spouse and children:

> It was good, it was great, from that point of view as it allowed both of us to enjoy in a fuller way our marriage and our children. Have the freedom to make choices...And be able to explore different views (Luke).

> When my son was 11, he said to me, he said, "Dad, I want to go play football for a team." And the teams usually play on a Sunday morning when there's church. And I said to the people at the church, because I was part of the music, and so I said, "I'm actually going to step out of the band because my son wants to go play football. And I want to be there with him." And nobody minded…I wanted to spend those years with my kids. And so that's what we do. So that's what I value the most. Definitely (Eric).

For the Jehovah's Witnesses, attending the weekly meetings and engaging in the community's activities is a priority, often at the expense of the family. When the respondents left the community, they could finally enjoy their families fully. The entire family had benefited because they left the community. They could experience the freedom to endorse their children's passions and to prioritise spending time with their families over church

attendance. Some of them also experienced being in a new, non-judgemental religious environment, which, contrary to the Jehovah's Witnesses, seemed to respect the individual's decisions and priorities.

Religious shunning usually results in a severing of the family ties; nonetheless, at times, it may act as a catalyst for other family members to leave the community. Carrie says:

> My mom and dad grew up seven of their children as Witnesses. Now five of them are Christians.

Following Carrie's official shunning, four out of six of her siblings decided to leave the Jehovah's Witnesses as well and to join a new faith together. Moreover, although her parents remained members, they did not shun them. As Carrie's account suggests, in some circumstances the shunning of a family member might prompt others in the family to leave. Carrie was a devout Jehovah's Witness, a respectable member of the community. The fact that she was shunned because she joined another religious faith led her family to question the reasons for this decision and to embark in open discussions with her. The way that Carrie's family reacted suggests that the response to shunning is not always predetermined and that on occasion there may be variation to the typical response.

Shunning a close person is such a drastic and life-changing decision for all the parties involved that, at times, the Jehovah's Witnesses may realise that this step cannot be taken lightly. However, there are strong internal and external factors that occur in bolstering individuals' reluctance to interact with shunned people. The threat of the punishment and losses, the internalised belief system (Lalich and McLaren, 2010), and the assumption that shunning will benefit the individuals are all factors that influence members' behaviour. Thus, a Jehovah's Witness's decision to listen to a shunned person is, by itself, a great achievement, which suggests a redefinition of the individual's priorities. It seems that something in the disposition of the individual is changing since such a decision defies deeply rooted beliefs. Therefore, although a member's decision to communicate with a shunned person may take time to solidify and actualise, it could be the first step towards a further overture that may have unexpected outcomes. The decision to finally engage in conversation with a shunned relative could not only be eye-opening but also be a step towards family and friends prioritising family bonds over shunning practices.

Conquering of existing fear. A sub-theme that permeates the data is the conquering of fear that used to hold back and subjugate participants whilst they were members of the community. Fear is a distinctive feature of controlling relationships. The psychological and emotional control that result from fear are pivotal in allowing the abuse to continue (Wiener, 2017). Although recovery from chronic fear (which characterises controlling relationships) may be a long-challenging process, the individual experiences a sense of inner strength and pride in changing (Pain, 2012). Some participants experienced similar feelings:

> Basically, I wake up in the morning now, I don't fear, I don't have any fear or guilt or sadness because I can't live up to these standards, which are just impossible to achieve. And I don't have to live this boring, monotonous life just there. I can live my life my own way. It's not, you know, I'm not perfect, but, you know, my life is not terrible. I'm not a bad person just because I left the Jehovah's Witnesses. You know? It's just nice being able to be in control, I do not have this nagging guilt or obligation (Noah).

I don't miss the control; I don't miss the feel of fear. Well, all the fears are gone. I don't fear Armageddon anymore. I don't fear demons. I don't fear the men coming to my door. I don't fear upsetting people unintentionally by one word. I don't miss any of that. And I never will. Freedom's quite sweet. Quite sweet (Maggie).

Free from fearing God's punishment, former members start to appreciate the present moment, to enjoy life fully, free of regrets, and accepting death as part of their existence.

I love the fact that I no longer live in fear of Armageddon…I've had a good run...if I'd die tomorrow, doesn't vary. I don't have a bucket list as such; I've done most of the things I wanted to do. I'm sure there are things out there I'd enjoy doing, but I'm very lacking in imagination. I'm very black and white on things, so. So, by now, if I died tomorrow, I would still have had a better life than the vast majority of people in the world (Tom).

The concept of freedom is a common theme that connects the various aspects of leaving the community. It is a sense of freedom that infuses a deep feeling of hope and which one of the participants describes, "I think it's important to know that there is life after the group" (Samuel).

Discussion

This article explored the impact being shunned from the Jehovah's Witnesses community has on those shunned. Being shunned by family and friends is an experience that encompasses several losses with severe repercussions on the lives of individuals. This article discussed the psychological impacts and practical challenges that result from shunning. For example, according to the respondents, being rejected by the family seriously impacted their self-esteem. Self-esteem is linked to self-value, and it is influenced by social processes (Leary and MacDonald, 2005; Liu et al., 2010). Episodes of social rejection have been associated with changes in peoples' self-esteem and feelings about themselves (Eisenberger et al., 2011; Eisenberger et al., 2003). Moreover, since the family is the primary and central social environment, the individual's level of self-esteem is aligned to the quality of family relationships and is vulnerable to rejection from family (Scharp and Hall, 2017). Therefore, poor family functioning is associated with an impairment of self-esteem and self-concept (Shi et al., 2017). Furthermore, the extent to which the community's teachings shape the members' self-esteem and self-concept becomes blatant once the community shuns them.

Worthlessness, feeling like a grounded child, or feeling that death is a deserved epilogue for their behaviour are some elements that emerge from the respondents' accounts and that underline the deep psychological impact of religious shunning on former members' lives. Ambiguous loss, depression, loneliness, suicidal thoughts, and suicide are other consequences that emphasise the deep psychological impact of religious shunning (Fazzino, 2014; Fenelon and Danielsen, 2016; Ransom et al., 2021). Moreover, religious shunning affects individuals physically by challenging their ability to provide for their own sustenance and by causing a tangible economic harm (Berger, 2015; Miller, 1998).

However, being shunned and leaving the community produces constructive outcomes as well through the rebuilding of self. The underlining theme that connects the participants' accounts is the concept of freedom. When the individuals are shunned and commence a new life outside the community, they undergo a process towards self-ownership, which involves freedom to choose according to their own judgments. Nonetheless, the process towards

healing and emancipation necessitates time and may involve the resolution of different facets of trauma and layers of influence that the individual experienced (Lalich and McLaren, 2010). For example, although a person physically leaves the community, the group's cultural heritage remains deeply embedded in former members (Scheitle and Adamczyk, 2010).

The group's beliefs, its perspectives about what is right and wrong, and the punishment/reward concept have become an integral part of the individuals' mindset, moulding their perception and behaviour. In this respect, the article underlined the extent to which shunning, rejection, and avoidance are behaviours that are deeply rooted in the community's culture. For instance, individuals, prior to being shunned, actively engaged in avoiding worldly people. Because the out-group cannot be physically removed, Jehovah's Witnesses keep worldly people at arm's length. However, following shunning, the participants in this study experienced an opening towards the external world. They started to appreciate concepts such as individuality and diversity and to reject the stereotyped labels that the community adamantly endorses.

The process towards self-appreciation and rejection of the community's stereotypes is equally lengthy. It takes time because members appraise themselves according to the criteria set by the community. The community negatively judges the behaviour of those individuals who have fallen short of the expected standards. As Oberg (1960) stated, individuals evaluate the world and themselves through the values that stem from their culture. As a result, people label themselves and others in the same way the community does. Therefore, this article provides insight into the controlling power of the Jehovah's Witnesses' religious discourse.

Language manipulation within a religious context becomes a means through which a group reinforces and expresses categorisation and ingroup/outgroup bias (Porter et al., 2016). Language shapes the audience's perception about its social identity and group membership. Language "contributes to the perpetration of stereotyping and prejudice" (Porter et al., 2016, p. 100). Categories and labels, such as worldly people vs. Jehovah's Witnesses, exert a strong and enduring influence on perception and judgement (Foroni and Rothbart, 2013). As Rosenhan (1973) argued, labels are "sticky," and once an individual or a group is labelled, it is difficult to remove the tag. Therefore, the decategorisation process may be challenging, especially if the labels are well-rooted in the former member. However, the participants' experiences suggest that exposure to a new environment may elicit a positive attitudinal shift, helping individuals to free their minds from prejudice and see the values of new community involvements.

Another aspect that underlines the controlling and coercive environment that characterises the lives of a member in the Jehovah's Witnesses community is the experience of being silenced. A parallel can be drawn between the experiences of some participants and the experiences of battered women who escape abusive relationships. Abuse within an intimate relationship is a multifaceted pattern of behaviours and strategies employed by the perpetrator(s) to coerce and control their victim(s). For example, perpetrators can punish their victims by expressing their needs and wishes as tactics by which to reassert their power and control over them (Estrellado and Loh, 2019). Thus, often battered women metaphorically lose their voices along with their autonomy as they learn (from fear of punishment) to restrain themselves from vocalising their thoughts or needs. When the victims free themselves from the abusive partner, they regain access to their silenced voices in the same way as individuals who leave the Jehovah's Witnesses are finally unconstrained by the group's dictates when expressing themselves.

The article also emphasised the way fear characterises the lives of the members of the community. Rather than being a positive and uplifting belief system, the Jehovah's Witnesses' ideology appears to subjugate members through concepts such as punishment, threat, guilt, fear, and unattainable expectations. After being shunned, the participants emancipated themselves from the rigid parameters that acted in devaluating community members. They experienced the effects of positive reframings of their own lives. They finally realised that their self-concepts and their lives do not have to be defined by others' rigid religious expectations. Rather, they underwent a positive reappraisal and started to appreciate themselves and their new possibilities.

Finally, this article indicated that being shunned also represents the opportunity to explore one's spirituality in a deeper and freer way, liberated from an imposed worship system. The article emphasised former members' (re)gained autonomy in deciding friendships, leisure, and education. Shunning also may provide opportunities to prioritise family bonds. By leaving the restrictive religious community, the participants had chances to regain ownership of their own lives.

Overall, this article represents an important contribution to the existing literature on Jehovah's Witnesses by providing significant and detailed insights into the disciplinary practice of religious shunning and its impact on the individuals' well-being. By evaluating the individuals' experiences, the article provides further evidence of the serious implications of being rejected and marginalised because of religious shunning. These implications encompass different levels of the individuals' lives, which include the physical, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of shunned members. A further contribution of this article is that it specifically identifies and outlines the positive outcomes that leaving the community can produce, underlining (as one of the participants stated), that "there is life after the group" (Samuel).

Limitations and Recommendations

The first author approached the topic of this study qualitatively. In selecting a qualitative framework, the researcher acknowledges that no claim can be made about the generalisability of the research findings. However, although the lack of generalisability of the qualitative findings represents a limitation of this research, the transferability of them appears to be its strength. For instance, the detailed depiction of religious shunning might also offer insight into, for example, the challenges of losing familiar points of reference, culture shock, being raised in gated, authoritarian, or extremist groups, social death, coercive and controlling tactics, and the experiences of being in abusive relationships. Therefore, this research provides specialist knowledge that may be applicable not only to people whom the Jehovah's Witnesses have shunned but also both to other communities that implement religious shunning as a disciplinary measure and to religious denominations where apostasy represents a point of no return.

In this respect, the current research can lead to new lines of inquiry. For example, additional qualitative studies might clarify whether a correlation exists between the reasons that groups shun individuals and their post-shunning experiences. In addition, further research might identify if the justifications that the Jehovah's Witnesses leaders give for shunning expelled members resemble ones given by leaders in other groups who impose similar punishments. Finally, comparative studies would be valuable that compared the consequences of shunning as experienced by former members of other restrictive groups.

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