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Grendele, Windy A. (2022) A qualitative exploration of the social dynamics of religious shunning in the Jehovah's Witness community. Doctoral thesis, University of West London.

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A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF THE SOCIAL DYNAMICS OF
RELIGIOUS SHUNNING IN THE JEHOVAH'S WITNESS COMMUNITY

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

at the University of West London

by

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March 2022

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Abstract

Background: Research indicates that shunning and ostracism may have long-lasting and severe effects on the individual's well-being. However, there is scarcity of research into shunning enacted in a religious context. Therefore, using Jehovah's Witnesses as an example, the present research explores the experiences of being shunned from a religious community, with particular reference to the impact on the lives of individuals, and the strategies employed to cope with such an event.

Methodology: Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and Identity Process Theory (Breakwell, 1986, 2001), integrated with the constructs of power (French and Raven, 1959) and the Social Dominance Theory (Pratto et al., 1994), provide the theoretical framework which underpins the current thesis. The narratives of two groups of participants, those of members who have been shunned (Group A; n = 21) as well as PIMO and former Elders (Group B; n = 12), form the research data. The data are analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun *et al.*, 2019).

Results: The thesis has generated three main findings. First, the participants' journey is a complex experience, where intrinsic and extrinsic forces combine in influencing the individual's behaviour and decisions. Second, shunning may produce constructive outcomes, but by-and-large, shunning is an experience of loss which has serious impacts on the individual's physical and emotional well-being. Third, the individual after being shunned embarks on a journey towards personal emancipation which culminates with a cognitive revolution. However, the process towards regaining ownership and autonomy is not defined by fixed stages of coping. Rather, it appears

to be a continuum with the individual advancing from personal stagnation to personal progression over time

Implications: By developing an awareness of the underlying factors which may facilitate or hinder personal progression, this research may assist healthcare professionals in providing a more effective support that aims at helping the shunned client to progress towards autonomy and self-reliance. Also, the contribution of this research leads to new lines of inquiry. Future work would focus on the need of informing and engaging the police force, legislators, educational stakeholders, and policy makers. This is firstly, to properly address reports of discrimination because of religious shunning, secondly, to enhance child safety in ensuring their best interests are met, and lastly, to guarantee the individual's basic rights during the judicial process.

To Massimo.

“I have come to learn
that when people of money and power organize
to set upon to break a person they seek to silence,
and the person seems but a shadow of what they were,
under the endless barrage,
in the end when laid to rest,
the dignity, compassion and presence of the person
somehow endures,
and their words awaken to speak clearer than before.
As if torches ignite, when their flame is gone,
the light of their truth
is brilliantly lit and once more born.”

- Tom Althouse -

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I am extremely grateful to my supervisors, Prof. Maddie Ohl, Dr Maya Flax, and Dr Savin Bapir-Tardy for their invaluable advice, continuous support, and guidance during my PhD study. I could not have imagined better mentors for my journey.

I would like to offer special thanks to Prof. Marcia Worrell, who, although no longer with us, was a source of great inspiration for my work with her energy, positivity, and expertise.

A special mention to Ms Maria Pennells, Mr John Smith, Ms Lisa Evans, Dr Erik Blair and all the Faculty Members and the UWL staff who have supported me during this academic path, for their encouragement, insightful comments, feedback, and practical assistance. Also, thanks to my colleague and friend, Aimee Mirto, for the long walks and chats which helped to ease mind and body. Aimee, we made it!

I am especially grateful to every participant who took time to share their unique experience with me as part of this research.

Nobody has been more important to me in realising this project than my mother Tiziana and my brother Davide. Thank you for your loving presence and care.

Last but not least, a heartfelt thank you to David. You have been my inspirer and my support. Thanks for your patience and strong encouragement throughout this journey,

and for all the chats we had which helped me to order my thoughts. You have encouraged me to shoot for the stars and aim for the moon!

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OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

The overall structure of the current thesis takes the form of eight chapters.

Chapter 1 sets the context of the research, delineating the historical roots of the practice of shunning and providing a definition of the term. Also, the specific phenomenon of religious shunning is presented and the principles guiding some religious denominations for adopting religious shunning as a measure to discipline members are briefly described. As the Jehovah's Witness community is taken as an example to explore religious shunning, an overview of their beliefs, their organisational structure and their activity is provided together with a detailed description of the leaving process and the practice of religious shunning as they conceive it. The chapter concludes by outlining the research questions the present study aims to answer, as well as the philosophical stance, methodological and theoretical approach adopted by the researcher.

Chapter 2 presents the theoretical framework of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986) and Identity Process Theory (Breakwell, 1986, 2001). This theoretical framework has been adopted in order to understand the social processes and environment in which religious shunning develops. The limitations of adopting such a paradigm will be outlined. The notions of power in relationships and social dominance are introduced as an integrative concept which plays an important role in influencing group dynamics.

Chapter 3 reviews the available research on shunning and its different facets. The pertinent literature is organised in five theme-dedicated sections. Each section takes into account a specific manifestation of shunning, shedding light on the effects it may have on the individual. At the conclusion of each section, a possible parallel between the topic considered and religious shunning is made.

Chapter 4 begins by laying out the philosophical stance framing the present research. The chapter is also concerned with the methodology used for this study, and the recruitment process, data collection and analysis are described in detail. The chapter concludes by discussing the ethical aspects and the measures adopted to address any ethical concerns.

Chapter 5 considers the lifecycle of religious affiliation, providing the groundwork for understanding the experiences of people who have been shunned from their religious community. The chapter explores the respondents' journey from being a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses to leaving the community. Therefore, the reasons which led the individual to embrace the Jehovah's Witness creed in the first instance, and an overview of the actions which then led respondents to be officially shunned, the shunning process and the consequences of being shunned are illustrated.

Chapter 6 considers the loss and disillusionment of being shunned and its impacts. The impacts that being shunned has on the lives of the participants, considering both the physical and the psychological are presented. This is then followed by a discussion on the constructive outcomes which may characterise the experiences of those shunned from the Jehovah's Witness community.

Chapter 7 focuses on the following: Personal challenge or personal development: What is the outcome for shunned individuals? Therefore, the participants' behaviours and reactions in response to being shunned from the Jehovah's Witness community are discussed. In light of the subjective appraisal of the shunning experience and its impact, the individual adopts different strategies in order to manage and counterbalance their new circumstances. On the one hand, certain strategies convey the idea of personal stagnation, as they seem to be determined by the influence the community still exerts on the life of the individual. On the other hand, other respondents reframed their life developing new-built coping skills. These new-built coping skills echo a sense of personal progression. The individual appears to be able to make peace with their own past and to move forward with their life.

Chapter 8 is the concluding chapter. The main findings discussed so far are drawn together in order to present a comprehensive picture of the experiences of religious shunning. The unique contribution of this research in terms of knowledge advancement and practical impact are also considered along with the suggested recommendations and future directions.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

While there is a plethora of literature on shunning and ostracism, which Williams pioneered by exploring the way being ignored and excluded may affect individuals and groups (Williams, 2001; Williams and Nida, 2017), shunning perpetrated within a religious context remains largely under-researched. The limited research available on religious phenomena represents, as Baumeister (2002) highlighted, a gap in our understanding of social processes. This is because, for many, religion is an integral part of life, and knowledge cannot be considered as complete unless it also explores and understands the spiritual dimension of an individual, and this phenomenon of shunning which develops within a religious context (ibid). Therefore, the under-representation of religious shunning within the academic literature urgently calls for the need of explore, understand, and raise of awareness on religious shunning and its possible impacts on the individuals who experience it.

Although religious shunning is a facet of social exclusion and rejection, it seems to present unique characteristics compared to other most researched instances of shunning and ostracism; characteristics that this study will seek to identify. The purpose of this study is ultimately to extend the existing body of literature on shunning specifically to develop knowledge of religious shunning. The study will explore the experiences of people who have been shunned from a gated religious group. Moreover, the research will shed light as to whether religious shunning may impact the individual's well-being socially, physically, emotionally, but also spiritually. It also aims at exploring the coping mechanisms the individual eventually adopts to deal with such an experience.

Religious shunning is a measure used to promote compliance. This practice is adopted particularly in gated religious communities, cultic groups and across other religious organisations typically described as being authoritarian in nature (Oblak, 2019). Across this thesis, the Jehovah's Witness community is defined as a gated community. However, in order to enhance the understanding of the reasons for relating the concept of gated-ness (Brunn, 2006) to this religious group, it appears important to briefly outline the characteristics of a gated community assembled as a group of individuals living in geographical area delimited by physical barriers.

In an urban context, a gated community is a residential area that is protected, and where access is restricted and controlled, by walls, fences and, at times, by armed guards (Atkinson and Flint, 2003). According to Low (2001), the walls and fences are concrete and visible systems of exclusion. The aim of these physical barriers appears to be threefold (Smets, 2005). First, they create and reinforce the community's internal cohesion which encompasses a shared physical space, a common agenda and values, and a shared social network. Second, walls and fences create physical boundaries. They protect the community from the intruders who Bauman (2001) defined as people with different lifestyles and values compared to the community and, therefore, regarded by the community's members as troublesome and unwanted. Third, in gated communities the process of exclusion is initiated by the community who deliberately choose to segregate themselves from the rest of the society (Smets, 2005).

The Jehovah's Witnesses do not live in segregated areas nor are hermits. Most of them work in secular employment, their children attend mainstream schools, they go

shopping in regular shops and malls, they enjoy mainstream activities such as going to the cinema, and they are actively engaged in the door-to door activity of evangelisation. These activities lead the Jehovah's Witnesses to interact with non-members on a daily basis. Therefore, the literal definition of 'gated community' is not applicable to this religious group.

However, the Jehovah's Witnesses can be *figuratively* considered as a gated religious community. This is because, as Brunn (2006) noted, the concept of gated-ness may also encompass a psychological dimension other than a physical one. The concept of gated-ness, therefore, can be also understood in terms of *gated minds* that is reflected in the kind of thinking some individuals hold about others (ibid). These individuals erect psychological barriers that separate them from those who differ from them in terms of, for example, lifestyle, religious perspectives, or political views. Psychological barriers may be moulded by the individual's socio-cultural contour. Like the physical barriers, psychological barriers too serve a protective and defensive purpose by "keeping out strangers" (Brunn, 2006, p. 9). This last dimension of gated-ness, *gated minds*, is the one applied in defining the Jehovah's Witness community in the context of this thesis. The Jehovah's Witness gated-ness is achieved through a series of processes and rituals, which will be explored in chapters 5, 6 and 7. These processes and rituals aim at drawing psychological clear boundaries between the in-group and the out-group. These boundaries then translate into a physical distancing which manifests itself in the community's involvement with the wider society kept to the minimum and in shunning former members.

In this respect, the present study is concerned with the individuals' experiences of being shunned from a religious community and the impact of this when it involves being completely ignored and excluded by the community. Religious shunning remains in force today as an official discipline practiced by a range of different religious denominations such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Exclusive Brethren, or Amish. However, considering the exploratory purpose of the current research, its focus will be upon a single religious group that practices shunning, that is the Jehovah's Witness community.

1.1 Shunning: Historical Roots and Definition

Shunning is one of the oldest sanctions adopted as a reaction to a behaviour which does not adhere to the group standards, or which endangers the group's equilibrium. The Christian tradition is familiar with episodes of shunning and the Bible reports some events in which people culpable of improper behaviour were reprovved by being shunned. However, shunning as an institutionalised practice, has its roots in ancient Athens, introduced by Cleisthenes' reform in 508 BCE to counterbalance the practice of exiling political opponents (Forsdyke, 2005).

The Greek archaic period (750-500 BC) was characterised by political instability, seeing the aristocratic elites engaged in violent rivalries for power. Exile was a drastic measure adopted for divesting the rival group of its influence and authority. The exile-condemned faction, nevertheless, often did not accept the sentence and, as Forsdyke (2000) stated, "they called on aristocrat allies to aid them in making a forceful return to the community. If successful, the returning aristocrat faction, in turn, drove its rivals from the community" (p. 235). The result of that back-and-forth movement from power

to exile was a climate of political instability, internal tension, and violent episodes. Cleisthenes' reform involved the citizen body in taking active part in the political life, establishing democracy.

The mechanism of shunning, *ostrakismos* in Greek, was a way through which the popular power was institutionalised. Athenian non-aristocrats became crucial in determining who was to be excluded from the city (Forsdyke, 2000, p. 253). The democratic institution of *ostrakismos* was a regulated form of exile, limiting the en masse banishment for a potentially unlimited period of time to the expulsion of a single individual per year, for a maximum of ten years (Forsdyke, 2005). It was conceived not as a tool to punish the individual for misconduct, rather to resolve the aristocratic conflicts by peaceful popular vote (Forsdyke, 2000, p. 255). Slowly this practice fell into disuse and the last known episode was that of Hyperbolus near 415 BC, narrated by Plutarch (Rhodes, 1994).

Today, shunning has acquired new connotations which may not necessarily be confined to a political purpose. Williams (2001) indicated the 'silent treatment', that is refusing to communicate with a person, as the most common form of shunning in a modern context. More extensively, shunning has been described as the intentional act of ignoring and marginalising by a single individual or a group (Wesselmann *et al.*, 2015). The target or targets of this treatment could be co-workers, classmates, minority groups or family members (Williams, 1997). As Zippelius (1986) commented, shunning has been mainly adopted as a response to what is considered a deviation from the accepted or established behaviour.

Shunning can be used to correct, or to manifest rejection of what is considered different, amoral or a social norm violation (Wesselmann *et al.*, 2013). It can take the form of a sporadic, brief episode, or become a targeting treatment which extends over time (Williams, 2001). It is not tied to a specific geographical area, rather it is a universal phenomenon that occurs in different contexts and cultures but with similar outcomes and effects on the targets (Tanaka, 2001; Wesselmann *et al.*, 2015). A significant part of the empirical research on shunning has focused on understanding what prompts such behaviour, the short- and long-term consequences, and the way it is framed in the social context (Williams, 2001). As research shows, shunning is an effective deterrent to promoting social compliance because its power lies in the fact that it threatens the individual's psychological, emotional, and physical well-being (Williams, 1997).

1.2 Religious Shunning: An Overview

Religious communities and churches are sub-cultural systems which exist within the society. Religious groups could provide a set of guidelines, precepts and rituals which help the individual to relate to the deity. Many religious denominations are guided by what is defined as the "doctrine of chosenness": they have been chosen by God and they represent His holiness on earth (Miller, 1988, p. 271). The individual who ceases to follow or questions the norms of the group, the spokesperson of God, needs to be reprovved and eventually disciplined. Excommunication and religious shunning are practices adopted in different religious denominations to correct the undesired behaviour. Even though both result in the sanctioned individual being forbidden to take part in some activities of the community, the practices and the outcomes differ. Also, religious groups that practise excommunication do not necessarily shun the individual

from the community's social life. As McGinnis (2015) underlined, shunning is an action distinct from excommunication. Excommunication, from the Latin *ex communio* (exclusion from the communion), is, for example, a practice used by the Roman Catholic Church. Nevertheless, according to The Code of Canon Law (1983), it does not imply being shunned from the community, rather excommunication is conceived as a loss of communion and participation in the ecclesiastical blessings and sacraments.

In other religious denominations, nonetheless, the discipline extends beyond the loss of the privilege of taking active part in the religious functions, and religious shunning is applied. Religious shunning involves the exclusion of a member from the community's social and spiritual life. Some religious denominations which continue to enforce this practice are Amish, Mennonites and Hutterites, Jehovah's Witnesses, Exclusive Brethren, the Korean Presbyterian Church, and Scientology.

The aim of adopting measures such as religious shunning is mainly related to the necessity to protect the group from what is considered a harmful influence (Plymouth Brethren, 2015; Scientology, 2019). Zippelius (1986) defined the shunning process as a "sanitary measure" (p. 164), preventing the community from being affected by harmful ideas or conduct. The practice of religious shunning involves, as Miller (1988) explained, the complete cutting of the social, spiritual, and economic ties between a former member and the community. The individual may lose their spouse, children, parents, or the possibility to conduct business with other members of the community (Bahk, 2002). Furthermore, the individual may also lose their social status and position

of power within the community (Bahk, 2002; Bear v. Reformed Mennonite Church, 1975).

1.2.1 Religious Shunning in Different Religious Denominations

Different religions adopt shunning in various ways. According to the Exclusive Brethren Christian Church doctrine, for example, it is the responsibility of the pastoral carers to keep the Assembly of God “pure in doctrine and in godly walk” (Plymouth Brethren, 2015, para. 3). It is necessary, in order to keep the Assembly morally clean, to use discipline according to the Word of God and eventually to shun a member by applying the “principle of separation” (ibid, para.2). According to this principle, members must avoid what is considered sinful and keep away from any person who does not follow or ceases to follow the group’s teaching. For example, according to the Plymouth Brethren, members, based on their own judgment, should decide to what extent they keep in contact with a former member. Nonetheless, the inevitable consequences for those who leave the community, by and large, result in the loss of their house and termination of business contacts, family breakups as well as being shunned (Aebi-Mytton, 2017; BBC, 2009).

Another example of a religious denomination which adopts shunning is the Amish community (Hostletler, 1984). They apply the Bann und Meidung, “the practice of social exclusion and discipline” (Wesner, 2015, para. 2). “Being in the Bann is how Amish describe being excommunicated from the church” (ibid, para.1). When a member “thwarts church regulation or commits transgressions, they are excommunicated” (ibid, para. 1). Being shunned from the community follows the excommunication of the individual. The Bann implies, as Wesner (2015) highlighted,

a change in social behaviour towards the individual. However, if the individual does not show repentance and the desire to reconcile with the church, the Meidung signs the end of all the interaction between the community and the impenitent individual (Clark, 2013). The Reformed Mennonites have a similar practice in order to discourage unwanted behaviour. Shunning an uncompliant member, in fact, represents the final solution to preserve the congregation's sanctity.

Members of The Church of Scientology are also encouraged to *disconnect* from "someone who is suppressive or who is antagonist to Scientology or its tenets" (Scientology, 2019; Wollersheim v. Church of Scientology, 1989). "Disconnection is a severing of a communication line; it is much like trying to deal with a criminal" (Scientology, 2019). Keeping in contact with an antagonistic person would negatively affect the spiritual progress of The Church of Scientology members.

Jehovah's Witnesses also practice religious shunning. Committing a sin, *apostasy*¹ and non-repentance are the main reasons which may lead to exclusion from the Jehovah's Witnesses community (Blankholm, 2009; Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 2015b). They consider the practice of shunning a "loving provision" (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 2015b, p. 29). According to the Jehovah's Witnesses' principles, shunning the individual from the community contributes to maintaining the honourable name of God and the purity of the congregation (Watch Tower and Tract Society, 2002). Also, "Overlooking willful sins encourages a lax attitude toward divine standards" (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 2015b p. 30). Moreover, shunning

¹ For a detailed explanation of the Jehovah's Witness terminology, please see the Glossary in Appendix 1.

“may bring the wrongdoer to his senses” (ibid, p. 30), helping the individual to realise the seriousness of what they have done and what they have lost in terms of approved standing.

Mennonites, Amish, Exclusive Brethren, Scientology and Jehovah’s Witnesses, all concur with the beneficial effects that exclusion may have on the individual. Shunning in a religious context, is mainly conceived as a way for the individual to reflect on the shame they brought upon themselves and the community, as well as a means to be restored and return to the approved path. Moreover, religious shunning is seen as a tool to protect the moral and spiritual purity of the community from the corruptive influence of ‘bad sheep’ (Wesner, 2015).

In the present research, the Jehovah’s Witnesses community is used as an example to gain insight into the specific phenomenon of religious shunning. The reasons this particular community has been chosen are twofold. First, due to the researcher having inside knowledge of the beliefs, precepts, and lifestyle of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Second, the network created by former members of the group is exceptionally well-branched and active on all the mainstream social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. This represents a great advantage, considering that the recruitment process is an important part of the development of the research and the virtual community is a good starting point to access potential participants.

1.3 Jehovah’s Witnesses: Who are they?

The Jehovah’s Witness community is a religious denomination founded in 1879 by Charles Taze Russel (Stark and Iannaccone, 1997; Wallis, 1984). Jehovah’s

Witnesses consider themselves as a worldwide spiritual family, and members refer to each other as brothers and sisters. The community is organised in local congregations. According to the Jehovah's Witnesses annual report, in 2020 the number of congregations was 120,387 worldwide, with 8,696,808 members (JW.org, 2021a).

The door-to-door proselytism, which aims to engage people in biblical conversations, is one of the community's distinctive marks. People who are allowed to preach are those who have been baptised as well as those who, though not yet baptised, have been considered qualified to be endowed with this responsibility. Members who preach are called Publishers.

Jehovah's Witnesses are structured hierarchically (Cobb v. Brede, 2012), and all the positions of power are a male privilege. On the other hand, Jehovah's Witness women are assigned the role of preaching, as well as caring for the less experienced women in the congregation. However, they will not be given the opportunity to preside over a congregation. This reflects a functionalist perspective on gender roles and power structure whereby men hold the positions of power whilst women perform an expressive role. Also, while men at the bottom of the power hierarchy may progress towards higher levels of the structure, women do not have this privilege. In this respect, the asymmetry in gender power becomes an integral factor to understand the social dynamics which develops within the Jehovah's Witness community (Pratto *et al.*, 2006).

Jehovah's Witnesses are led by the Governing Body, a group of eight men who claim to be appointed by the holy spirit of God and that every instruction or new spiritual

understanding they provide to the community stem directly from God and Jesus. Members of the Governing Body are not elected. Rather, new members are selected by the existing ones (Franz, 2007). Each congregation is then directed by nominated groups of Elders, the accredited spiritual shepherds of the Jehovah's Witness community, who report other higher ranked representatives. The following diagram (Figure 1.1) provides a visual representation of the Jehovah's Witness hierarchical structure.

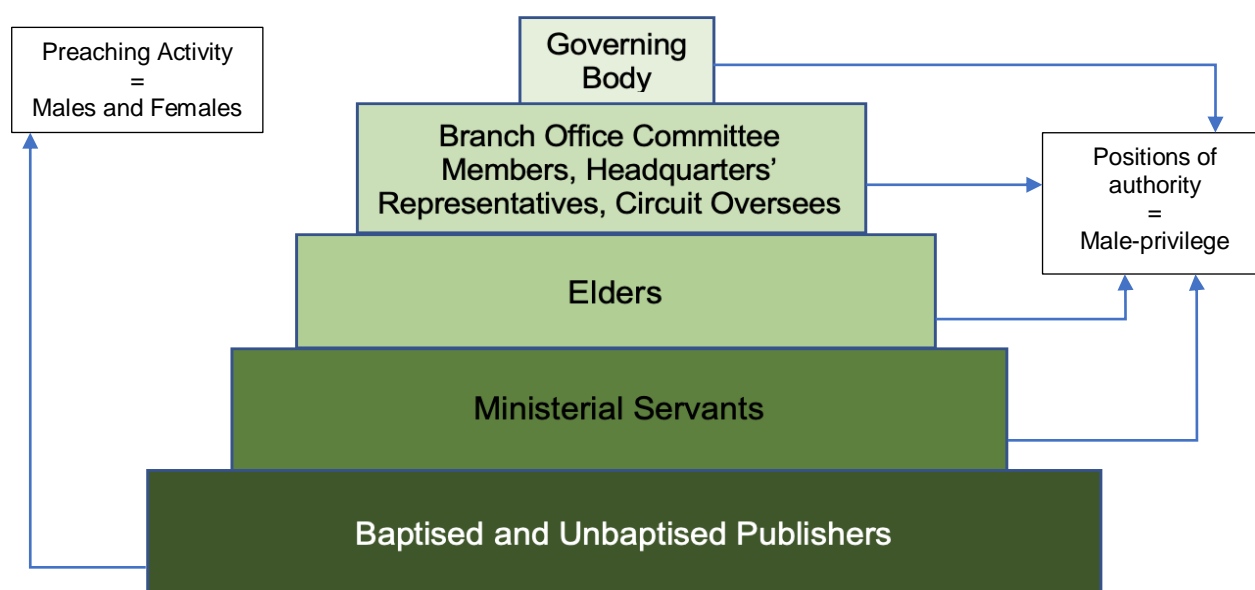


Figure 1.1 Hierarchical Structure of the Jehovah's Witness Organisation

All the Jehovah's Witness doctrines and teachings are built upon the strong dichotomy *the Truth/the World* (Blankholm, 2009). Jehovah's Witnesses refer to their religion as *the Truth*. On the other hand, the term *the World* refers to the rest of mankind, who do not know Jehovah God or do not follow *the Truth* and, therefore, are under the rule of the Devil (ibid, 2009). A dichotomy-based belief, such as *the Truth/the World* or *Godly/Ungodly*, is not peculiar to the Jehovah's Witness creed only. Other religious groups, such as the Islam or the Roman Catholicism, structure their beliefs, teachings,

and worldview on a dichotomous perspective. This binary perspective which may characterise some religious beliefs may translate into an othering process where members of the out-group are labelled as having negative and pernicious characteristics and therefore, are to be avoided. For example, as Blankholm noted, the Jehovah's Witnesses are strongly advised "against having any unnecessary association with *worldly people* [non-Jehovah's Witnesses] which often include coworkers and classmates" (p. 197) or extended family members who have not chosen the Jehovah's Witness path. This has a twofold implication. On the one hand, members' interactions with the wider society are superficial and kept to the minimum. On the other hand, this results in the Jehovah's Witnesses as being a tight-knit community who not only share the same religious beliefs, but at times also business relationships, hobbies, and leisurely activities.

The Jehovah's Witnesses are defined a high-cost religion (Scheitle and Adamczyk, 2010). This is due to the demands in terms of time, personal commitment, and resources. The strict moral and behavioural code members must follow proscribes activities such as masturbation, pornography, smoking, the celebration of traditional holidays such as Christmas and birthdays, or the involvement in political or military affairs, reinforces the concept of high-cost religion (Stark and Iannaccone, 1997). Furthermore, transgressing the community's set of rules leads to being officially shunned. Being shunned may result in several negative consequences, such as the immediate loss of the supportive network, the severing of family and friendships ties (Ransom *et al.*, 2021), or the preclusion to conduct business with other members of the community (Miller, 1988).

1.4 Leaving the Jehovah's Witness Community: A Close-up

Baptised members can decide to leave the community by choice, disassociating themselves. "Disassociation is an action taken by a baptised member of the congregation who no longer desires to be one of the Jehovah's Witnesses" (Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 2019a, p. 151). Members can disassociate from being a Jehovah's Witness by formal request. The person either orally or by presenting a written statement to the Body of Elders, declares that they do not want to be recognised as one of the members of the community anymore. Disassociation can also be imposed on a member (Ransom *et al.*, 2021). In this case, the individual has taken a course of action which could lead the Body of Elders to consider the individual as disassociating. Apostasy, willingly accepting blood transfusions, joining the army, political organisations or another religious denomination are some examples of actions by which the individual is said to *disassociate themselves by their actions*. By contrast, if a member no longer preaches or attends the meetings they are referred to as *inactives* (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 2012a, p. 18). When a member commits what for the community is considered a sin, the individual is *disfellowshipped*. All these categories of leavers are equally exposed to religious shunning. The main difference is that there is no formal shunning for becoming an *inactive* and shunning such a person is a matter of personal choice.

The following diagram (Figure 1.2) provides a visual representation of shunning, when it is a personal choice, and when it is a formal provision.

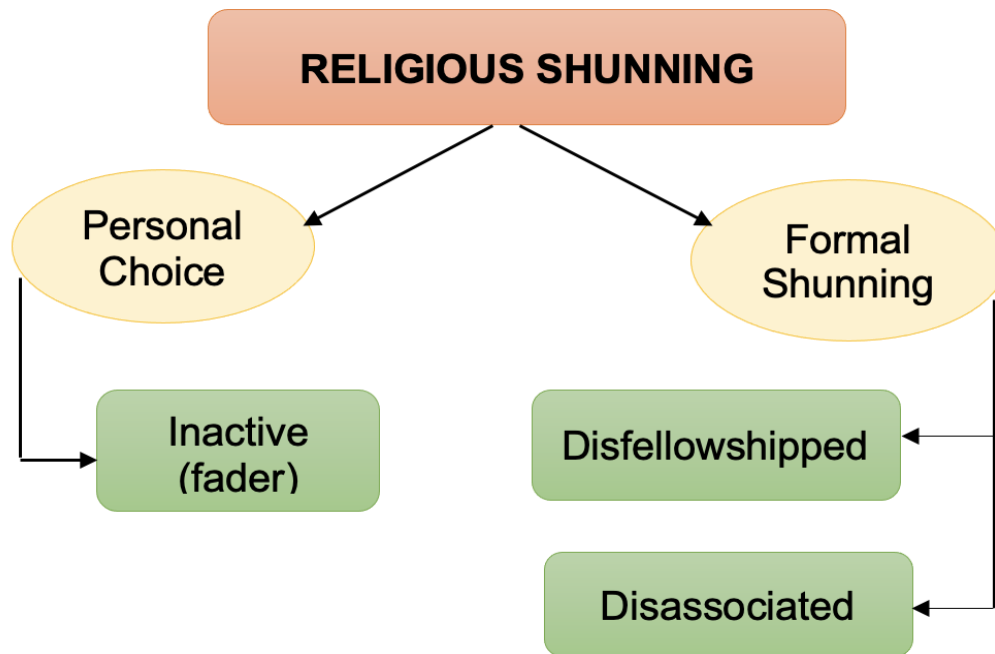


Figure 1.2 Differentiation of the Targets of Shunning in the Jehovah's Witness Community

Religious shunning in the Jehovah's Witness community is the final outcome of leaving by choice or *disfellowshipping*, a practice adopted by Jehovah's Witnesses. As their handbook explains, "disfellowshipping is an action taken by a judicial committee against an unrepentant wrongdoer" (Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 2019a, p. 151). Shunning the individual is an integral part of the practice as the Jehovah's Witnesses conceive it. "We do not receive them into our homes or greet them" (Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 2011b, p. 16). "Do not look for excuses to associate with a disfellowshipped family member" (Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 2013a, p. 16). "There should be no fraternising or conversing with the disfellowshipped person" (Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 2010b, p. 116).

Thus, while the term *disfellowshipping* refers to the practice, the term religious shunning refers to the end result of this practice. The term religious shunning will be

used across this thesis, apart from during direct communication with participants. As disfellowshipping is the official and the more familiar term within this community, using this term would ease access to participants and make them feel more comfortable.

When the Elders receive a report of an alleged wrongdoing, they will meet in order to establish the seriousness of the matter and to decide whether a Judicial Committee is therefore necessary. If a Judicial Committee is needed to handle the case, the panel of Elders who will form the committee is chosen among the Body of Elders. A Judicial Committee is usually made up of three Elders. After the Elders have discussed the details of the judicial hearing, such as time and place, the accused is then approached by two of them, and is orally invited to attend.

At the conclusion of the judicial hearing, the panel will evaluate the actions to be taken, and will inform the accused and the rest of the Body of Elders about the disciplinary measures needed. If shunning has been deemed necessary, a week after the judicial hearing a public announcement is read in front of the community stating: “[Name of person] is no longer one of the Jehovah’s Witnesses” (Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 2019a, p. 142). The same announcement is read when a member disassociates, leaving the community by choice. These announcements demarcate the suspension of a range of interactions with the individual until the point of an eventual reinstatement.

Some behaviours which may require review by a judicial committee and for which a member may be shunned from the community are (Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 2019a, pp. 79-93):

- Sexual immorality
- Adulterous marriage
- Child abuse
- Gross uncleanness, uncleanness with greediness
- Brazen conduct
- Drunkenness
- Gluttony
- Stealing, thievery
- Deliberate, malicious lying, bearing false witness
- Fraud, slander
- Reviling
- Obscene speech
- Greed, gambling, extortion
- Refusal to provide for family
- Fits of anger, violence, domestic violence
- Manslaughter
- Apostasy

Moreover, willingly keeping in contact with a former member may also lead to being shunned (Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 2010b, p. 116; Paul v. Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1987).

The aims of such a practice stem from the necessity to protect the group from what is considered harmful behaviour as well as to help the individual to return to the desired path. In fact, the negation of any interactions imposed upon the individual is seen as a tool which would allow the person to reflect on their behaviour, repent, provide

evidence that the sinful course has been abandoned, in order to be reinstated (Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 2019a). This research will explore the type of actions which have led to the respondents' shunning.

Lipka (2016) reported that the retention rate in the Jehovah's Witness community is one of the lowest compared to other religious denominations. Grundy (2018), using the information made available by the group in their publications, noted that there has been

A significant increase in the number of people leaving since the early 1990s. For the 10 years from 1986 to 1995 the leaving rate was an average of only 12%; for the 10 years from 1996 to 2005 it had risen to 41%... While in 2014 there were less leavers... the number leaving rose to over 50,000 again in 2015 (Grundy, 2018, para. 48).

This calculation took into account the global population death rate so as not to overestimate the number of people leaving the community. These data are important as they provide an indication of the number of people who have potentially been exposed to shunning by the Jehovah's Witnesses community.

1.5 Research Scope and Questions

In view of the number of people affected and the little that is known about this phenomenon, a key objective of the present study is not only to shed light on some of the possible psychological, emotional, social, and spiritual impacts of being shunned from a religious community, but also to provide a starting point for the development of a set of resources to inform future practice. It is therefore important that research into modern religious shunning will open pathways for more informed means of support from practitioners and key stakeholders working with those who have been through this process. For instance, Van der Kooij *et al.* (2017) underlined that since religion

moulds the believer's worldview and shapes the way people organise their understanding of their role in society, it is fundamental for health practitioners to fully recognise the religious experiences of their clients as an integral part of their lives.

Acknowledging religious shunning as a specific phenomenon, understanding what is involved in the leaving process, the impact that it has on the individual, the meaning the individual gives to the occurrence and the coping strategies adopted to deal with such experience, are all fundamental aspects necessary to ensure a proper rehabilitative process (Aebi-Mytton, 2017; Poole and Higgs, 2011). This study aims at opening pathways for more systematic research into the subject. In fact, in order to develop a more competent and effective health service and improve the outcomes of interventions for people seeking specialist help, empirical findings should provide the basis for health practice, integrating the research results into health settings.

Hence, the present study seeks to consider the following:

- 1: The lifecycle of religious affiliation
- 2: The loss and disillusionment of being shunned and its impacts
- 3: Personal challenge or personal development: What is the outcome for shunned individuals?

1.6 Philosophical Stance, Methodological and Theoretical Approach

This study has been conceived as an exploratory research which seeks to provide an understanding of religious shunning in terms of the meaning it has for people experiencing it and for those who enact it (Langdridge, 2007, p. 2). From this perspective and taking into account the Research Questions, a qualitative approach

has been considered as the most appropriate methodology to address the topic. This approach provides the means to look deeply into the lived experiences of religious shunning. The qualitative methodology provides the tools for an interpretative approach which aims at being an attentive reflection of the individual's experience. To understand the scrutinised phenomenon, the concept of the individual as a source of knowledge becomes central in the process of understanding the topic. Subjectivity and the personal sensemaking of the experience of being shunned are fundamental aspects in trying to uncover the meaning and the essence of religious shunning as the individual experiences and interprets it (Brysbaert and Rastle, 2012; Higginbottom, 2004). From this perspective, where participants are considered as experts because of their special insight into the phenomenon, the researcher's role is that of a learner. Participant and researcher are in a position to create what Josselson (2004) described as a genuine relationship, where the interviewees willingly share their knowledge and where their narratives are fully heard and embraced by the researcher.

Thus, the accounts of two groups of participants, those individuals shunned as well as those in the position and with the authority to shun a member, form the body of the present research. The participants provide accounts of their personal experiences and narratives, of their sense-making and processing of events associated with being shunned. Moreover, these narratives offer a wider understanding of the impact that being shunned from a religious community has on the person's life. Also, the accounts of the Elders are of particular interest, presenting their perspectives on the practice of shunning, the types of behaviour which require such intervention, the processes involved and whether the individual could be reinstated.

In trying to understand the phenomenon of interest, the focus is on non-artificial settings where socio-cultural variables are acknowledged, and individuals' experiences are considered essential to develop and pilot future interventions. The qualitative nature of this research attempts to draw the meaning of the phenomenon from a subjective point of view and acknowledges the existence of real-world variables that cannot be controlled or quantified. Those variables become important factors in understanding the phenomenon and the framework in which it occurs (Starks and Trinidad, 2007).

1.7 Summary

This introductory chapter sought to contextualise the current research, offering an overview on the historical roots of the practice of shunning as well as the way it is conceived in the present day. This chapter has considered the pertinent principles which guide some religious denominations which adopt shunning as a practice for social control. The formal terms these communities use to indicate the practice of shunning have been contextualised and explained. Moreover, a detailed explanation has been presented to give the reader an understanding of the Jehovah's Witness religious group and the reasons this community has been chosen to develop insight into religious shunning. The individual's behaviour which may lead the Jehovah's Witness community to shun one of their members as well as the shunning process and the consequences for the individual have been outlined. Statistical data have been reported to underline the relevance of exploring religious shunning as a modern phenomenon and the research questions have been stated. Lastly, the methodological and theoretical approach which provide the framework for the research have been

concisely presented and these will be explored more fully in Chapter 4 of this thesis, *Methodology*.

The next chapter will develop the concept of the individual acting within a social context. Thus, Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel and Turner, 1986) will provide the foundation to understand the relevance which social dynamics have in influencing the individual's identity formation and perspectives. Also, the concept of power in relationships will be explored to enhance the understanding of the social dynamics and social control.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT, SOCIAL NORMS, AND THE CONCEPT OF POWER AND SOCIAL DOMINANCE

This chapter will explore Social Identity Theory (SIT; Tajfel and Turner, 1986) and Identity Process Theory (IPT; Breakwell, 1986, 2001) as they provide the theoretical framework for this research. These theories have been selected as they offer a useful perspective to understand personal and social processes within the Jehovah's Witness community. In the first instance, the socio-psychological processes underlying identity construction and change, and the concept of the individual acting in and influenced by the social milieu will be outlined. The motivation for social interactions as well as the boundaries which regulate and protect group membership will be examined. Furthermore, the concept of 'power' in interactions appears to play an integral role in influencing social dynamics. Thus, the notion of power and social dominance will be introduced and developed as integrative elements in order to address some of the limitations that adopting the identity process and social identity paradigms present. For this purpose, the constructs of power (French and Raven, 1959), and the Social Dominance Theory (SDT; Pratto *et al.*, 1994) will be evaluated. Lastly, the part socio-cultural context plays in the development of norms and sanctions, and the consequences of these for the individual will also be considered. Specifically, 'social death' as the result of religious shunning will be discussed. It is to be noted that although in developing the theoretical framework which underpins the current research other psychological concepts are included, such as self-categorisation (Turner *et al.*, 1987) or self-determination (Deci and Ryan, 2000; see Chapter 5), a critical evaluation of these is beyond the scope of this thesis.

2.1 The Individual and the Social Context: Social Identity Theory and Identity Process Theory

One aspect which characterises human life is the tendency to be social and to engage in social interactions. It is therefore important to outline the theoretical framework which provides an understanding of the concept of self and identity formation of an individual acting in a social context. This will help to better understand the implications of being shunned from a gated religious community where all the social interactions develop within the community itself.

We grow, learn, entertain, and work as members of societal groups (Gavac *et al.*, 2017; Rogers, 2019). Stets and Burke (2000) explained social groups as sets of individuals “who hold a common social identification or view themselves as a member of the same social category” (p. 224). The connections the individual establishes, together with the dynamics which develop in a social context, influence the individual’s concept of self. According to Strawson (1997), the term ‘self’ refers to the individual’s mental representation as a conscious living being. Casey (2001) suggested that the individual’s identity is created by an interaction of internal and external processes. Thus, identity and the notion people hold about themselves (the self) can be seen as the result of the interaction between the individual’s intrinsic motives and processes, and external forces (Oyserman *et al.*, 2012; Leaper, 2011). For instance, Tajfel (1974) explained social identity as the awareness of belonging to certain social groups, as well as the emotional components this knowledge convey to the individual.

Individuals are born and live in a structured society and in this context an individual positions themselves in interacting with others and in occupying specific roles

(Vignoles *et al.*, 2006; Stets and Burke, 2000). Roles and interactions highly contribute to an individual's identity formation. According to Burke and Tully (1977), and Tajfel and Turner (1986), an individual's identity is formed through a process of self-categorisation or identification which involves the classification or labelling of the self in relation to others and to the meaning society conveys to any given role. Therefore, as Lido *et al.* (2020) assert, firstly, the process of self-categorisation helps the individual to function in a social context by enhancing their understanding of the social environment and their role within it in a meaningful way. Secondly, categorisation and social identity processes can be understood in terms of being driven by intrinsic motivations as they may relate to the individual's need for belonging, self-esteem, subjective meaning, and continuity (Lido *et al.*, 2020). Specifically, Vignoles (2011) argued that the tendency to seek group membership is triggered by the fact that the social identities which result from being a member of any given social group satisfy the individuals' intrinsic needs.

Breakwell (1986) also proposed that identity processes should be conceptualised in terms of content and value/affect dimensions. The content dimension of identity entails the unique arrangement of identities which are determined by the individual's social context which includes group memberships. On the other hand, the identity value/affect dimension refers to the positive or negative value people attached to these identities. The structure of the individual's identity is not unwavering. Rather, identity has been suggested to be a dynamic structure which integrates and constantly adjusts the individual's personal and social construal. Therefore, identity formation appears to be cultural, context and value sensitive, being constructed "through a complex interplay of cognitive, affective and social interaction processes" (Vignoles *et al.*, 2006,

p. 309). In this perspective, identity is understood as the inner representation of reality that emerges from interpersonal and intergroup interactions which in turn is shaped by the meaning the individual attaches to it. Also, the identity structure consists of different identities which are interconnected and vary in terms of perceived relevance (Vignoles *et al.*, 2000). The identity that best satisfies the individual's intrinsic needs of self-esteem, self-efficacy, distinctiveness, meaning, continuity, belonging, and psychological coherence becomes salient within the identity structure (*ibid*). Nonetheless, because of the interdependence of social context, intrinsic factors and values attached to the content of identity, it results in identity being a dynamic construct. For instance, the salience of an identity can be affected when the identity motives and value are jeopardised or challenged by external or internal changes and the individual's needs are no longer fulfilled. This may affect, as Lido *et al.* (2020) suggested, the individual's attitude, behaviours, and group's membership.

When highly engaged in a group, and when a sense of identity distinctiveness is drawn from belonging to a group, the individuals identify themselves with it, defining their own identity with regard to the social group they belong to (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Galanter, 1999). Hence, members of groups typically share similar characteristics or goals and as a result a collective sense of unity and cohesion could arise. Therefore, the consequences of the process of self-categorisation as a member of a group are twofold, implying simultaneously both likeness and dissimilarity (Cohen, 1985). On the one hand, the members of a group have something in common with each other, on the other, in-group similarity distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other groups. Shunning could be used as a tool to publicly reaffirm the differentiation between the in-group from the out-group (Stets and Burke, 2000). However, shunning

can also be understood as a tool to protect the individual's identity from an external factor (a subversive member) that is seen as posing a threat to the core values the individual attaches to group belonging (Vignoles, 2006). Therefore, the individual would endorse the community's practice of shunning to protect the salient identity derived from the needs that being a member of the community is fulfilling.

2.1.1 Addressing the Limitations of Social Identity Theory

The social identity paradigm offers a perspective to understand the way the social context and the interactions with others could potentially influence self-perception and behaviour. Also, it provides an explanation about self- and social-categorisation, and group dynamics. Moreover, by integrating the evaluation of the role that personal values and the fulfilment of personal needs that may derive from group affiliation, it provides a more rounded understanding of the intrinsic processes and social dynamics which may develop within the Jehovah's Witness community. Nonetheless, this framework presents some limitations. For instance, Social Identity Theory assumes the widespread applicability of the social identity model to all groups, at times overlooking significant differences which may distinguish one group from another, and which may alter the group dynamics and the categorisation process (Cinnirella, 1993).

Groups are not identical entities in terms of intrinsic characteristics, or in terms of the social psychological processes. When intra- and inter-group dynamics, and the position the individual occupies in the social context are explored, the specific culture which characterises the group should not be disregarded (Gençer, 2019). Attention to this specific aspect is especially apposite when considering groups isolated from mainstream society, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, which may develop internal,

and in-group/out-group dynamics which are different from the ones Social Identity Theory forwards. This is one of the reasons there is a need to exercise caution when making inferences about social processes within a group and between groups. The Jehovah's Witness community presents its peculiar cultural environment which determines its specific intra- and inter-group dynamics and processes, which may distinguish it from other religious denominations or social groups.

Another pitfall to consider in applying the social identity paradigm is that, in large groups, such as religious denominations or political parties, the group processes predominantly occur within sub-groups of the wider grouping, rather than within the wider community itself (Cinnirella, 1993). The worldwide community of the Jehovah's Witnesses is arranged in sub-groups, such as *Bethels* and congregations. Although each sub-group reports to the same authority, follows the same norms, and shares the same beliefs, it may differ from another one. This is not only because of the uniqueness of its members, but also due to the distinctive characteristics of the leadership exerted by the Body of Elders who presides over the sub-group. These elements may determine a non-homogeneity of the sub-groups' dynamics within the broader community. Hence, the way social influence occurs and develops, appears to be a much more complex process than the one Social Identity Theory proposes, and individual characteristics as well as those of the leadership should also be considered.

2.1.2 Power and Social Dominance as Integrative Concepts to Understand Social Dynamics

As noted, the presence of an authority who regulates groups and sub-groups and the way this leadership is exercised may bear weight on the social processes to the point

that the variation in social dynamics may relate to the differences in inter-group power structures (Gençer, 2019). Therefore, it appears appropriate to introduce the notion of power in interactions and social dominance as elements which may enhance understanding on the way social interactions are created, develop, are maintained, and evolve within the Jehovah's Witness community.

Russell (1938) stated that, "The laws of social dynamics are laws which can only be stated in terms of power" (p.10), implying that when social relationships are created, these can also be understood in terms of 'power'. According to Halstead *et al.* (2016), a symmetrical or egalitarian relationship is when there is a balance of power between the subjects involved. On the other hand, when there is an imbalance of power, the relationship is asymmetric. Therefore, Simpson *et al.* (2015) defined 'power' as the "ability of one individual to exert influence on another person in order to achieve specific outcomes, while in turn being able to resist the influence attempts by the target" (p. 393) or targets. The ability to produce a desired change in beliefs, behaviour or attitudes in another person is referred to as social power, and it is not applicable only to a dyadic relationship, but also to bigger social systems (Gangl *et al.*, 2015; Lammers *et al.* 2009).

Regardless of the cultural background or beliefs that regulate the life of members, social groups are systems that tend to develop as social hierarchies, with one dominant group controlling the subordinate group or groups (Pratto *et al.*, 2006). These systemic hierarchies can be organised according to a trimorphic structure based on age (adults exert power over children), gender (men exert power over women), and arbitrary-set characteristics (when, for example, ethnicity, social status,

or religion are used to determine and legitimise the position of power of one group over another) (ibid).

Keltner *et al.* (2003) suggested that the uniqueness of the individual characteristics, social roles, and stereotypes together with the specific characteristics of the social group within which individuals interact, are all variables which affect the way power is constructed and exerted. According to previous literature, power is a multi-facet construct which, depending on the agent/agents' final aim, relies on different strategies and tactics (Simpson *et al.*, 2015; French and Raven, 1959).

Depending on the capabilities employed, social power has different forms. For instance, French and Raven (1959) identified five different constructs of power by which the relationship between the agent and the target is regulated. These are reward power, coercive power, legitimate power, referent power and expert power. Two of these are of particular interest in the context of the current research and both are facets of the power construct intended as a tool for social influence. These mechanisms are legitimate power, and coercive power. Hofmann *et al.* (2017) argued that the power of the authority, by an assigned social position, allows to create a structure of power in order to influence the behaviour of individuals (p.1). Authorities employ different measures to regulate social membership and expected conduct, and different mechanisms are adopted to foster compliance. These tactics and mechanisms for social influence are dependent on the structure of power created by the authority to validate their position. Legitimate power and coercive power are two structures of power the authority may rely on to achieve social influence. While legitimate power "occurs when the target perceives that an influence agent has the

right to affect the target, who then must comply with the agent's request" (Simpson *et al.*, 2015, p. 395), "coercive power can be comprised of severe punishment and strict monitoring... which enforce compliance" (Hofmann *et al.*, 2017, p. 1).

Pratto *et al.* (2006) also argued that social ideologies serve as a powerful tool to favour and legitimise the dominant group's position of authority within the social hierarchy, and to discriminate the subordinate group. These ideologies are defined as "legitimising myths, or societal, consensually shared social ideologies" (Pratto *et al.*, 2006, p. 275). Legitimising myths are a combination of specific values, beliefs, cultural ideologies, and stereotypes that characterise any given social system. The legitimising myths provide a moral and intellectual justification for the group's power structure, for sustaining one group's dominance, and for perpetrating inequality and oppression within the social system. Legitimising myths mould the way individuals understand the way they and another individual should be treated (Pratto and Stewart, 2012). For example, it is argued that as the consequence of the categorisation process, a stereotyping process is also activated, which involves assigning a series of personal characteristics to the in-group and outgroup (Lido *et al.*, 2020). The stereotyping process may be initiated and endorsed by external forces and influenced by the socio-cultural context. The frequent exposure to stereotyped, ideological narratives may lead the individual to accept and internalise such stereotypes and to categorise and judge others according to these labels (*ibid*). The way certain groups or individuals are depicted may lead to the legitimisation of the use of force and discrimination against these groups and individuals.

The effectiveness of the legitimising myths in providing the foundation to sustain dominance of one group over another is the degree of ideological consensus shared across members of both the dominant and subordinate groups (ibid). Religious narrative may provide the rationale to support group-based hierarchy and to enhance the consensual degree on the legitimising myths among dominant and subordinate groups (Pratto *et al.*, 1994). This may be done by justifying the dominance of one group over another as being the will of God, by allocating more power to men than to women, and by validating the use of coercive tactics to sustain and maintain the status quo. In this respect, the current research will illuminate the power structure which the Jehovah's Witness leadership has established and consider whether the tactics adopted to regulate and influence the members' behaviour are intended to be controlling and coercive. Also, the research will elucidate whether the practice of religious shunning is justified by a religious narrative which endorses a group-based hierarchical structure and promote institutional discrimination.

2.1.3 The Individual, Social Groups and Norms

When individuals become members and associate themselves with the group, two main processes may take place. Firstly, the individual internalises the features, behaviours, and norms of the group (Hogg and Turner, 1987). Gaffney and Hogg (2017) commented that, "social influence occurs through a process of categorisation of the self as group member" (p. 259). The outcome of the process of self-identification as in-group members is the strengthening of a collective identity and a reinforcement of the internal homogeneity. These are prompted and determined, as Gavac *et al.* (2017, p. 333) further explained, by the standards set within the group which defines behavioural expectations. Social norms are these standards. These boundaries are

the elements which embody, as Cohen (1985) argued, the sense of discrimination between in-group and out-group, marking “the beginning and the end of a community” (p. 12).

Social norms not only regulate the individual's conduct, demarcating the difference between proper and improper behaviour, but also define what “we are” from what “we are not” (Forsdyke, 2005, p. 6). Just as grammar rules frame the writing, social norms mould individuals' actions into behaviour (Bicchieri, 2006; Bicchieri *et al.*, 2018; Gavac *et al.*, 2017), regulating the interactions with others, establishing and maintaining equilibrium within the group (Young, 2007), and promoting social welfare (Bicchieri *et al.*, 2018). Also, being part of a group with clear rules and boundaries provides the individual with the means to understand their place within and outside the community (Gaffney and Hogg, 2017).

Secondly, when an individual becomes a member of a group, they also accept its social structure and the differentiation of the structural roles within it (Hogg, 2005). The individual, by virtue of sharing the group's values which the leadership personifies, accepts the standard set for the community, legitimising the leadership's role to regulate the community's life. Nonetheless, the way the group leadership is perceived by members and the way the authority is exerted, also concur to promote member's adherence to the desired behaviour (Hoffman *et al.*, 2017; Raven and French, 1958). Thus, it appears that, intertwined with the process of self-identification as an in-group member, the power dynamic within the group also acts as a tool for social influence. On the one hand, “by using the legitimate power approach, an authority operates through legitimacy of its position, expertise, a policy to disseminate relevant

information, and its ability to make others identify with it" (Hoffman *et al.*, 2017, p. 1). On the other hand, the authority which exerts coercive power relies on the effectiveness of threats and punishment to achieve compliance. In coercive power systems, members would conform in order to avoid punishment.

As Mill (1859) argued, "everyone who receives the protection of society owes a return for the benefit, and the fact of living in society renders it indispensable that each should be bound to observe a certain line of conduct towards the rest" (p. 141). Social norms, in fact, impose a certain degree of limitation to personal freedom, acting as behavioural boundaries. Consequently, the person who breaks the group's norms could face legal and social consequences. As Bicchieri *et al.* (2018), Gavac *et al.* (2017) and Young (2007) highlighted, a powerful mechanism by which norms are enforced, is social control. Reiss (1951) defined social control "as the ability of social groups to make rules and norms effective" (p. 196). As Gavac *et al.* (2017) explained, social control refers to any reaction to someone who goes against the status quo, from social disapproval, such as a scowl or gossip, to a formal censure or punishment. Considering the definitions provided, religious shunning is better understood as a practice adopted for controlling members (Lalich and McLaren, 2018). First, religious shunning could be used as a tool to discourage behaviours which violate the group's norms. Second, it is an effective deterrent to dissuade affiliates to openly question the leaders' dictates. Finally, religious shunning may be used as a legitimate tool to perpetuate oppression and inequality justified by a religious narrative which endorses a group-based hierarchal structure of power.

2.1.4 Social Norms, Gated Religious Communities and Religious Shunning

Religious communities are social contexts. Nevertheless, they could be seen as specific social contexts. This distinctiveness is determined by the fact that the individual not only engages and interacts with other peers in performing the designated rituals and practices but also connects with the divinity, worshipping the spiritual being, seeking guidance and acting to please the divine (Guthrie, 1996). The presence of the divinity as part of the social context may have a deep influence on the way the individual interprets their own life or their role in the society. Moreover, peer interactions may also be shaped by the beliefs the individual holds about God's will. In some religions, in fact, the deity is not an abstract being, rather God is conceived as a conscious, omnipotent being having specific anthropomorphic characteristics who has explicit purpose and expectations for the individual (ibid).

The assignment of human characteristics to the divinity, like considering God as a 'father' or a 'friend', may reinforce the intensity of the involvement and influence of the deity in the individual's life (Schieman, 2010). As Schieman highlighted, some religious beliefs assume that the divinity desires to establish and maintain a personal connection with the individual. Thus, as Pollner (1989) commented, "individuals participate in 'divine relations' as well as social relations and that divine relationships may approximate concrete social relationships in intensity" (p. 92). Krause (2002) explained the interactions with the divine as a set of themes in which individuals have "a sense of trust in God, believe that God is in control of their lives, believe that God knows what is best for them, and believe that God ultimately ensures they will get what they need most" (p. 335).

Having a religious belief creates certain dynamics between the individual, their peers and the deity. The deity fulfils the most influential role, shaping the individual's interactions and behaviour with other members of the fellowship and out-group people. Human relationships are on an unequal level when compared to the relationship the individual establishes with the divinity. Peer interactions, also those with other fellow members, are modified by the presence of an almighty, spiritual figure; his commandments cannot be questioned. The deity's interests prevail on the individual's affect, often outweighing even blood ties (Lalich and McLaren, 2018). The concepts of a supernatural, omniscient agent and the threat of a supernatural punishment have a potent influence on the group's dynamics (Johnson and Bering, 2006). Foucault (1995) termed such influence as 'disciplinary power', a construct that believers internalise and through which control and coercion are achieved (McLaughlin and Muncie, 2019). The deity monitors, judges, rewards, and punishes human behaviour and interactions (Gervais and Norenzayan, 2011, p. 1). God's will, transmitted to and taught by his spokespeople, becomes the validation for members to accept, subject to and endorse the religious norms and discipline (Heil, 2017). The 'word of God' together with the belief that God perceives human thoughts and actions is used as a means to control members within an ideology of control in some religious communities (Gervais and Norenzayan, 2011).

Research found that, overall, spirituality and religiosity have a positive influence on the individual's well-being. On the one hand, spirituality is defined as "a subjective experience of the sacred" (Vaughan, 1991, p. 105), placing the individual at the centre of the mystical experience. Spirituality has been linked to personal intuitions, fantasies, and subjective experience (Saucier and Skrzypinska, 2006). While O'Reilly (2004)

and Garfield *et al.* (2013) explained spirituality as the interpretation of personal beliefs and behaviour in light of an intimate relationship with a higher being, Swinton (2000) recognised that spirituality could not be primarily focused on the transcendent aspects of existence. Spirituality is a means through which personal meaning and a place in the world could be sought (Cornah, 2006).

Religion, on the other hand, is a vehicle through which spirituality could be expressed. Religion could be understood as one of the ways through which a connection to the divine, meaning to life, and purpose could be sought. Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi (1975) defined religion as “a system of beliefs in a divine or superhuman power, and practices of worship or other rituals directed towards such a power” (p. 1). Garfield *et al.* (2012) explained religion or religiosity as the individual’s “involvement in an organised, structured community focused on moral code” (p. 27), regulated by a set of clear guidelines and precepts which are provided for the enactment of rituals and prayers to worship the deity.

Religious beliefs provide the individual with a lens through which reality is filtered and understood. Thus, religion is connected to concepts of sense-making. Like other systems of meaning, religion influences the individual’s worldview, concepts, goals and emotions. However, as Pargament *et al.* (2005) underlined, religion is a unique system of meaning because it provides an interpretation of the self and the world based on what the individual considers to be sacred. Thus, as Park (2013) recognised, religion, depending upon the involvement of the individual, could exert a powerful influence on the individual’s life. As Saucier and Skrzypinska (2006) found, religion is “Highly associated with authoritarianism and traditionalism. Religion provides a set of

practices and rituals which the community shares, and rules for controlling social and sexual behaviour” (p. 1285).

According to Swinton (*ibid*), spirituality and religion involve the social, biological, emotional, and physical dimensions of an individual. Therefore, spirituality and religion may impact positively or negatively on people’s well-being (Cornah, 2006; Pargament *et al.*, 2003). Cornah (2006) argued that subjective, social, and transcendental elements play an important role in defining spirituality. Thus, the interaction of these elements and the individual’s health could not be seen as static nor linear. Rather, the spirituality/well-being relationship is complex and dynamic.

Spirituality and religion may allow the individuals to find comfort and relief during adverse circumstances. Religious beliefs provide the individual with the necessary tools to interpret and reframe the situation in the light of a higher, transcendental meaning. An event on which the individual feels having no control is reinterpreted and the personal circumstances are seen as a way to connect more intensely with the divinity, to have a first-hand experience of God’s love and care, and to experience God as a partner in overcoming the difficult moment (Pargament *et al.*, 2004). Pargament *et al.* (2005) expanded further the concept saying,

The language of religion... speaks to the limits of human powers. When life appears out of control... beliefs and practices oriented to the sacred seem to have a special ability to provide ultimate meaning, order, and safety in place of human questions, chaos, and fear (p. 300).

Research shows that there are benefits to belonging to a religion. The study conducted by McCullough *et al.* (2000) suggests that people affiliated to a formal religion and who are actively involved in the religious activities have enhanced life expectancy

compared to people who are less involved. Mathews *et al.* (1998) argued that “religious commitment may play a beneficial role in preventing mental and physical illness, improving how people cope with mental and physical illness, and facilitating recovery from illness” (p. 118). According to Ironson *et al.*’s (2006) findings, spirituality and religiosity seem to predict slower disease progression in people diagnosed with HIV. Also, Szaflarski (2017) reported that “Higher levels of spirituality/religion have also been associated with less psychological distress, less pain, greater energy and will to live, better cognitive and social functioning, and feeling that life has improved since HIV diagnosis” (p. 324). Furthermore, Koenig (2012), and Kaufman *et al.* (2005), indicated that, when spirituality and religion are associated with positive emotions, sense of meaning and purpose, and social support, there seems to be slower progression or better outcomes in other degenerative diseases, such as Alzheimer’s disease or cancer.

Boey (2003) found that, when the individual considers their spirituality and religiosity as a source of comfort and strength, religious activities are related to psychological well-being. Moreover, Yoo (2017) suggested that religious involvement expressed in terms of beliefs and behaviour would be directly correlated with spiritual well-being, self-esteem, and life satisfaction. Religious affiliation could also provide the individual with a well-developed social network and the necessary emotional and psychological support. Spiritual and religious support may be important resources of information, companionship, and practical help. Specifically, religion could protect an individual from social isolation, strengthen family ties, consolidate social relationships, provide a sense of belonging while enhancing self-esteem and help making sense of difficult life-events (Cornah, 2006).

In the study conducted by Currier, Holland and Drescher (2015) on 532 U.S. veterans in a residential treatment programme for combat-related PTSD, spirituality factors at the beginning of the therapy were predictive of PTSD symptoms severity at the end of the treatment. Specifically, the findings appeared to suggest that veterans who were actively involved in their church's life, regularly engaged in spiritual activities, and implemented positive religious coping strategies during the treatment, presented lower levels of PTSD symptomatology when they completed the rehabilitation programme.

The same research, however, also highlighted that religiosity could be linked to negative health outcomes too. For example, the findings suggested that those veterans who commenced the therapy feeling that God had abandoned them, that their conditions were a punishment for wrongdoing, spiritual weakness, and those who distanced themselves from God fared worse in the programme (Currier *et al.*, 2015). Research also seemed to indicate that detrimental effects on mental health outcomes are associated with continued commitment, forced religious activities, and religious conflicts (Yoo, 2017). Negative religious coping could occur when the individual is unable to integrate the traumatic experience within the meaning frame of reference provided by their religious denomination (Park, 2013). Miller and Kelley (2005) indicated that some religious constructs "can inflame psychopathological expression or even contribute to its aetiology" (p. 464). Religious configurations that reinforce deluded beliefs, and exacerbate guilt and worry, could negatively impact on the individual's well-being and the coping mechanisms adopted.

Traumatic events could shake concepts based on God's love and compassion. As a consequence, the individual may feel wounded by God and develop persisting feelings

of anger towards God. As Exline and Rose (2013) reported, frequent or unresolved anger towards the divinity has been related to low self-esteem, depression, poor problem-solving skills, and insecure attachment. To resolve their anger and disillusion, some individuals may decide that God does not exist. This phenomenon is defined as emotional atheism (Novotni and Petersen, 2001).

Pargament *et al.* (2003) found that God's punishment, anger at God, religious doubts, conflict with other members of the religious community, and conflict with the community's teachings were related to poorer mental health and event-related outcomes (p. 1345). "The efficacy of coping is related to the degree to which a person's beliefs, emotions, relationships and values are integrated in their response to specific stressors" (ibid, p. 1345). When such integration lacks, the individual's attempts to cope with religious stressors are compromised. Being a member of a highly controlling religious group has also been linked to poor coping (Carone and Barone, 2001). The well-being of the individual may be seriously affected by two prevailing features. Firstly, the focus on the negative aspects of the relationship with God, where any wrongdoing will lead to punishment, may instil a sense of fear. Coupled with this, is the discipline of the controlling environment in the community which may also negatively impact on the individual (ibid). From this perspective, religious shunning poses a real threat to an individual who leaves a gated community such as the community of the Jehovah's Witnesses. This thesis will seek to explore the effect which shunning has on the individual's level of spirituality and relationship with God.

Like any other social group, religious communities and churches have in place guidelines and rules that govern the life of the worshippers. The right of a religious

denomination to establish internal rules is, most of the time, sanctioned by the law. For example, the Supreme Court of Canada in the case of *Highwood Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Judicial Committee) v. Wall* (2018) reiterated the fact that it is the right of any religious denomination to establish internal rules and membership criteria. The Treaty of Amsterdam (European Union, 1997) bestows on religious communities and churches the right to be guided by their internal rules. Moreover, the Ecclesiastical Abstention Doctrine of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution "prohibits courts from delving into issues such as religious doctrine, belief, discipline or faith" (Back, 2002, p. 5). Like social norms, religious norms impose upon the worshippers the accomplishment of some expectations and a limitation to their personal freedom. For example, personal resources, time and the observance of rituals and precepts or the limitations to associate with out-groups are some expectations that the individual negotiates for the purpose of religious affiliation (Rogers, 2019).

Furthermore, sanctions could be applied to promote compliance, to discourage undesired behaviour (Iannaccone, 1994, p. 1180) and to guarantee adherence to an established set of values by sending a clear warning message (Miller, 1988; Rogers, 2019, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1963b). Thus, behaviour which diverges from the accepted path could be followed by formal censure and discipline such as shunning the dissenting individual from the religious community. The strictness of religious norms and their application screen out members who do not conform to them (Iannaccone, 1994), maintaining rigour and uniformity within the group.

As Williams (2001) discussed, shunning can threaten the individual's sense of belonging, control, self-esteem, and meaningful existence, and when it occurs in a religious context, it could also affect the spiritual dimension of the individual (Adam, 2009; Streib, 2014). According to the community's perspective, being shunned appears to be not only a practice for sanctioning misconduct but also a judgment about the quality of the individual's spirituality. By shunning an unrepentant wrongdoer, the community will not be morally and spiritually contaminated (Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 2017).

The individual may be exposed to spiritual alienation and shunned in a certain way not only from fellowmen but from God too:

The fact is that when a Christian gives himself over to sin and has to be disfellowshipped, he forfeits much: his approved standing with God; . . . sweet fellowship with the brothers, including much of the association he had with Christian relatives (Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 2002, p. 3).

The person loses the favour of the group. The individual is no longer considered a member of the community and the connectedness with the Divine, in the eye of the community, seems severely compromised. The shunned person is considered as spiritually dead. Moreover, the threat of the physical, eternal death appears to be like the sword of Damocles, forthcoming and inevitable. "Have you left Jehovah? If so, whatever the reason, your relationship with Jehovah and your eternal prospects are at risk" (Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 2006, p. 21). Only restoring an approved standing with the community and with God by repenting and re-joining the community could save the individual from an adverse divine judgment. When the individual leaves the community, the need for an emotional and psychological adjustment as well as social and spiritual reconnection may become of primordial importance for the

individual's recovery (Thien and Malapert, 1988). However, such rewiring is not immediate. Therefore, the research in this thesis aims at understanding the leaving process and the strategies the individual adopts to overcome the possible impacts of religious shunning. Furthermore, it seeks to explore whether the respondents felt that their spirituality and relationship with God were affected by being shunned.

2.1.5 Social Death as a Consequence of Religious Shunning

Schulman (2009) described shunning as an active form of persecution. This practice may lead to the social death of the individual. Králová (2015) identified three main facets which typify social death. First, loss of social identity; second, loss of social connections, and third, the losses associated with the disintegration of the body. When social death occurs, these three facets, or the majority of them, characterise the experience of the individual (ibid). As Králová (ibid) argued, social death is an extreme form of social maltreatment which severely compromises the social and emotional integrity of the individual. When shunning becomes a systematic behaviour adopted by meaningful relationships, 'death' is not only a social condition for the individual, but it also becomes a salient aspect in the individual's psychological processes. For instance, Steele *et al.* (2014) proposed that shunning increases the accessibility to and persistence of death-related thoughts.

The religious community of the Jehovah's Witnesses represents, for most of its members, their entire world and social life. Members frequently gather and take active part in the official meetings and in the activities of the community. Leisure and hobbies are usually arranged with other members of the group. The public shunning announcement in front of the Jehovah's Witnesses community marks a turning point

in the life of the shunned individual, their family, and friends. It is the moment which determines the change in the established relationships and social status because the community is officially informed that an individual is no longer one of its members. The behaviour which led the individual to be shunned determines an alteration of the spiritual bond which is mirrored by the disruption of family and community networks. Thus, a complete cutting off from the community results from leaving the group.

Moreover, the member's shunning marks a change in the individual's social status too. The person becomes a former Jehovah's Witness. From being alive, the shunned member becomes symbolically dead in the eyes of the community and is treated as non-existent (Borgstrom, 2017; Goffman, 1959). Notably, eating disorders are some of the consequences of being shunned (Williams, 2007). The body's deterioration due, for example, to the loss of weight becomes a powerful enactment of the way the community sees, or better, does not see the individual who has left (Grendele, 2018; Králová, 2015). The one who once was visible becomes invisible. The group and family halt any communication with the former member, avoiding contacts and interactions with the individual. Emails, text messages and phone calls are also forbidden (Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 2013a).

Schulman (2009) defined the practice of shunning as a form of mental cruelty and Nezlek *et al.* (2015) suggested it should be considered as a form of aggression. The effects of being shunned are powerful and destructive. This is because both the religious community and the individual's family, if part of the community, adopt the same behaviour towards the individual, denying their existence. Once shunned, the

individual may need to not only manage their new social status, but also cope with the shallow social connections outside of the community.

2.1.6 The Effects of Shunning Others on Perpetrators

It can be argued that shunning and, in the context of the current research, religious shunning, is not only a form of mental cruelty towards the targeted person but also towards one's own. According to research, shunning other people appears to be psychologically costly (Legate *et al.*, 2013). Milgram's experiment on obedience was one of the first studies bringing to light the negative effects that inflicting physical pain on others may cause to an order-complying perpetrator. Milgram (1963) reported participants feeling agitated, anxious, and guilty. Based on Milgram's findings, Legate *et al.* (2013) assumed that complying with directives to inflict social pain on others, rather than physical pain, would produce a similar negative response on the perpetrator. Their study suggested that people who shunned others (social pain) experienced higher levels of emotional distress, shame, and guilt than those in the neutral condition. Legate *et al.* (2013) proposed that shunning others may have a negative effect on the perpetrator because it is a behaviour that hampers the fulfilment of the individual's psychological needs. Specifically, shunning others as a form of obedience would undermine one's own need for autonomy, relatedness, and competence.

Shunning others starts a process of self-objectivation and dehumanisation which involves the shunned person as well as the person who shuns. Bastian and Haslam (2010), for example, found that victims of shunning perceive both themselves and the perpetrator as less human. Examples of research such as Nezlek *et al.* (2015) and

Legate *et al.* (2013) evidenced that shunning may affect the sense of belonging, and both victims of shunning and perpetrators may experience feeling less interconnected. Also, Jack *et al.*'s (2013) findings seem to indicate that the act of depriving an individual of their humanness as when refusing to acknowledge their existence, leads to a disengagement of the default mode network which is a brain network associated with experiential reasoning, moral concern, and social cognition. Nevertheless, Nezlek *et al.*'s (2015) findings suggested that when shunning was purposively adopted to correct an unwanted behaviour, perpetrators "felt more in control, their self-esteem was higher, they had greater meaningful existence, and they felt less apologetic and angrier" (p. 441).

Religious shunning is a disciplinary measure and, according to Nezlek *et al.* (2015), the family and the community would feel justified and rewarded in shunning the impenitent person. However, whether this is the case, as Nezlek *et al.* (ibid) underlined, "although shunning someone can provide some rewards, these rewards are not nearly as great as the costs incurred by the targets" (p. 446). This thesis will seek to understand the physical, emotional, social and psychological costs the individual incurs once they are shunned.

2.2 Summary

The theoretical perspective which emerges from the current chapter is one which suggests the need to integrate the social identity paradigm and the notion of power. The social context influences members through a process of self-identification as in-group members which in turn determines a strengthening of a collective identity and a reinforcement of the internal homogeneity. At the same time, there is a disparity of

power due to the presence of an authority figure whose powers are derived from the 'institutional' role they hold (Schmid Mast, 2010). The hierarchy of power in this context enables obedience from its members and provides the appropriate conditions for social influence. The use of threats and punishment is a strategy to ensure members' compliance. Religious shunning seems to be a measure for social control especially adopted in social structures which rely on the use of coercive power to guarantee the members' adherence to the behavioural standards set by the authority.

The next chapter, which is the literature review chapter, will discuss the literature on different experiences of ostracism, shunning, ambiguous loss, and the disenfranchisement of grief. These are: the adoptees' experiences of loss, the migrants' experiences of leaving, bullying, family estrangement and honour-based violence. The choice of exploring these experiences has been made because the literature on the specific phenomenon of religious shunning is scarce. Therefore, these topics, presented as five main themes, have been selected as they have parallels to shunning and may shed light on the impact that being shunned from a gated religious community might have on the individual's life. Moreover, these experiences have strong parallels with those shunned as individuals may experience feelings of loss and grieving the living.

CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

ACQUAINTING ONESELF WITH RELIGIOUS SHUNNING: DRAWING PARALLELS

The empirical research on the specific phenomenon of religious shunning is limited. Although shunning is a practice with ancient roots, the practice of shunning in a religious context has been acknowledged only recently. The academic environment and the wider public are often unfamiliar with its unusual characteristics, the reasons some religious denominations adopt it and, most importantly, the impact that being shunned has on the individual's life. Despite its distinctiveness, religious shunning shares some processes and outcomes with other behaviours and occurrences. The following sections have been added in order to enhance familiarisation and knowledge with the practice of religious shunning. Each section will present a topic which has some aspects in common with religious shunning. The parallels between the findings on the topic presented and religious shunning will guide the reader to acquaint themselves with the meaning of being shunned from a religious community, increasing understanding of what religious shunning involves.

Following an overview of research on ambiguous loss and the disenfranchisement of grief, which will illuminate the experience of grieving the living, the literature review will be presented in five theme-dedicated sections and parallels between these topics and religious shunning will be made. This will emphasise the significance of the studies considered in providing groundwork for the research and in helping to understand the practice of religious shunning and its consequences.

In Theme 1, research on the experiences of adoptees will provide important material to reflect on the emotional and relational impacts caused by the loss of connection with and rejection by the biological family which a shunned individual may experience.

In Theme 2, a parallel between the experiences of migrants and people who have been shunned will be presented. Studies aiming at evaluating the impact of migration on the individual's life and the subsequent loss of cultural points of reference will offer evidence to evaluate the impact of being shunned from a religious community.

In Theme 3, research on bullying will provide the foundation to acknowledge religious shunning as a form of relational bullying determined by an asymmetric power relationship between the parties involved. This will help to start understanding the implications of being shunned from a gated religious community.

In Theme 4, the meaning of the severing of the family ties will be explored presenting findings on family estrangement. Commonalities and differences between family estrangement and religious shunning will be drawn.

Lastly, in Theme 5, some cultural practices adopted to sanction unwanted behaviour will be taken as pertinent examples to introduce the notion of gated religious communities as cultural environments influencing and directing the development of social norms and sanctions within groups. This last theme will also highlight the importance which constructs, such as honour and shame, play in promoting compliance within an ideology of control and abuse of power.

The final part of this chapter will provide an opportunity to reflect on the reasons it is often difficult to understand the social pain-related experience religious shunning is. The literature review will highlight the importance of researching religious shunning as a specific phenomenon in order to raise awareness and to open pathways for more informed means of support from practitioners and key stakeholders working with those who have been through this process.

3.1 Ambiguous Loss and the Disenfranchisement of Grief

Leaving a gated religious community such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, may result in feelings of loss and grief. Nevertheless, the loss of the shunned person is related not to dead people but to people who are still alive. It is therefore important to understand this kind of loss which Boss (1977) termed as ambiguous loss.

Loss is an experience that characterises human existence and, at some stage, almost everyone has to deal with losing a loved one. Although the loss of a beloved person is a common, universal phenomenon, it is considered one of the most stressful emotional events that an individual may experience (Howarth, 2011). The impact that loss may have can vary from one individual to another but usually sadness, anger, numbness, weight loss and insomnia are considered normal emotional and physical reactions during the grieving process (Cohen *et al.*, 2002; Howarth, 2011).

Grief, bereavement, and mourning are all terms associated with loss. Although they are often used interchangeably, Brown and Goodman (2005) highlighted that they refer to specific facets of the experience of loss. In fact, Stroebe *et al.* (2001, p. 24) defined bereavement as the objective occurrence of having lost a loved person to

death. Grief is explained as the combination of the cognitive, emotional, physiological and behavioural manifestations as the consequence of losing someone (Stroebe *et al.*, 2001, p. 24). Finally, mourning is defined as the culturally tied rituals and expression of grief (Brown and Goodman, 2005, p. 248).

Grief is not a linear, discrete event, rather it is a process. As Shuchter and Zisook (1993) suggested, “grief is a composite of overlapping, fluid, phases that vary from person to person, and moment to moment” (p. 23). Despite being an individualised process researchers have identified at least three common, overlapping phases which characterise grief. These phases are “an initial period of shock, disbelief and denial, an intermediate acute mourning period, and a culminating period of restitution” (Shuchter and Zisook, 1993, p. 24). When the individual goes through these stages successfully, the bereavement is defined as ‘uncomplicated’ or ‘normal’ (Howarth, 2011; Shuchter and Zisook, 1993). Uncomplicated bereavement involves, as Cohen *et al.* (2002) stated, “reconciliation; the individual works to integrate the new reality of moving forward in life without the physical presence of the person who died” (p. 309). This kind of reconciliation is achieved through specific steps which go from accepting the reality of the death to finding meaning in the loved one’s absence (Cohen, *et al.*, 2004; Neimeyer *et al.*, 2014). Those who grieve, as Saito (2014) explained, need to “create and tell stories that make sense of the loss in their lives by fitting their losses into their life stories” (p. 39). However, at times, the individual is unable to effectively achieve such reconciliation, the bereavement process is interrupted, and the resolution is postponed. When these conditions occur, the grief develops as an atypical process. Some of the reasons for an atypical grief could be traumatic bereavement or childhood traumatic grief (Howarth, 2011).

Another experience of atypical grief is what Boss (1977) termed 'ambiguous loss'. Ambiguous loss is defined as an "incomplete or uncertain loss" (Boss, 1999, p. 3). It is explained as a relational disorder (Boss, 2010) since grief becomes, as Knight and Gitterman (2019) explained, a response not to death loss rather "as a response to the changed nature and circumstances of a significant relationship" (p. 165). Boss (1999) distinguished between two situations that could lead the individual to experience such loss uncertainty. In the first instance, this could take place when the loved one is perceived as being physically absent but psychologically present. In the second, the important other is perceived as physically present but psychologically absent or emotionally unattainable. Thus, the loss is primarily emotional or cognitive (Boss, 1999, pp. 8-9). As Shalev and Ben-Asher (2011) reported, physical loss is often associated with war, kidnapping, going missing or mass natural disaster. It also may occur as the consequence of adoption, emigration, or divorce (Vaswani, 2018). However, the psychological or emotional loss could arise when the loved one suffers from Alzheimer's disease, autism, depression, or traumatic brain injury (Shalev and Ben-Asher, 2011).

The ambiguity in such loss is due to the absence of a clear cut-off, usually represented by a death certificate, ceremonies and rituals which enable the start of the grieving process (Shalev and Ben-Asher, 2011). There is no official nor social recognition of there being a real loss and the opportunity to work through grief is denied. In that case, when grief is overlooked or devalued and social support is lacking, the reactions of the bereaved could become more intense and dramatic (Gitterman and Knight, 2019). The ignored loss could lead to what Doka (1999) termed 'disenfranchised grief'.

Different situations may result in disenfranchised grief. A first situation is when the loss is not recognised such as the loss a woman could suffer following a miscarriage (Doka, 1999). A second situation which may result in disenfranchised grief is when the relationship is not recognised. Divorce and friendship rupture are exemplificative. Also, an individual could experience a disenfranchised grief when losing someone because of suicide or addiction (ibid). In ambiguous loss the griever finds themselves alone in mourning, since the social rituals of support that accompany death loss are not applicable. In fact, as Doka (1989) and Attig (2004) argued, grief is a social construct. Social norms establish the parameters for grieving, determining the appropriate circumstances for grieving and when grief is socially recognised. Consequently, when it does not occur within the socially accepted standards, the loss is disenfranchised (Knight and Gitterman, 2019). The individual is not accorded the right to grieve (Doka, 2002).

Moreover, in ambiguous loss the uncertainty freezes the grieving process and may impede the individual from accepting the loss, thereby blocking, as Boss (2007) underlined, the possibility for the individual to effectively cope with the event. Ambiguous loss also interferes with the decision-making process. The missing person is somehow there but at the same time not there (Boss, 2007) and the individual has to live with the contradiction of absence and presence (Boss, 2006). Ambiguous loss, particularly when disenfranchised, could lead to guilt, depression, and anxiety, resulting in poor quality of life (Boss, 2006). Nevertheless, personal characteristics could play an important role in moderating the effects of such an experience. The individual could show resilience after an ambiguous loss and successfully cope with the uncertainty characterising the loss (Perez, 2015). The absence/presence paradox

could characterise the experience of individuals that have been excluded by their own family, adoptees, and migrants as well as shunned people. Despite the fact that all these groups are characterised by the ambiguity of loss, the findings reported in the analysis below will present different facets of this same phenomenon. These facets are, feeling rejected by one's own biological parents, being estranged from one's own family members and, lastly, losing not only the affection of family but also one's own culture and its familiarity. Research on adoptees, migrants and 'estranged' as well as on the different aspects of ambiguous loss that characterise their experiences, is relevant in obtaining a deeper appreciation of the loss and impact endured by those shunned.

3.1.1 Theme 1: The Adoptees' Experiences of Loss

Findings based on adoptees' accounts provide certain parallels in relation to loss. Studies on adoptees focus on the emotional and relational consequences of the loss experience. These findings help to better understand the consequences that religious shunning could have on the individual because, as in the case of an adoptee, the shunned individual may experience the loss of family and the connected feelings of rejection and uncertainty.

Research showed that being adopted or being placed in foster care has important consequences for the individual, representing a drastic life change (Courtney, 2000). As Fagan (2010) reported, adoptees usually greatly benefit from being adopted. An improvement in the socioeconomic conditions, the support and the emotional stability of the new family, the availability of the regular medical care, and the possibility to seek a sound education, are some of the factors contributing to the overall positive

outcomes of adoption. Nevertheless, adoption could also represent an experience of loss for the adoptees. Brodzinsky *et al.* (1993), for example, listed some of the losses that the adoptee could suffer, such as the loss of biological parents and siblings, cultural and family roots, and the social status intended as the status of a person who has their father and mother.

The Department of Health (1999) added, “A recurring theme [in adoptees] was the sense of loss at having to leave their birth families and, in certain cases, others [such as foster carers] to whom they had become attached” (p. 45). From this perspective, adoption and foster care present two opposing sides. On the one hand, adoptees have gained a family. On the other hand, they have lost a family. For this reason, loss, disruption, and disconnection, as Bocknek *et al.* (2009), Courtney (2000) and Mitchell (2016) highlighted, could be considered a possible downside of the adoption and foster care experience. The Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption (2002) reported that while most adopted adults have successfully managed the loss experienced during their childhood by developing effective coping strategies, many adopted individuals struggle with grief, loss, meaning-making, self-identity, and self-image.

The difference between being raised by birth parents and having been adopted slowly takes shape and might acquire a new meaning, that of rejection and uncertainty. As Darnell *et al.* (2017) reported, adoption is often a stigmatised condition, and some adoptees may struggle in integrating into the new social environment. Feelings of having been rejected may negatively impact on present and future relationships, compromising the development of healthy interactions and the possibility of maintaining long-lasting friendships and meaningful connections with others during

their lifespan (Groza and Rosenberg, 2001). Also, unworthiness, inadequateness and being fundamentally wrong could become, at times, the most plausible motivations for having been given away, thereby producing feelings of shame and guilt (ibid).

Together with the feelings of rejection and uncertainty, the process of becoming aware of the adoption's meaning could also set the stage for a mourning-like phase (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). The adoptee needs to mourn the biological parents. Nonetheless, adoptees' loss is ambiguous since the mourned people, most of the time, are still alive. Powell and Afifi (2005) explored the issue of the adoptees' ambiguous loss and the management of uncertainty. Some of the interviewees described their feelings of loss and uncertainty as "an emotional hole" (p. 140), a lack of belonging. Also, research suggests that the higher the sense of uncertainty and loss, the most severe were the long-lasting attachment issues that adoptees developed. Rejection and ambiguous loss could translate into a general lack of trust towards close people and in an inability to form attachment (Knight and Gitterman, 2019).

Williams (2001) sustained that shunning, compared to other prejudicial interpersonal behaviours, endangers all the four core human needs. He explained those fundamental needs as the need to belong, for self-esteem, for control and for a meaningful existence. Some facets of the adoption experience may also pose a threat to these human needs. For example, the perceived or real rejection by the biological parents may undermine the need to belong (Powell and Afifi, 2005). Shame and guilt as the consequence of unworthiness and inadequateness as plausible reasons to be given up for adoption may challenge the individual's need for self-esteem (French,

2013). Ambiguous loss and the uncertainty that goes with it may destabilise the individual's need for control (Baxter *et al.*, 2001). Lastly, the difficulty in integrating the past into the present may threaten the possibility of having a meaningful existence and the possibility of establishing meaningful social connections and attachment (Groza and Rosenberg, 2001; Powell and Afifi, 2005).

A parallel could be drawn between the experience of an adoptee and a person who has been shunned from a gated religious group. As a consequence of religious shunning, the family who rejects the individual could be spiritual, biological, or both. The shunned individual is suddenly rejected not only by the spiritual family but also by their biological relatives if they are members of the community. In this way, the loss experienced by a shunned individual is similar to the feelings of loss that an adoptee may suffer. Moreover, anger, guilt, shame, and lack of control may severely affect the individual's emotional and psychological equilibrium (Darnell *et al.*, 2017). The lack of interpretative control (Williams, 2001) in this context appears to be particularly damaging. Bandura (1997) argued that feeling in control in a situation allows the individual to be efficient and to persist despite the adverse experience and to succeed. Williams (2001) further claimed that interpretative control is essential because it implies the ability to clearly understand the traumatic experience and to process it. This provides a certain degree of order and meaning to the individual's existence. The pain for being rejected could be such a damaging experience which could have important consequences not only on the overall individual's quality of life but also on their future relationships. This research will explore whether uncertainty and ambiguous loss threaten the need for control of the shunned person, decreasing the likelihood for the individual to successfully cope with the event they are experiencing.

3.1.2 Theme 2: The Migrants' Experiences of Leaving

Rosen (2014) compared people who leave gated religious communities or cultic groups to “invisible immigrants” (p. 21). The experiences of loss a shunned individual has to deal with, together with the displacement from a cultural environment to a new one, and the disruption of the established patterns and social connections are as powerful as those an immigrant has to face. Torn between the old and the new, the shunned individual leaves behind what is familiar, concrete, and well-established for the unknown. As Kuhn (1962) stated, “what follows will necessarily be more tentative and less complete than what has gone before” (p. 86). Thus, exploring the experiences of migrants and the impact of migrations on the individual's life appear apposite in order to understand the parallel between shunned individuals who leave the religious community and migrants who leave their homeland.

The immigrant's heart marches to the beat of two quite different drums, one from the old homeland and the other from the new. The immigrant has to bridge these two worlds, living comfortably in the new and bringing the best of his or her ancient identity and heritage to bear on life in an adopted homeland (McAleese, 2008, para. 3).

McAleese's words well describe the inner feelings people leaving their homeland could experience. The general term ‘migrant’ refers to “any foreigner living in a foreign country (asylum seekers, refugees or voluntarily immigrated)” (Shema, 2018, p. 72; Heeren *et al.*, 2014). The reasons to leave one's own country and settle elsewhere could be multiple. Patterns of emigration have been moulded by economic, political, and social changes. People leaving may wish to escape negative circumstances or oppressive conditions. They could also be forced to abandon their native land as the consequence of population transfer or the threat of ethnic cleansing, in which case being a migrant could become a permanent state of being.

Despite the initial reasons for leaving their homeland, migration and resettlement could pose particular strains on the individual. For instance, Kirmayer *et al.* (2010) argued that transitions and uncertainties characterise migration. In most cases, migrants successfully cope with the experience of leaving their own country and settling elsewhere. Nevertheless, changes in personal ties and the reconstruction of social networks, together with the move from one socio-economic and cultural system to another could be potential stress factors for the individual. Moreover, premigration, migration and postmigration are phases in the leaving process “associated with specific risks and exposures” (ibid, p. 3). Disruption of the usual social role and social ties, for example, uncertainty about the future, poor economic resources, sense of powerlessness and isolation, could all pose a threat to the individual, affecting, at times, their mental and physical well-being. As Shema (2018) underlined, migrants usually “exhibit higher percentage of mental health issues compared to non-migrant population” (p. 72).

The experiences of a Jehovah’s Witnesses shunned from the community appear to be similar to those of migrants. The shunned person may transit from a familiar socio-cultural milieu to a completely new one; from one social status to another. Often, the transition may be brutal as the individual is thrown into a new cultural environment. A new social role, new social rules, habits, and behaviours need to be learnt. Moreover, a new language needs to be absorbed and the old one needs to be abandoned. The role language plays in this particular context is especially notable. The terminology Jehovah’s Witnesses usually adopt moulds not only their interactions when speaking but also their worldview. However, once the individual leaves the community, they start

perceiving the terminology used by the Jehovah's Witnesses as being incongruent with the new social environment and no longer appropriate. This is because not only is it not shared by people outside the community but also because it conveys the strong dichotomy of in-group/out-group which characterises the Jehovah's Witnesses' worldview.

Although in certain circumstances the decision to leave the community is voluntary, often the emotional and psychological costs associated with leaving have not been properly considered. Like migrants, the shunned individual faces the challenge that leaving the community poses alone. Meaningful social ties have been cut off and the new social environment could appear too overwhelming. The lack of social connectedness, the loss of meaningful relationships and cultural points of reference highly impact on the shunned individual's life as much as they impact the migrants' life.

Studies conducted on refugees and asylum seekers in Europe showed that mental health is a significant issue affecting these groups of migrants. Severe and persistent mental health pathologies were associated with pre-migration trauma and post-migration difficult experiences and stress (Humphris and Bradby, 2017). Post migration factors which threatened the mental well-being of refugees and asylum seekers who resettled in European countries are poverty, episodes of racism, acculturation stress, poor language proficiency and loss of family and friends (ibid). Humphris and Bradby (ibid) also reported that the rate of mental illness increases when refugees and asylum seekers experience social isolation as well. The exposure to severe pre-migration trauma, as well as the post-migration and resettlement

experiences, have important repercussions on refugees and asylum seekers' mental health.

In terms of protective factors, resilience was found to be an important resource to deal positively with pre-migration and post-migration extreme stress experiences (Tessitore and Margherita, 2017). Charney (2004) defined resilience as the ability to maintain proper functioning despite adverse stimuli, chronic stress, a non-rewarding environment as well as to develop adaptive social behaviour (pp. 204-205). As Charney (2004) reported further, the adult characteristics associated with resilience to stress are the ability to bond with a group which shares a common purpose and a mutual altruistic behaviour. This research will seek to explore the coping mechanisms adopted by those shunned to manage the impact of shunning.

Besides the diverse events experienced by the literal or symbolic migrants, the separation from their loved ones, homeland, culture and what is familiar are also relevant factors which could impact on the individual's life. The separation from family and friends, and from one's own country and culture, voluntary or imposed, may be accompanied by a deep sense of personal loss. For a migrant, the feeling of loss could be as distressing an event as the death of a loved one and the journey to the new land could be seen as the final separation (Kilduff and Corley, 1999, p. 3). The shunned individual may experience something similar. The positive, emotional benefits of the community and its culture, expressed in terms of beliefs, points of reference and worldview, are left behind. Moreover, in the eye of the Jehovah's Witness community, the individual who leaves is symbolically dead.

Perez (2015) explored the experiences of lifelong loss of Cuban migrants who resettled in Miami. Chronic feelings of loss were common to all participants. Thwarted expectations of returning to Cuba and deliberating about the life left behind increased the sense of loss Cuban migrants experienced. While time was recognised to have an important role in soothing the pain associated with their losses, it could not completely heal the wounds of these losses. As the participants' accounts highlighted, the ambiguous loss coping process is a decades-long process without a clear end or resolution (Perez, 2015, p. 59; Boss, 2006). Although participants efficaciously coped with the experience of leaving their homeland and successfully resettling in a new country, feelings of frustration, pain, anger, *nostalgia*, and guilt characterised their new life.

Experiences of loss accompany both people who leave, and family and friends who stay. For the one who left, living outside their birth culture, discrimination and exclusion and the language barriers are all factors increasing the feeling of loss. For people who stay, the loss is experienced in terms of the person who has departed as well as the vacant role they have left within the family (Solheim *et al.*, 2016). Solheim *et al.* (*ibid*) found that the ambiguity of loss was an integral part of the experiences of Mexican immigrants in Minnesota as well as their families still in Mexico. Most of the participants crossed the border to seek employment in the US and help their family in Mexico financially. Their accounts highlighted the emotional impact of living with the paradox of psychological presence and physical absence for immigrants as well as for their families. As Solheim *et al.* (2016) reported, ambiguous loss frames the experiences of immigrant workers and their families.

Perez (2019) reported that the uncertainty related to the possibility to return home one day and the uncertainty of which place to call home are part of the immigrants' experiences of ambiguous loss. Ambiguous loss of homeland is an experience, as stated in Perez (2019) and Boss (2006), which lacks closure. Homeland and all the things related to home are physically far but psychologically present. The lack of closure makes it difficult for immigrants to easily settle in the new country.

While leaving one's own land is by and large a matter of personal choice, leaving a religious community is not always a voluntary decision. Despite the distance, the separation from one's own family does not imply for the migrant a complete severing of the social ties, and different strategies can be adopted to 'stay connected'. Phone or video calls or travelling back home when it is possible allow the migrant to alleviate the physical absence of family and friends. These strategies are precluded to an individual who has been shunned from the Jehovah's Witness community. Video and phone calls as well as emails or letters remain unanswered. WhatsApp or Facebook accounts are blocked, and the individual is not even allowed to be a passive observer of the family's or friends' lives. As the paradox of living with the contradiction of absence and presence (Boss, 2006) inhibits the possibility for many migrants to easily adjust to the new environment (Miller, 1985), the same paradox and inability characterise the experiences of leaving the religious community. Nevertheless, the meaning of loss acquired for the shunned individual has a stronger connotation. The loss is, most of the times, definitive. The only possibility to reinstate the lost connections is for the 'wrongdoer' to repent and return to the community. Even when effective coping strategies are adopted, by and large, the loss is "a wound that could never heal, it can only be alleviated" (Perez, 2015). Therefore, this research seeks to

determine which strategies participants adopt to deal with the severing of social ties and to understand whether these strategies proved to be successful for the meaning-making process of their losses.

3.1.3 Theme 3: Indirect Bullying

Morese, Defedele and Nervo (2017) argued that bullying may cause emotional, psychological, and interpersonal consequences, more than social exclusion. Victims of bullying may develop anxious reactions and suffer from poor, negative self-esteem. Tanaka (2001) reported being shunned from the peer group as an 'invisible' form of bullying, and Williams and Nida (2014) termed it as a 'non-behaviour' because it entails no specific, overt action intended to cause physical harm. It does not leave evident bruises or wounds. Religious shunning is conceived not only to distance the individual from the community as a consequence of an unwanted behaviour. Religious shunning specifically entails the community's deliberate intention to avoid, ignore and marginalise the individual. Religious shunning shares common features with bullying and possibly similar outcomes for the individual.

Research on bullying shows that boys and girls, children, teenagers, adults, and mature people, could all be the victims of bullying. Bullying could occur in the most diverse context and settings, such as primary school, college, work, nursing homes, prisons and online (Rosta and Aasland, 2018; Zych *et. al*, 2019). Moreover, bullying is not tied to a specific geographical area, rather it represents a major concern both in western and eastern countries (Smith *et al.*, 2016). Despite there being no legal definition of bullying, the British Government (Gov.UK, 2019, para. 1) offers the

following broad description of the behaviour which usually characterises bullying, it is a repeated action, it is intended to hurt the target either physically or emotionally, and lastly, it is often aimed at certain groups, for example because of race, religion, gender or sexual orientation.

Olweus (1994) provided a more detailed definition of bullying stating that,

It is a negative action when someone inflicts or attempts to inflict injury or discomfort upon another. Negative actions can be carried out by physical contact, by words, or in other ways, such as making faces or obscene gestures, and intentional exclusion from a group (p. 1173).

Olweus (1994) highlighted one more characteristic for bullying to be considered as such: “an asymmetric power relationship” (p. 1173), which he explained as an imbalance of power between the victim and the perpetrator. The victim is perceived as weaker by the perpetrator (Baldry, 2004) and is typically unable to defend themselves (van der Wal *et al.*, 2003). As Baldry (2004) underlined, two subcategories of bullying could be identified: direct and indirect bullying. Direct bullying is typified by overt actions against the victim. “It includes all sort of physical and verbal aggression, such as kicking, hitting, threatening, name-calling, and insulting” (van der Wal *et al.*, 2003, p. 1312). Indirect bullying implies a covert and relational behaviour. As Blain-Arcaro *et al.* (2012) suggested,

The term indirect bullying shares commonalities with both relational aggression and social aggression. In relational aggression, harm to relationships serves as the primary means of hurting a victim. Social aggression inflicts harm by damaging a victim’s self-esteem and social status, or both (p. 227).

Indirect bullying includes aspects of social isolation, such as ignoring, excluding, and backbiting, spreading rumours and the silent treatment (van der Wal *et al.*, 2003; Young *et al.*, 2010). Many studies found a gender difference between direct and

indirect bullying in terms of perpetrators as well as victims. While direct bullying is predominantly enacted by males, female predominance appears to be most present for relational bullying. Moreover, males are more often victims of bullying than females (Smith *et al.*, 2019).

Indirect bullying is more difficult to detect and often overlooked (Young *et al.* 2010). Various studies conducted in school contexts found, for example, that verbal or social/emotional abuse is usually judged by teachers as being less severe than direct bullying and consequently, less worthy of intervention (Hazler *et al.*, 2001). Also, it is argued that indirect bullying, intended as the deliberate social exclusion of a student from a group or the act of ridiculing a peer, is often not regarded as bullying (Tanaka, 2001). Nevertheless, the effects of indirect bullying have been considered as more subtle and damaging than overt, direct bullying. Tanaka (2001) reported, for example, severe distortion of the self-image as one of the consequences of *Ijime*, the Japanese term for bullying a peer by shunning, with serious impact on the individual's identity. Tanaka also listed feelings of rejection, isolation, and loss as the central experience of Japanese victims of indirect bullying.

Bullying has a cumulative effect on victims because it is a repeated action. This effect could persist into later life, leaving the individual feeling helpless and without hope. Tanaka argued that being bullied by shunning is an experience similar to the experience of children neglected by their mother in terms of cumulative trauma. Tanaka (*ibid*) suggested that "shunning has similar characteristics in terms of rhythmic pattern, its repetitious nature forms and the difficulties in avoiding the repetition. It then

has a strong impingement to emotional development, which... is the essence of cumulative trauma” (p. 467).

Besides the possible link between violence, such as acts of revenge perpetrated by victims of bullying, and relational bullying (Leary *et al.*, 2003; Sommer *et al.*, 2014), one of the most dramatic consequences of shunning is linked to own life termination in terms of suicidal ideations, attempts and suicide. According to BullyingUK (2019), in 2016, 1.5 million young people in the UK were bullied. Of these, 145,800 were bullied every day. Feeling isolated, worthless, and suicidal thoughts are some of the main impacts of being bullied. 40% of young people who reported being bullied experienced thoughts of suicide, and 39% had self-harmed. Also, 42% of young people had had to take time off school after they had experienced bullying. Over 200 school children commit suicide every year in the UK. Moreover, research conducted in Asia (Shaikh, 2013), US (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012) or in Europe (Barzilay *et al.*, 2017) presented the same evidence, that is, bullying is highly linked to suicidal ideation and attempts. Specifically, Barzilay *et al.* (2017) reported that while physical victimisation (direct bullying) was associated with suicide ideation, relational victimisation (indirect bullying) was associated with suicide attempts.

As Eastman *et al.* (2018) reported, reactions to being bullied may vary from victim to victim. Some victims may internalise the experience by developing a range of deleterious mental health conditions such as social isolation, depression, and anxiety. In contrast, other victims may externalise symptoms related to being bullied, engaging in violent behaviour, or becoming bullies in turn. Another set of victims may experience both types of symptoms simultaneously (ibid, p. 101). Lastly, for other victims, the

impact of being bullied is minimal. As Eastman *et al.* (ibid) recognised, social connections and family relationships act as protective factors against the harmful consequences of being bullied, underlining the important role that social support has for victims of bullying.

Religious shunning seems to present some features which characterise indirect bullying. The community, which often includes the family and relatives of the shunned individual, intentionally avoids and ignores the individual. Nevertheless, because there is no aggressive, physical behaviour expressed against the shunned person, alike indirect bullying, religious shunning too is difficult to detect and, because of the common lack of knowledge about this practice, it is often overlooked. Moreover, religious shunning is often perceived by the wider world as a disciplinary measure which has fallen into disuse, belonging to the distant past. For these reasons, it may not be recognised as a modern threat. Also, it may be difficult to understand, from the outside, the sense of loss and deep pain that the shunned individuals may experience and the impacts that leaving the community may trigger. It is therefore an important aim of the current research to evaluate the nature of religious shunning, exploring the impact that such a practice has on the individual's life.

3.1.4 Theme 4: Family Estrangement

Being shunned from the Jehovah's Witness community usually leads to a complete break from the family relationships. Former Jehovah's Witnesses may suffer estrangement from their family. Estrangement is seen as a necessary tool to discipline the deviant individual and at the same time to protect the family's values from harmful influences. People outside the community are a danger. This is even more true for

those who have been shunned because they have been considered unrepentant. Worse than a disfellowshipped individual is a member who has left the Jehovah's Witnesses by choice or because of apostasy. People who have been shunned and who have left by choice, are a threat due to their lifestyle, reasoning or doubts about the community's dogma. It is essential for the family and the community to keep their distance from members who leave to prevent them from becoming tainted. Moreover, obedience to the community's precepts becomes of primordial importance for members in order to keep an approved standing in front of God and the community. The relationship with the deity displaces blood ties to the point that the shunned individuals are not only shunned by the community but also by their relatives. "Our love for Jehovah must be stronger than our love for unfaithful family members" (JW.org, 2019c, p. 31). "Are you personally proving yourself holy with regard to not associating with family members or others who have been disfellowshipped?" (Watch Tower and Tract Society, 2014b, p. 14).

Baumeister and Leary (1995) argued that frequent and positive social interactions with people who are considered close, fulfil the humans' intrinsic need to belong. The failure in satisfying the need to belong could affect the individual with an onset of psychological and physical disturbances (Hall, 2018). Family ideally embodies a safe context in which the need to belong could be fully met. Also, for many, family often represents a point of reference and support in times of difficulties. "People give more weight to kinship in awkward and emergency situations" than to other kind of relationships (Neyer and Lang, 2003, p. 318). Thus, the disruption of the family's interactions and relationships could severely jeopardise the individual's well-being (Blake, 2017). In fact, despite the common expectations and assumptions about the

indissoluble nature of family relationships, many factors could lead to physical distancing and loss of affection between family members, referred to as family estrangement.

The term estrangement originates from the two Latin words, *extraneare* and *extraneus*. They respectively mean 'treat as a stranger' and 'not belonging to the family'. "Estrangement could be primarily physical where there is little or no contact between two or more family members, or primarily emotional, where one or more family members have limited, uncomfortable and emotionally absent or strained contact" (Agllias, 2017, p. 2). As Scharp (2019) explained further, family estrangement could be seen as a continuum rather than a discrete event and the individual can experience or enact different degrees of estrangement. "Physical distancing, lack of emotional intimacy, an unsatisfactory relationship, intermittent conflict and avoidance, and a belief that there is no way to resolve problems" (Agllias, 2011, p. 108) are points along the estrangement continuum and the individual adopts different strategies until achieving the desired distancing (Sharp and Hall, 2017).

When the family's set of beliefs and principles are endangered, questioned or betrayed, estrangement could become a protective response to threat. As Agllias (2011) reported, "every cut-off is a reaction to the articulated or implied conviction that 'you killed my God', whether the 'God' is defined as material possessions, adequate care, or respect for a significant person, value, or belief" (p.109). Family estrangement is more likely to occur especially when family members are inflexible and rigid in their beliefs, values, and perspectives, leaving no space for the acceptance of what is considered different. For instance, among the triggers identified by Clarke *et al.* (1999)

which could elicit the breach of the family ties, are habits, lifestyle, politics, religion, and ideology choices.

An important aspect that typifies family estrangement concerns the nature of its intention. Sharp *et al.* (2015) highlighted the fact that the estrangement is willingly brought about by one or more members of the family to “reduce implicit or explicit conflict, anxiety or tension between the parties” (Agllias, 2016, p. 4). Family estrangement entails a behaviour which aims to marginalise, physically or emotionally, or both, the member of the family, the “black sheep” (Fitness, 2005). However, the rupture of family ties is often surrounded by social stigma, is judged or misunderstood (Agllias, 2017). Thus, estrangement is, most of the time, hidden, disguised or denied (Agllias, 2011; 2017).

Family estrangement is an experience of ambiguous loss (Agllias, 2017; Agllias, 2011; Blake, 2017; Scharp and Hall, 2017). Depending on the strategy employed to carry out the estrangement, the individual who is estranged could experience the physical presence and the psychological absence or the psychological presence and the physical absence of the person who has promoted the estrangement. Moreover, when the loss is not disclosed to others, the grieving experience is disenfranchised (Agllias, 2011; Sharp and Hall, 2017). The loss is not socially acknowledged, publicly mourned and the lack of social support may exacerbate the impact of the experience of the individual. Agllias (2016) suggested that the context in which the estrangement takes place plays a decisive role in determining the severity of the effects on the individual. When it occurs within the family, the impact is intensified because estrangement, as

Agllias (ibid) commented, openly challenges the internalised expectation the individual may hold about the safety and stability of familial relationships.

Social support is an important factor which could mitigate the stressful effects of traumatic events. Nevertheless, the estranged individual is deprived of the primal source of support represented by family relationships. As argued by Tajfel and Turner (2004), social group's acceptance is important for the individual's well-being. Being part of a group and being accepted by the group influences the individual's sense of self by defining the individual in relation to the group and their role in the social context. Family is usually the primal social group an individual belongs to and being rejected by one's own family could possibly impact self-esteem, as Scharp and Hall (2017) suggested.

Agllias (2011) reported possible impacts on the emotional and physical well-being, interpersonal relationships, personal development, and self-determination as consequences of being estranged. Also, Agllias (2017) reported shaking, anxiety, crying, anger disappointment, guilt, low self-esteem, and rumination as some of the disruptive effects of family estrangement. Missing what family represents in terms of emotional, educational, financial, and physical support was another aspect the participants in the Agllias' study reported as the consequence of estrangement. "Losing historical information about family was also a source of considerable pain for many participants" (p. 8). Lack of a support network was another factor negatively affecting the overall individual's well-being. The lack of support was primarily due to the fact that victims and perpetrators tend not to share their experience with others. Estrangement is often socially stigmatised and people experiencing it manage the

selective sharing of information. As findings suggest, having secrets about, denying or disguising traumatic experiences affect the quality of social interactions leading at times to social isolation and depression (Agllias, 2011, 2013, 2017).

Research indicates that not only victims but also those who initiated the process of distancing experience loss and grief as well as guilt and shame (Agllias, 2017). Ormrod (2018) highlighted that “both parties have to come to terms with the loss of the parent-children relationship” (p. 548). Moreover, as Poulsen and Carmon (2015) reported, “The consequences of initiating the disruption of a social bond may also signal loss and trigger a sense of depression for sources of ostracism” (p. 455). Blake (2017) and Ormrod (2018) also argued that family members that proactively engage in estrangement processes often experience uncertainty as to whether they have made the right decision.

Hall (2018) found that estranged family members may adopt five main coping mechanisms to manage their experiences. First, individuals chose to invest their resources in family relationships which were loving and inclusive. They sought support from adopted or fictive kin, developing an alternative network of support which become family-like. Second, estranged individuals created and negotiated boundaries with their families moving towards a fresh start. Third, people managed to reframe their situation by focusing on rebuilding their lives while acknowledging and embracing the negative feelings connected to the experience. Fourth, some individuals downplayed the lived experience of estrangement denying it and diminishing the influence that family relationships may have. Lastly, individuals coped with the experience of family

estrangement living authentically despite disapproval, developing a sense of self-pride of their stigmatised identities or life-choices.

Family estrangement is not always experienced as a negative event. In some cases, the possibility of living authentically, without hiding or lying about one's own beliefs, sexual identity or religion is worth the consequences (Hall, 2018, p. 320). Feeling proud and empowered could help people to channel their negative feelings into productive actions and living having control of their lives. Also, family estrangement could represent a valid escape from an abusive or toxic relationship (Scharp *et al.*, 2015).

One important aspect that distinguishes religious shunning from family estrangement is its total and immediate excluding nature. Family estrangement usually involves primarily the dyad parents-child, but in religious shunning all members of the family, close and extended, may actively engage in shunning the individual. Religious shunning immediately disqualifies the individual from any family events or gatherings. Family could be seen as the custodian of its own inheritance which creates a connection between the past and the present. The individual is denied the access to this repository of memories and traditions, possibly losing a sense of continuity. Within the current research, the participants' accounts will provide an insight into the change in family dynamics triggered by the announcement of shunning. Also, the experiences of being estranged by one's own family, the severing of the family interactions as well as the making sense of the new situation will help to better understand the impact that leaving a gated religious community may have on the individual's social environment.

3.1.5 Theme 5: Sanctions and the Culture of Social Control

Religious shunning is a tool for social control, and it reflects the system of beliefs of the subculture which adopts such a practice. For instance, the way social control is applied to sanction the deviant behaviour and its severity, highly depends on the social and cultural context in which it develops. Thus, social sanctions can be understood as being culture-dependent, mirroring the beliefs, perspectives and influences which frame any given society or social group (Hague *et al.*, 2013). As Jary and Jary (2000) stated, “culture may be taken as constituting the ‘way of life’ of an entire society, and this will include codes of manners, dress, language, rituals, norms of behaviour and systems of belief” (p. 129). Culture and sub-cultures become the fingerprint of a social group, defining its identity (Haralambos and Holborn, 2013). “Culture is not genetically inherited but is instilled by upbringing within a given cultural context” (Hussain, 2005, p. 4). Culture and its set of rules, which constitute a way of life, provide for members of the community the normal, acceptable way to understand themselves and the world (Lago, 2006).

By way of example, in some social contexts the avoidance of interacting with others is a culture-specific practice which is “internalised as an emotional-cognitive-behavioural cultural script by the child and later re-enacted in his/her relationships to siblings, parents, close relatives, and friends” (Behzadi, 1994, p. 321). Thus, the silent treatment could be used as a tool to correct wrongdoing and to teach the community’s values. The Iranian practice of *qahr* and *ashti* is an example. The core concept of this practice is to externalise that a given behaviour was inappropriate and caused emotional sufferance. *Qahr* and *ashti* are initiated to correct the wrongdoing sending

a signal to the offender, giving the individual the possibility to amend and find reconciliation.

Behzadi (1994) described *qahr* as a brief temporary rupture, not a break-up, in the relationships among family members, relatives and close friends and it is usually associated with the silent treatment. The practice delivers a powerful message to the 'wrongdoer', which is, "I view myself as an important resource for you and I deprive you of my relationship for your wrongdoing" (ibid, p. 336). The emotional component becomes a strong drive used as a tool for social control where guilt and shame lead the ostracised individual to restore the fractured relationship by modifying their behaviour in order to please the offended, or to comply with the cultural norms or the family values.

Honour and shame are other constructs which form the basis of different practices which characterise specific socio-cultural milieu. Nevertheless, the level of importance the community places on honour and shame may determine the strictness of the sanction imposed to correct the deviant behaviour. On the one hand, as explained by Mansoor (2017), honour is a concept built on and reinforced by spoken as well as unspoken set of rules. These rules are passed down from member to member of the community, becoming a distinctive mark of a specific social group. On the other, shame is an emotion, and it is defined by the individual's response to the perception of having lost honour (ibid, p. 29). Shame has a twofold dimension, one internal and one external. "Internal shame manifests itself as a sense of the individual feeling ashamed, shameful and shameless" (ibid, p. 29). As Kellett and Gilbert (2001) explained "there can be a sense of internal, personal or private shame associated with

seeing oneself as inferior, inadequate, flawed and rejectible” (p. 11). External shame has a social connotation, and it is connected to punishment and enforced compliance by others (Mansoor, 2017, p. 29). As reported in Gilbert (2003), the fear of dishonour and shame acts as a strong deterrent for the individual to adhere to the group’s norms.

Honour and shame, in some communities, are strictly linked to shunning, and shunning becomes one of the most effective tools for social control and influence. As Tanaka (2001) explained, “Shunning implies the existence of a central group that provides coherence and a dominant narrative, and a peripheral group that always forms a counter-group” (p. 470). The practice of shunning, in specific social groups, is the result of socio-cultural dynamics and it appears to have a functional and utilitarian role, especially in face-to-face, kin-based societies (Mahdi, 1986). In the Pathan Hill tribe, for example, shunning is a cultural-dependent disciplinary measure used as a tool, as Mahdi (ibid) explained, to deter behaviour which goes against the cultural norms of the community.

The Pathans are one of the largest tribal groups in existence, totalling to 15 million members. Their territory is located between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Despite being part of the state of Pakistan, they are autonomous. The community is segmented into tribes, then clans, sections, subsections, and families. As Mahdi (1986) explained, in the Pathan community there is not a central government, nor do they recognise a permanently established authority as they consider the individual freedom a great value (ibid, p. 148). Nevertheless, they also acknowledge the importance of belonging to the group and, thus, the necessity to protect the group as a cohesive entity regulating not only the intra-group but also the inter-group relations. Pathans have

found in the Pukhtunwali, that is the Code of the Pathans, the way to respect the desire for individual freedom and at the same time to protect the community unity. The Code is a set of stated rules of conduct. The observance of the Code is not imposed, and a member of the community is free to leave the community if they do not wish to follow its dictates.

Honour is the core concept of Pathan normative behaviour. To act against the Code brings dishonour and shame upon the member and it is punished by being shunned (Mahdi, 1986). Shunning is conceived by the Pathans as a range of actions, from the termination of life or exiling the member who caused dishonour to a milder form of disapproval such as public derision (ibid, p. 147). "Women personify the honour of the tribe" (ibid, p. 149). Indulging in an illicit sexual relationship is the worst crime for a woman the Pathans can conceive, and it can be punished by being exiled. Shunning, intended as the imposition of exile, is an institutionalised practice the most similar to the Greek *ostrakismos*. However, being that the women's honour is highly connected to the tribe's honour, when the honour of a woman is compromised, the honour of the tribe is compromised as well. Thus, the most extreme form of shunning is usually applied, which is the death sentence. In fact, the death sentence, or 'revenge killing', is referred to by the Pathans as the only way to completely restore the tribe's honour.

As Hales *et al.* (2017) commented, the use of shunning as a social punishment has three main aims: to protect the group identity, to correct the deviant behaviour and to expel the impenitent member. Forsdyke (2005) argued that shunning is highly related to the boundaries set by the group, and it is implemented as a way to reinforce the

group's identity by physically removing the individual who threatens the community's core values and identity.

As Williams (2001) observed, considering the intrinsic power of shunning, the threat of being shunned may become a strong motivation for people to adhere to the group's norms, increasing the individual's susceptibility to social influence (Carter-Sowell *et al.*, 2008). In this context, the current research explores the way shunning is used as a tool for social control within a gated religious community such as the Jehovah's Witness community.

In some other cultures, as Tapper and Tapper (1993) argued, "honour and shame constitute an ideology of control" (p. 4) where they are purposefully used to regulate member's behaviour. Cultures of honour, according to Vandello and Cohen (2003), exist in some Mediterranean societies, Middle Eastern and Arabic cultures as well as Latin and South American cultures and, as Gill (2009) reported, cultures of honour are not tied to a specific religious environment. Nevertheless, religious values could play an important role in setting the direction for culture and norms to develop (Björktomt, 2019). When these values are taken to extremes in order to endorse a strong orientation towards male authority, the religious background becomes the means to validate a specific culture, belief and worldview.

Usually, cultures of honour are characterised by strong patriarchal values (Gill and Brah, 2004; Hume, 2007). In patriarchal cultures, women are often devalued, and obedience is a concept associated with women's submission (Hume, 2007). As Hidayatullah (2003) commented further, "crimes in the name of family honour are the

symptoms of cultural views of women's sexuality and shame" (p. 285). According to Fischbach and Valentine (2007), in patriarchal cultures where the gender roles are strictly defined, the concept of "masculinity and male honour is strongly associated with violence against women" (p. 206). In this context, it is men's responsibility to maintain and "defend the honour of the family against any behaviour that might be seen as shameful by the community" (Gill, 2011).

In honour cultures, the gender hierarchy is also mirrored in the intrinsic difference between men's and women's honour. While female honour is associated with negative, static, and passive characteristics, male honour is perceived as dynamic and linked to positive features. Honour is the paradigm against which proper and improper behaviour is determined and chastisement is applied accordingly (Sanberg and Janssen, 2018; IKWRO, 2013). Honour and shame have the effect of restricting the individual's autonomy and bounding the person to adhere to the norms which regulate the social group's life. Once the individual breaks the rules set by their families and communities, bringing dishonour and shame, family members are expected to act to restore the family's honour (Sanberg and Janssen, 2018). Behaviours that could be considered as violating the honour code are dressing in a way which is disapproved by the family, resisting an arranged marriage, seeking divorce, dating someone outside of the community or reporting domestic violence (IKWRO, 2013).

The actions undertaken to restore honour are not a private matter. The community gets involved and becomes the audience. The nature of honour-based violence and honour killing is public because the loss of honour has important consequences for the family. Individuals who break the social norms, not only bring dishonour upon

themselves but also and especially upon their family (Gill, 2011). Thus, because family honour has been damaged in the public's eye, certain steps need to be taken to restore the family's reputation and its social standing (Idriss, 2017). Shunning the individual is another powerful public act which aims at restoring the family's honour in the eyes of the community. As a consequence, the family and social ties are damaged forever.

The aim of honour-based violence is twofold. First, it aims at reassuring those members of the community who are aware of the individual's transgression, of the worthiness of their family. Second, honour-based violence acts as a measure for social control, terrorising other members, forcing them into compliance with acceptable behaviour (Idriss, 2015; Idriss, 2017). Even though honour-based violence is predominantly directed towards women, men too can be victims of such a practice (Thapar-Björkert, 2011).

It is argued that the need for control is important to have a healthy life (Dickson, 2014). However, honour-based violence victims are deprived of the possibility to have control over their lives and circumstances. The lack of such control could affect the individual's wellbeing, and self-esteem (Tones and Green, 2010). It could have important repercussions on the individual's mental health. A study conducted in the United Kingdom in South Asian communities, found that anxiety, depression, self-harming behaviour, attempting suicide, fear, anger, running away from home, isolation, and mistrust in sharing the personal experience with others were some of the consequences victims of honour-based violence reported (Khan, Saleem & Lowe, 2018).

Honour-based violence and religious shunning share some common features. Shame and honour are motivating factors in adopting honour-based violence and religious shunning. The aim of religious shunning is not only to restore the reputation of the 'spiritual family' but also the reputation of God, which the wrongdoer's behaviour has stained. Religious shunning, as well as honour-based violence, is a public act and the entire Jehovah's Witness community is actively involved in carrying out the punishment. Another aspect which religious shunning and honour-based violence share is the death-related status. While the victims of honour-based violence risk losing their life, recipients of religious shunning experience a spiritual and social death. The spiritual death, which is represented by leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses community, according to the group's teachings, will be possibly followed by the physical one on doomsday (Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 2006).

3.1.6 Understanding the Impact of Religious Shunning

The reactions to others' sufferings may vary from person to person and different factors may modulate the individual's response while they are witnessing the impact of social pain experienced by others. Personal characteristics and cultural background, for example, play a role in the observer's empathic responses to others' physical and social pain (Atkins *et al.*, 2016; Santamaria-Garcia *et al.*, 2017). Meyer *et al.* (2013) found that not only observing physical pain triggers a different response compared to observing social pain-related sufferings, but also the relationship with the individual who is suffering is determinant in moderating the empathic reactions of the observer.

Research suggests that empathy includes two primary components (Masten *et al.*, 2011). The first component pertains to the affective dimension and allows the observer

to share the emotional experiences of others. The second component involves cognitive processing and mentalising. The affective and cognitive components of empathy rely on distinct neural networks (ibid, p. 381). Not only do the two components of empathy activate different regions of the brain, but also, they rely on distinct neural mechanisms. On the one hand, observing a stranger suffering physical pain, activates the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex (dACC) and insula. These areas are responsible for coding the affective distress associated with the first-hand experience of pain. The activation of the same region of the brain during first-hand experiences of physical pain, and while observing other's sufferings, helps to create an affective connection between the observer and the sufferer, allowing the observer to feel the other person's distress (Lamm *et al.*, 2007). On the other hand, a substantial activation in the dorsal medial prefrontal cortex (DMPFC) is registered in observing a stranger excluded from a peer-group but not in the dACC and insula (Williams *et al.*, 2000). The DMPFC regions are associated with mentalising processes, that is thinking about the traits, states, and intentions of others (Meyer *et al.*, 2013, p. 446) or, as Masten, Morelli and Eisenberger (2011) commented further, "thinking about and understanding the mental states of others" (p. 381), also refereed as mentalisation.

While evidence suggests that empathy is an important motivation factor for prosocial behaviour, cognitive empathy is not significantly associated with actions intended to benefit others. These kinds of actions are more likely to be triggered by an affective reappraisal of others' sufferings (Lockwood *et al.*, 2014). Notably, Nordgren *et al.* (2011) suggested that people have the tendency to underestimate and distort understanding of social pain. Loewenstein (1996) defined this empathy gap for social pain as a "cold-to-hot empathy gap", arguing that people that are not personally going

through a visceral experience, such as an experience of shunning, are inclined to misjudge the other's suffering, the severity of the emotional pain and the extent of the effects on the individual (Nordgren *et al.*, 2011). Nevertheless,

Although emotion sharing may occur less readily for strangers' social suffering and may therefore recruit mentalizing regions without recruiting dACC and insula, emotion sharing may occur more readily when there is identification with a close other, corresponding with increased activation in dACC and insula (Meyer *et al.*, 2013, p. 447).

Recent research suggests that social pain, such as that experienced by some shunned individuals, could be deeper and longer lasting than physical pain (Chen *et al.*, 2008; Meyer *et al.*, 2015; Williams and Nida, 2011). Also, according to Meyer *et al.* (2015), being shunned could leave a profound mark on the individual to the extent that the emotional and psychological pain related to that experience becomes easily accessible. Thus, it can be re-experienced more easily and more intensely than physical pain, enhancing the emotional distress over time and delaying the healing process. Nevertheless, reactions to shunning may vary from person to person and some individuals may feel empowered and relieved in leaving the community (Grendele, 2018; SAMHSA, 2014).

Tanaka (2001) and Williams (2001) argued that the consequences of the exposure to a long-term shunning trigger, are dramatically more harmful compared to the sporadic, short-term experiences of shunning. As Eisenberger *et al.* (2007), Oliè *et al.* (2017) and Tsai *et al.* (2015) confirmed, the effects that being shunned have on the person's well-being are deleterious. Feelings of living a worthless life, depression, ideations and attempts to commit suicide (Williams and Nida, 2014), maladaptive responses, such as eating disorders (Baumeister *et al.*, 2006; Salvy *et al.*, 2011), promiscuous behaviour (Stock *et al.*, 2011) and aggressive behaviour (Sommer *et al.*, 2014;

Wesselmann *et al.*, 2015) have been recognised as some of the negative impacts endured by those shunned.

These findings are especially compelling considering that religious shunning could last for many months or, at times, be permanent. In fact, as reported in the Jehovah's Witnesses handbook '*Shepherd the flock of God*', when a former member expresses their desire to be reinstated by presenting a written statement, the judicial committee which evaluates the request "should be careful to allow sufficient time, perhaps many months, a year, or even longer, for the disfellowshipped person to demonstrate that he is genuinely repentant" (Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 2019a, p. 156). If the individual decides not to return to the community, the shunning-related behaviour of the community will be permanent.

3.2 Summary

The literature review has presented an overview of the current research available on social phenomena that share some common features with religious shunning. This serves to strengthen the understanding of what religious shunning might involve and the possible impact that being shunned from a religious community, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, could have on the individual. Religious shunning appears to be a complex experience which presents characteristics and outcomes similar, yet distinct, from other manifestations of shunning. For example, religious shunning is a form of relational bullying. Nevertheless, it could not be labelled simply as bullying. Religious shunning could be compared to an emotional exile which can be related to the experiences of migrants. However, religious shunning could not be explained just

as an experience of exile because more complex dynamics are involved when a person leaves the community.

Religious shunning is characterised by the ambiguity of loss similar to the experience of estranged people or adoptees. Yet, the loss of family is not the only loss the shunned individual suffers. Religious shunning and honour-based violence share common mechanisms and patterns. Nonetheless they are not the same practice. The distinctiveness of religious shunning revolves around the fact that the dynamics which develop between peers in the gated community includes the presence of a supernatural entity. This plays a pivotal function in the development of interpersonal dynamics, personal perspectives, and social roles. The will and presence of the deity shape not only the interactions between the individual and the divine, but also, and especially, those between the individual and other members, and between the individual and outsiders. The triangular interaction between the individual, the group, and the deity makes religious shunning a complex, distinct phenomenon not comparable to other shunning-related experiences.

The next chapter will describe the philosophical stance framing the present study. Moreover, the methodological approach adopted to address the topic will be outlined. Practical aspects of the study such as the recruitment process, data collection and analysis will be described in detail. A reflexivity section will help the reader to position the researcher within the research. Lastly, the ethical aspects of the study will be discussed, which will include the measures taken to address ethical concerns.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

The present chapter will outline the philosophical stance framing the research and it will provide the rationale for adopting a qualitative approach to address the topic. The limitations of choosing a qualitative method will also be discussed. The advantages and potential disadvantages of the researcher's familiarity with the subject explored will be presented together with the strategies implemented to minimise the risks of the researcher's possible bias in understanding and interpreting the data. The recruitment process, the data collection and data analysis will be described in detail. Finally, the ethical principles which have guided the recruitment process, the data collection as well as the analysis will be delineated and explained.

4.1 Philosophical Stance and Methodological Approach

The present study has been conceived as an exploratory project which sought to provide an understanding of religious shunning in terms of the meaning this has for the people experiencing it and for those who enact it (Langdridge, 2007, p. 2). Most of the available studies that have explored the experiences of shunning have adopted a quantitative approach (Waldeck, 2017). This method is especially useful to make standardised comparison, to verify the consistency of the final results across similar studies and to strengthen their validity (Anderson, 2010; Coolican, 2013). On the other hand, as Anderson (2010) explained, "Qualitative research involves the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data that are not easily reduced to numbers. These data relate to the social world and the concepts and behaviours of people within it" (p. 1).

In trying to understand the phenomenon of interest and to fill the existing gap between evidence and practice, the attention should focus on non-artificial settings where socio-cultural variables are acknowledged, and individuals' experiences are considered essential to develop and pilot future research (Handley *et al.*, 2016; Moir, 2018). The qualitative nature of this research attempts to draw the meaning of religious shunning from a subjective point of view and acknowledges the existence of real-world variables that cannot be controlled or quantified. Those variables become important factors in understanding and making sense of the phenomenon and the framework in which it occurs (Starks and Trinidad, 2007).

“Gazing into the heart of things” (Rilke, 1987) or having an insight into the lived experience of human existence is the stance that frames the development of the present qualitative study. An interpretative approach that aims at being a thoughtful reflection of the individual's experience driven by, as van Manen (2007) suggested, “a fascination with meaning” (p. 12). The subjective construal and sensemaking of the personal occurrences are central in the process of ‘knowing’. Subjectivity and the individual's interpretation of the phenomenon, in fact, gives the possibility to uncover the meaning and the essence of religious shunning as the individual experiences it (Brysbaert and Rastle, 2012; Higginbottom, 2004). As Higginbottom (2004) claimed, the meaning of everyday life and language is rooted in subjectivity; research could elicit such significance and make the “unspoken visible and audible” (p.12).

According to van Manen (2007), the understanding of the experience that emerges from the individual's interpretation “is not primarily gnostic, cognitive, intellectual, or technical but rather relational, situational, corporeal, temporal, actional” (p. 20). There

is no objective reality but there are as many realities as people constructing them (Chilisa and Kawulich, 2012). From that perspective, the participant is considered as an expert of their experiences, capable and eager to share with the researcher an in-depth view of their own reality (Gough and Madill, 2012; Josselson, 2004). The researcher's role acquires a new nuance, that of a learner. The researcher, as Walcott (1990) stated, becomes engaged with participants in the co-production of knowledge.

The researcher is no longer an external, neutral observer, rather the researcher becomes involved in the participant's sensemaking course of the phenomenon, attempting to understand the way the experience is viewed from the participant's standpoint (Biggerstaff, 2012). The researcher and the participant create what Josselson (2004) defined an "I-Thou" relationship (p. 7), a genuine, profound, and non-judgemental connection between the interviewee and the interviewer where the self finds fertile ground to be fully disclosed and heard. Language and stories become powerful means to convey information and give meaning to the occurrences. "It is within the social medium of language that we articulate our most individual memories in the mode of narrative" (Ricoeur, 1997, p. 43). Thus, reality also becomes a social construction (Creswell, 2007; Murray, 2003); we use language to share stories, to talk with others, about others and about ourselves.

The scrutinised phenomenon takes the shape of a narration; as in a plot, the narrator (the participant) positions the characters of their personal experience coherently in time and space to give a meaning, to explain or to normalise what happened (Bamberg, 2012). Moreover, in narrating, the participant makes sense of themselves and others, providing a unique order of meaning (Crossley, 2000). Interestingly,

narrative is not a chronological sequence of events rather, as Ryan (2007) commented, “narrative is about problem solving, conflict, interpersonal relations, human experience. Narrative is about temporality of existence” (p. 24); when a story contains those components, it becomes a narrative. Narratives are closely related to self-identity (Murray, 2003), and as McAdams (1985) argued, “identity is a life story” (p. 19).

At the same time, the researcher acknowledges the limitations that choosing a qualitative method could imply. As Atieno (2009) stated, “Findings cannot be extended to wider populations with the same degree of certainty that quantitative analyses can” (p. 17). This is because of the sample size, which is not statistically significant and consequently the findings cannot be generalised to the wider population. Therefore, the findings of the present research are not to be considered as representative of the worldwide community of people who have been shunned from the Jehovah’s Witnesses but of a small sample of British participants.

Another limitation of a qualitative approach is concerned with the replicability of the research. Murray (2003) suggested that the structure of the narrative is context dependent. The I-Thou relationship between the participant and the researcher influences the construction of the account (Josselson, 2004). Consequently, the involvement of the researcher in the process of knowledge production and the unique relationship the researcher and each participant create, are difficult to replicate. Nevertheless, the researcher feels that this aspect does not represent a pitfall for the present research. In fact, an accurate and detailed description of the following aspects has been recorded and made available: research settings, the position of the

researcher along the insider-outsider continuum, the sampling procedure, the nature of the interactions with participants and each step of the analysis process (Aguinis and Solarino, 2019). As Aguinis *et al.* (2018) highlighted, the more willing researchers are in providing a rationale and a detailed description for each decision made or procedure selected during the development of their research, the more the study will gain in methodological transparency.

Thus, “if replication is a desirable goal, then transparency is a required step” (Aguinis and Solarino, 2019, p. 1292). Complex events and phenomena, such as religious shunning, demand complex understanding, and a qualitative approach is suitable in exploring this topic in depth, because of the nature of the insight it could provide (Anderson, 2010; Willig, 2008). Thus, bearing in mind the nature and the research questions of the present research, a qualitative approach has been considered as the most appropriate method to understand religious shunning as the participants experience it. This approach, in fact, has been deemed as appropriate for the specific objectives of the research, because the systematic collection of quantifiable, objective data would have limited the understanding of this phenomenon (Queirós *et al.*, 2017). As Atieno (2009) argued, the qualitative approach does “justice to the participants’ perceptions and the complexity of their interpretations” (p. 16). Therefore, the researcher, approaching religious shunning qualitatively, aimed to valorise the depth and richness of the participants’ experiences.

4.2 Method

4.2.1 Recruitment Process and Participants

Research participants included two groups: those who have been shunned from the community (Group A) as well as those in a position to shun a member (Group B). The narratives of these two groups have formed the research data. The interviews with Group A are aimed to provide an insight into the experiences of being shunned from the Jehovah's Witness community. The narratives of participants of Group A have provided the material to address the following:

- 1: The lifecycle of religious affiliation
- 2: The loss and disillusionment of being shunned and its impacts
- 3: Personal challenge or personal development: What is the outcome for shunned individuals?

On the other hand, the interviews with participants of Group B are aimed to understand the perspectives of the PIMO and former Elders on the topic. Exploring their viewpoint was important considering that the Elders are directly involved in the judicial process which assesses the alleged wrongdoing and whether a disciplinary action is required. The Elders are ultimately those who have the authority to shun a member. Therefore, the interviews with the participants of Group B have provided the material to elucidate the procedures and policies regarding the shunning and the reinstatement process, as well as the way they appraise the power which comes with such position of authority. By seeking data from these two opposing groups, a more wholesome picture of this shunning process can be presented.

Participants of Group A were eligible for the study if they were 18 years or over, as well as British. Thus, the findings of the present research are representative of a small group of the population with a specific cultural background.

According to the Research Governance Framework for Health and Social Care (Department of Health, 2001), researchers should acknowledge the heterogenic nature of society, and research samples should mirror such cultural nuances. As Allmark (2004) highlighted, ethnicity, sexuality, gender and economic status are factors weighted by cultural differences. These differences may impact on the phenomena the qualitative research explores, determining the variance in the findings. Nevertheless, the sample size, in research adopting a qualitative approach, is often small. Thus, “qualitative researchers could not reflect such diversity in each of their samples” (ibid, p. 188). This research is a portrait of religious shunning within a small sample of 21 British respondents. To address what could appear as a limitation, Allmark suggested (that researchers) “let a thousand flowers bloom” (ibid, p. 188) in qualitative research. In this way, “then the body of research evidence that reflects the diversity of the population will, for the most part, develop” (ibid, p. 188).

Being officially shunned from the Jehovah’s Witness community was another fundamental inclusion criterion applied for the recruitment of participants of Group A. Thus, all participants in the former-members group were individuals who have been declared as no longer part of the Jehovah’s Witnesses community. The formal shunning of the participant from the community took place not less than 7 months before having been recruited. This lapse of time was set to address risks related to emotional distress for leaving the community and to give prospective participants a

reasonable period of time to settle after formally becoming former members. According to Rodriguez (2018), any less than this lapse of time might suggest that participants going through a sensitive event may not be ready to share their experiences.

The initial inclusion criteria for participants of Group B were, first, being 18 years or over, and second, being an appointed Elder of the Jehovah's Witness community in one of their UK churches. Despite the various efforts made, none of the body of Elders of the Jehovah's Witnesses' churches who were contacted, accepted to be interviewed. This is mainly because Jehovah's Witnesses are a gated religious community, and they are reluctant in sharing their testimonies with an external party. At this point, a revision of the inclusion criteria was deemed necessary. Another category of participants was subsequently identified, and the invitation to participate in the research was extended to those Elders who are active members of the community but who secretly do not agree, in part or at all, with the community's ideology. Also, former Elders were included in the pool of prospective participants. Considering the difficulty in finding participants for Group B despite the implementation of the new inclusion criterion, the geographic area of interest was subsequently extended beyond the UK boundaries, to include participants from Australia and the USA. The sample size for Group B was of 12 participants.

Interviewing participants from the USA for Group B gave an unexpected little twist to their narration. Being that the world headquarters is based in New York state, from where the Governing Body of the Jehovah's Witnesses directs the community, some of the Elders who were interviewed, had personally met members of the Governing

Body, or had attended the training course for Elders at the headquarters facilities. Not many Elders within the worldwide community of the Jehovah's Witnesses have the opportunity to have direct contacts with or to work alongside the Governing Body. Therefore, the perceptions and experiences which the participants from the USA shared during the interviews, provided additional details to better understand their decision to distance themselves, mentally or also physically, from the community.

4.2.1.1 Sampling strategies and sample size

A conceptually driven approach guided the sampling process and specifically a purposive sampling was adopted (Farrugia, 2019; Patton, 2015). The research framework and aims provided the parameters to identify the suitable sample in order to answer the research questions (Farrugia, 2019; Moser and Korstjens, 2018). Specifically, Jehovah's Witnesses who have been shunned from their religious community for Group A, and the spiritual shepherds of the same denomination, for Group B, were purposefully selected. This was because of their direct knowledge and expertise of the subculture they belong to (van Manen, 2014). As Patton (2015) noted, purposive sampling allows for the selection of "information-rich cases to study, cases that by their nature and substance will illuminate the inquiry question being investigated" (p. 264).

While quantitative research relies on the power of statistical representativeness which permits confident generalisation from a sample to a larger population, and consequently random sampling is preferred, samples in qualitative research tend to be small in order to support the richly textured material the in-depth interviews which participants provide (Vasileiou *et al.*, 2018, p. 2). The selection of a small sample with

similar characteristics which represents a weakness in quantitative research becomes a strength in qualitative research because it allows a thorough, individual-focused, and contextually sensitive understanding of the topic explored (Patton, 2015). Therefore, a purposive sampling method is often selected when conducting qualitative enquires. For the current research, the sample is of 33 participants in total, 21 for Group A, and 12 for Group B.

Participants for Group A and Group B were recruited using a combination of two forms of purposive sampling: homogeneous and snowball sampling (Farrugia, 2019). Homogeneous sampling aims to select a group of participants with similar backgrounds who went through a similar experience. As Dallos and Vetere (2005) explained, a homogenous sample is when the researcher has determined the population of interest very specifically. On the other hand, snowball sampling actively engages participants in the sampling process. As Farrugia (2019) explained, “initially identified participants are asked to suggest other possible candidates”. This sampling strategy is particularly helpful when the group of interest is difficult to access as. for example, in this initiative no public records are available for those who have been shunned from their religious community. Therefore, a snowball sampling strategy proved to be an essential sampling strategy for the current research and the role of some participants as gatekeepers was pivotal during the recruitment process.

Although snowball sampling was considered as the most advantageous method to access former members of the community, PIMO and former Elders, one major limitation of this sampling technique has to be acknowledged. According to Kirchherr and Charles (2018) and Waters (2015), the main issue with snowball sampling is that

of distortion, which has a twofold implication. Firstly, there is the concrete possibility of an overrepresentation of specific demographic or personal characteristics within the research sample. This may lead to the results being ‘distorted’, not completely representative of the sub-population, and only partially capturing the full nuances of the phenomenon studied. Secondly, because the recruitment process mostly relies on the gatekeeper’s network of connections, individuals who are not connected to this network may be overlooked despite meeting the inclusion criteria.

In the case of the current research, the individuals referred by the gatekeepers present some similar characteristics. For instance, most of the participants are middle-aged or older. This resulted in the underrepresentation of participants between 20 and 50 years of age. Furthermore, all the participants from the gatekeepers’ networks commenced in a spiritual journey towards becoming Christians once they left the community. This aspect only partially depicts the post-exiting experiences of people who have been shunned. Although some people who leave the Jehovah’s Witnesses may convert to another Christian denomination, it can also be argued that this may not be the choice of all those who decide to join another religious denomination, nor that the majority of those who leave will convert to another faith.

The principle of saturation (Hennink *et al.*, 2016) guided the selection of the appropriate sample size. The concept of saturation in qualitative research was introduced first by Glaser and Strauss (1967). They referred to theoretical saturation when, during data collection, “no additional issues or insights emerge from data and all relevant conceptual categories have been identified, explored, and exhausted. This signals that conceptual categories are ‘saturated’” (Hennink *et al.*, 2016, p. 2). As Kerr

et al. (2010) suggested, theoretical saturation is better explained in terms of data adequacy of the sample, rather than sample size.

Hennink *et al.* (2016) argued that the concept of saturation is not unidimensional, rather it could be determined based on code and on meaning. Code saturation refers to the point when no additional topics are identified, and the codebook is relatively stable. Meaning saturation, on the other hand, refers to the point when an issue is fully captured and understood, and when “no further dimensions, nuances, or insights of issues can be found” (*ibid*, p. 4).

When conducting PhD research several factors should be considered to determine saturation. For example, some of these factors are the time available to conclude the PhD and the possible difficulty of gaining access to prospective participants. Also, the researcher’s expertise about the domain of inquiry and the challenge of properly analysing the data collected are other aspects which should be considered when considering saturation (Baker and Edwards, 2012; Guest *et al.*, 2006; Mason, 2010). Nevertheless, according to Mason (2010), “in interview studies little that is ‘new’ comes out of transcripts after you have interviewed 20 or so people” (p. 120). This research had therefore initially aimed to recruit a sample size of 20 participants for Group A, and at least 5 participants for Group B, with the final numbers being 21 participants for Group A and 12 participants for Group B.

4.2.1.2 Characteristics of the samples

In total, 43 people for Group A showed interest in the research. Fifteen of those participants did not match all the inclusion criteria, and seven did not follow up with

the interview. This resulted in 21 participants who signed the Consent Form, 10 women and 11 men. Almost half of the participants were in their 50s or over. More than half were in employment. Nine were 'born into' the Jehovah's Witness community. Six were 'raised in', following their parent's conversion when they were young. Six converted, joining the community as adults. Thirteen were disfellowshipped, six disassociated, and one, after being disfellowshipped twice and reinstated is now a *fader*. Eleven joined another religious denomination after exiting the Jehovah's Witness community, and ten declared to have no religious affiliation at the present. In particular, one participant described herself as being 'anti-theist' and another as being 'humanist'. Further demographic characteristics of participants can be found in Table 1 and Figure 1 (Appendices 16 and 17).

In total, 16 people for Group B were contacted by the researcher or contacted the researcher after reading the invitation. Twelve of them signed the Consent Form. All participants of Group B are men, as being appointed as an Elder is a male prerogative. Two participants were still active Elders of the Jehovah's Witness community, all the others were Elders who had resigned from their position. The large majority of the sample are American male participants. Nonetheless, some of the interviewees decided to not disclose any demographic information about themselves. The demographic characteristics provided are shown in Table 2 and Figure 2 (Appendices 18 and 19).

4.2.1.3 The recruitment process of participants for Group A

The first step in recruiting former members was to post an invitation on social media asking for participants to be involved in the research after receiving permission from

several group administrators, such as ICSA (icsahome.com) or UK-XJWz Friends & Support Group, a private peer support group for former Jehovah's Witnesses on Facebook (Appendix 2). Also, the invitation was posted on Reddit which hosts a large community of former Jehovah's Witnesses. This social platform was suggested by the first participant who was interviewed. Some administrators and therapists who were contacted by the researcher proactively posted the invitation on their personal Facebook page. The request to participate included a brief overview of the purpose of the study, the inclusion criteria, together with the contact details of the researcher and her principal supervisor. Using the snowball sampling strategy, recruited participants were then asked to pass on details of the study to others who may also wish to take part in the research (Mutepe, 2016).

4.2.1.4 The recruitment process of participants for Group B

The second group of participants, Group B, was made up of the spiritual shepherds of the community, who are also referred to as the Elders. In order to recruit the Elders, a leaflet was produced (Appendix 3). The leaflet provided information about the researcher, her affiliation, her contact details, as well as the reason why she was contacting them. The leaflets were placed in envelopes addressed to the Bodies of Elders of the local Jehovah's Witness churches. The envelopes were addressed to the generic 'Body of Elders' of each church and not to a specific person because the list of all the appointed Elders of the Jehovah's Witness community is not publicly available. All the addresses of the Jehovah's Witness churches are listed on the Jehovah's Witnesses' official website (jw.org). After selecting the area of interest, Greater London, the relevant addresses of where to send the envelopes were

identified. Two sets of ten envelopes were sent by mail to some of the local Jehovah's Witness churches.

The reply rate was disappointing. Four Bodies of Elders out of 20 replied. Three of them by way of email, and one as a text message. All four declined the invitation to be interviewed, advising that the researcher visits the Jehovah's Witness' website instead (Appendix 5). At this point a response was prepared and sent. It was explained that the main purpose of inviting them to take part in the research was because of the researcher's interest in understanding the phenomenon of religious shunning from the perspective of their personal experience as Elders of the community. It was highlighted that there is no previous research which gives voice to the Elders of the Jehovah's Witness community and sharing their experience would shed more light on this phenomenon.

In trying to build bridges, they were told that they would receive the list of interview questions before hand and the transcript following the interview. Emphasis was placed on the fact that the researcher follows the British Psychological Society (BPS) ethical guidelines for research and a link to the BPS website was provided. The Elders were reassured about the protection of their anonymity. It was clearly stated that the audio-recorded data, the transcription, and the related documents would be kept private and secure. The audio tape would only be used for the purpose of transcribing and analysing the interview. If any academic publications would originate from the research, only anonymised quotes from the interview would be used. Lastly, the researcher underlined that they have the right to refuse to answer any questions they would consider inappropriate, and they have the right to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. This response was sent to them by email in three cases and by post in one instance.

Despite the best efforts to reassure them and to put them at ease, only one Body of Elders replied. Part of their response was the following: “Our Elders have reviewed your request. We are not in a position to give a personal view on the subject but to endorse the references provided from our website” (Appendix 6).

The possibility of gaining an inside perspective was not looking promising. Nonetheless, the researcher was aware that some members of the peer support groups for former Jehovah’s Witnesses, are still part of the community. They define themselves as being PIMO which means being *physically in but mentally out*. The possibility to find Elders in this position within the religious community was more likely.

A message on Reddit addressed to the PIMO Elders, members of the virtual community, was posted. Also, the researcher approached the administrator of a peer support group on Facebook if they knew some PIMO Elders she could contact. They knew one. A letter explaining the purpose for contacting him was prepared, and the administrator forwarded the letter to the Elder. The strategy to contact PIMO Elders on Reddit proved to be the most successful and a small group of four PIMO Elders replied to the message in private. Despite their interest in the research, they were extremely cautious in interacting with the researcher. In the Jehovah’s Witness community, not only are interactions with the outside community frowned upon but also it is a behaviour which can have drastic consequences for the individual. Thus, researchers who decide to approach members of gated religious communities will have to deal with members’ fear; the fear of the consequences of being discovered. This feeling is not based on mere threats but on the community’s concrete provisions

against the transgressor such as being accused of apostasy and subsequently shunned.

The fear of the PIMO Elders was something tangible during the email exchange between them and the researcher. Reassuring them about their anonymity being protected at all time was the first step in gaining their trust. Also, providing the researcher's credentials was a second important step for the PIMO Elders. The researcher was transparent about the aim of the research in order to disperse their doubts about a possible malicious intent from her side in contacting them. The contact details of the principal supervisor were provided in order for them to verify the researcher's affiliation.

This stage of the recruitment process required a high degree of understanding, openness, and negotiation. Two PIMO Elders agreed to share their perspective on the topic. One Elder did not want to schedule a video or audio interview. Instead, he suggested he provides written answers to the researcher's list of questions. A second Elder agreed to arrange an audio interview. Moreover, two former Elders contacted the researcher and offered to be interviewed. As for Group A, here too, the role of a gatekeeper was pivotal to access other prospective participants. One of the two former Elders who agreed in taking part in the research, proactively contacted other former Elders and eight more individuals agreed to be interviewed.

4.2.2 Interviews, Data and Analysis

To ease communication with participants of both groups, a dedicated mobile phone SIM card was activated (Fahie, 2014). After the first contact was established, the

Information Sheet (Appendix 4) stating the aims of the research, its development and what was required was emailed to all participants. An appropriate time to evaluate the implications of taking part in the study as well as to ask further questions or clarify doubts was given. When the researcher received confirmation of the interest in proceeding with the interview, the Consent Form, and the Demographic Questionnaire (Appendix 7; Appendix 8; Appendix 9; Appendix 10) were emailed. After receiving the signed Consent Form and the completed questionnaire, the interviews were scheduled.

Initially, interviews with participants were intended to be conducted face-to-face on the University of West London premises. This information was included in the invitation sent out to prospective participants. Thus, participants needed to be based within easy reach of London. Nevertheless, the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic imposed a revision of the interviewing strategy. In order to adhere to the government safety guidelines, videoconferencing interviews were scheduled instead of face-to-face interviews. The necessity to implement social distancing during data collection presented one main advantage. The pool of potential participants increased and people matching all inclusion criteria, except for the criterion concerning living within easy reach of London, could be interviewed as well. Zoom, Skype, FaceTime and Messenger were successfully used as videoconferencing platforms for interviewing research participants. For some participants, the videoconferencing interview was the first time where they used such communication format. One interview was conducted by phone.

Research investigating the implementation of new communication technologies for the conduct of qualitative research is still at an early stage due to the recent advance in digital technologies. However, an increased number of researchers have started to employ Voice over Internet protocol-mediated technologies (VoIP) to collect qualitative data (Krouwel *et al.*, 2019; Davis *et al.*, 2004). Some advantages of using such technology have already been acknowledged. For example, according to Archibald *et al.* (2019), online interviews present more appealing features for potential participants in terms of convenience, efficiency, cost-effectiveness and flexibility. Also, researchers could access geographically dispersed populations (Archibald *et al.*, 2019, Sullivan, 2012). Overall, Internet interactions are more closely aligned with in-person interactions than phone communication. This is because of the visual component of videoconferencing which allows the researcher to observe participants' body language and to identify signs of discomfort, stress, or anxiety (Janghorban *et al.*, 2014).

Nevertheless, videoconferencing presents some drawbacks. First, as Cater (2011) noted, body language during videoconferencing interviews is only partially visible. In fact, "web cameras normally provide just a 'head shot' so the researcher will not be able to observe body language cues such as nervousness conveyed by hand behaviour" (p. 3). Second, technical issues may affect the quality of the data collection. Sound quality, microphones and webcam malfunctions, a lag in the live feed or Internet connection speed are possible issues a researcher could experience while interviewing participants using VoIP technology (Sullivan, 2012). Third, Krouwel *et al.*, (2019) observed that in their study, despite the similar number of words and codes video calling and in-person interviews produced, "the number of statements upon which the variety of topics was based was notably larger for the in-person interviews"

(p.1). This seems to suggest that people might experience video calling interaction as more constraining, reducing the narration to its essential. Also, as Krouwel *et al.* (ibid) suggested, in-person interviews would generate a greater depth of discussion compared to video calling.

The collection of data for the current research proceeded without any major flaws. Respondents seemed to be comfortable as video calling interviews offered them the opportunity to be interviewed in the comfort of their homes. Interview setting could have an impact on the way people experience being interviewed. It could also affect the extent the individual feels comfortable, especially when it comes to sharing personal and delicate details. According to Bashir (2017) and Graham *et al.* (2007), settings in research interviews matter. Being in their “own territory”, enhances the participant’s disclosure of intimate details, and the more comfortable the participant is, the more willing they would be to share their own experiences (Graham *et al.*, 2007). Moreover, any ethical concerns of the researcher protecting their own safety was avoided through video calling. It allowed the researcher to interview participants at their place while safeguarding her own safety.

Individual interviews were conducted with all participants except for two married couples with whom the method of interviewing partners jointly was employed. This interview method presents several advantages. As Braybrook *et al.* (2017), Bjørnholt and Farstad (2012) and Arksey (1996) underlined, the ethical element is one of the most important advantages which this method presents. One ethical principle which guided the current research was represented by the promise of anonymity and confidentiality. Nevertheless, when separated interviews are to be conducted with

individuals of the same household, protecting their right for anonymity and confidentiality could become an issue. As Bjørnholt and Farstad (2012) argued, “Despite researchers’ efforts to conceal the participants’ identity, it is hard to avoid the possibility that participants will recognise... their partner... in an interview segment” (p. 13), possibly compromising the right for anonymity and confidentiality of each partner. However, the joint interview becomes for the partners an agreed ‘public’ setting for not only disclosing a shared experience (ibid) but also where the principles of anonymity and confidentiality were mutually secured.

Another advantage of a joint couple interview is represented by the fact that it could be seen as a common reflective space. As Bjørnholt and Farstad (2012) recognised, joint reflection may bring out nuances in the data material, enriching the narration with useful details. Also, the partners’ interactions provide the opportunity for the participants to become more explicit and detailed with their narration. This phenomenon was termed by Morgan and Krueger (1993) as “cueing phenomenon” (p. 17). During the joint interviews for the current research, it was noticeable how participants prompted their partners’ memories for example about specific dates or lengths of periods, enhancing the richness and accuracy of the account.

Lastly, another major advantage of interviewing couples jointly is especially connected with the nature of the research. The topic of the present research is clearly sensitive. The act of sharing their past experiences led participants to re-experience unpleasant and distressing feelings. One participant suggested, during the debriefing, that if he had had access to a supportive partner immediately after the interview, it would have enabled him to recover his emotional equilibrium more easily. The researcher

recognised the validity of this observation when she interviewed couples together. Religious shunning has left, especially on one of these couples, deep scars and their emotional and physical well-being has deteriorated after leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses. During joint interviews, the partner was present, not only immediately following the interview, but also during the interview. The physical presence of their partner and the possibility to share with them the burden of disclosing delicate events seemed to be beneficial to the emotional equilibrium of both, soothing their possible discomfort.

Despite the advantages of the joint interviewing, the researcher acknowledges that this method could have provided an issue with one partner being dominant and influencing the course of the interview. However, the researcher felt that, as the couple went through the shunning process together, it was valid to interview them jointly as they wished. This is because, as shunning was a shared experience, it was likely that their own experiences would have influenced their partner even if they were interviewed separately.

Data were collected from February to September 2020, through 33 in-depth interviews. Twenty-one were conducted with former members of the Jehovah's Witnesses community and twelve with PIMO Elders or former Elders. Interviews were conducted by the researcher using a semi-structured interview guide on the following aspects: the experiences of being shunned, the impact and effects that being shunned had on their life, and the strategies adopted to cope with religious shunning (Appendix 11). With participants of Group B, the areas explored were, their perspectives on shunning, the aim of the practice of shunning in their community, the behaviour which

may lead to shunning, the expected behaviour of members towards a former member, whether it is possible to be reinstated and the possible known consequences of this practice for the shunned person. Also, the meaning of being a PIMO Elder or a former Elder was explored according to their personal experience (Appendix 12). Interviews with participants of both groups were conducted remotely, audio-taped and lasted approximately 1 hour and half for Group A, and 1 hour for Group B. Following the interview, all participants received the Debrief Form (Appendix 13; Appendix 14). The rich interview material was transcribed verbatim using Otter and de-identified. Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun *et al.*, 2019) was used to explore the data derived from the interviews, which highlighted similarities and differences across the participants' accounts through the identification of themes (Nowell *et al.*, 2017; Braun and Clarke, 2006).

4.2.3 Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Braun *et al.* (2019) endorsed the active role of the researcher in the knowledge production process. The analysis conducted by a fully immersed researcher will result as being characterised by an open, iterative reflexive process. According to Braun *et al.* (ibid), the aim of the data analysis is not to accurately summarise the interview material through the development of codes and themes. Nor it is to inhibit the influence that the researcher's subjectivity could have on the analytic process (ibid, p.6). Rather, it is important to acknowledge and embrace the researcher's cultural background, social positioning, theoretical assumptions, ideological commitments, and scholarly knowledge. Moreover, the motives and agenda which first inspired the researcher to explore the topic should be valued as important factors which pertain to the subjective dimension of the researcher. These factors also contribute to the uniqueness of the

reflexive approach of the data analysis. The researcher in this perspective is a storyteller actively engaged in understanding and interpreting data through the lenses of their subjectivity. The end-result will be “a coherent and compelling interpretation of the data, grounded in the data” (ibid, p.6).

According to Braun *et al.* (2019), the reflexive approach to Thematic Analysis (TA) highlights the researcher’s active role in the production of knowledge. Therefore, codes are assumed to represent the researcher’s interpretations of patterns of meaning across the dataset. Indeed, this study did not attempt in capturing participants’ accounts in terms of ‘accurate’ or ‘reliable’ coding. Nor did it aim was to pursue agreement among multiple coders by using Cohen’s Kappa value to assess the degree of agreement. Instead, the aim was for “the researcher’s reflective and thoughtful engagement with their data and their reflexive and thoughtful engagement with the analytic process” (Braun *et al.* 2019, p. 594) to take precedence.

Within this study, there are various sections where the reader’s attention is drawn to the reflexivity of the researcher. There is a section on this chapter, ‘The quest for transparency’, and reflexive boxes at the end of each main theme in the analysis chapters and in the concluding chapter. These reflexive sections will highlight the researcher’s process and allow the reader to assess the way and the extent the researcher’s interests, positions, and assumptions influenced the exploration of the phenomenon discussed. Furthermore, the reflexive sections will accomplish a twofold aim. First, they will allow the reader to distinguish the voices of the participants from that of the researcher as they will be written in the first person. Second, these sections will also allow the reader to distinguish between the assumptions, beliefs, and

experiences of the researcher from those of the participants. This will permit the experiences of the participants to flourish through their voices and not be excessively contaminated by the pre-conceived ideas or beliefs of the researcher.

The nature of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) is flexible, allowing researchers to explore different topics and address a variety of research questions. For example, Braun *et al.* (2019) reported RTA to be apposite to explore the lived experiences of minority or marginalised groups or people suffering from diseases such as Parkinson. It can also be used to analyse the “factors that influence, underpin, or contextualize particular processes or phenomena, identify views about particular phenomena or interrogate dominant patterns of meaning surrounding particular phenomena” (p.8). RTA is also flexible in terms of data collection. It is not tied to a specific method to collect data, rather, interviews, focus groups, diaries, visual methods, surveys, or indirect sources could be used to gather data to be analysed.

The researcher however recognises that in choosing RTA as a tool to analyse data, no claim can be made about the way interviewees constructed their reality through the use of language. This represents, according to Javadi and Zarea (2016) and Braun and Clarke (2006), one of the main issues in using RTA. Through language, the individual, constructs and makes sense of their own experience. Language is used to achieve specific objectives, such as, to evoke emotions, or to manage conflicts. The way language is performed could be revealing, providing the context to better understand the individual's experience, and the way meaning is created while speaking. Therefore, because RTA is an approach which does not allow exploration

of the language usage, the researcher accepts that some nuances of the participants' accounts may be missed.

4.3 The Quest for Transparency

Reflexivity and own awareness of the personal role in the narrative's creation should be one of the researcher's central concerns in the inquiry process. The aim of reflexive practice in qualitative research is, as Berger (2015) explained, "to monitor the tension between involvement and detachment of the researcher and the researched as a means to enhance the rigor of the study and its ethics" (p. 221). The reflexive process helps researchers to locate themselves in the context of the research, enhancing awareness of the fact that personal characteristics, backgrounds, and emotional responses to participants could both facilitate and hamper the process of knowledge production (Berger, 2015).

A starting point in the reflexive process is that of identifying the motivation which has led to researching a specific topic. It is therefore important to recognise that my own direct knowledge of the Jehovah's Witness beliefs, precepts, and lifestyle, and having close friends who have experienced religious shunning, played an important role in the decision to explore religious shunning. In order to understand my own position as a researcher conducting a qualitative study on religious shunning, it is helpful to briefly present my personal background, my involvement with the Jehovah's Witnesses and my interest in religious shunning.

4.3.1 Personal Context

I grew up in what the Jehovah's Witnesses would define as a "spiritually divided household". My father's contact with Jehovah's Witnesses began when I was two years old. Despite my mother's lack of interest for the Jehovah's Witnesses' teachings and, more in general, for any religious doctrine, she thought that moral and spiritual principles were important for her children's development. Thus, she agreed to let my father teach my brother and me his new creed. A couple of years later, my father was baptised. He made what Jehovah's Witnesses define as *spiritual progress*, becoming a ministerial servant first, and then an Elder.

I had a happy childhood. I had friends within the religious community, but I also had good friends among my classmates, with whom I spent a considerable amount of time. The ties with my non-Jehovah's Witness extended family were not severed, and I enjoyed the companionship of my cousins and their friends. I was raised according to the Jehovah's Witness' teachings but, at the same time, I was also exposed to the outside culture. Being part of these two worlds is not common.

This had an important implication. Although I internalised the Jehovah's Witness teachings, I had always felt like a fish out of water, never really at 'home'. I felt different from other members. Despite my active involvement in all the required activities of the group, I always strived to find my place within the community, until the time I chose to become a *fader*.

It was now that I started to reflect on what it would mean to be shunned from the community and what the consequences would be. I started pondering the implications

of living in a gated community and then leaving everything behind. It is important to note that at this time I was six months into completing a master's course and I was 37. The theories I was studying during this course, coupled with the discussions with my classmates and supervisors as well as the conversations with some former Jehovah's Witnesses helped me to become aware of the possible mechanisms, dynamics, and effects of being shunned from a religious community. Perceiving that the impact of religious shunning on the individual may be potentially traumatic and considering that little was known about this phenomenon, I decided to explore religious shunning as part of my final project for the masters. For this project, I was able to interview eleven former Jehovah's Witnesses. During this study, I became aware of the lack of peer-reviewed literature on the impact religious shunning may have on the individual's well-being. I therefore embarked on this PhD project to explore the phenomenon further and to raise awareness among the academic community.

4.3.2 The Researcher's Positionality

I consider my role of a researcher as being ambivalent. On the one hand, my familiarity with the topic has enabled the creation of a profound connection between the participants and myself where feelings and experiences could be acknowledged and understood. At the same time, I recognise and accept the fact that the person I am, my background and my past involvement with the Jehovah's Witnesses as an active member of the community have possibly impacted the way I interpreted the research data. However, I also feel that this is unavoidable when conducting qualitative research, where the researcher becomes an integral part of the knowledge production process.

When I interviewed participants of both groups, my role was that of an *external-insider* (Banks, 1998). I shared with them a common background. I had a great understanding of the culture of the community because it was my culture and my way of life. I also had my own personal experience and journey of leaving the community. Thus, participants' accounts about their past in the community or the use of the Jehovah's Witness language were easily understood due to my personal experience of being part of the community (Bonner and Tolhurst, 2002). Furthermore, like the interviewees, I had left behind a way of living and of understanding myself and the world. Like the participants, I too experienced the inner turmoil caused by facing the unknown when the structures behind you have collapsed. For these reasons, I could be considered as an insider. My prior knowledge was advantageous during the interview process because it "allowed me to gather richer and more focused data" (Bonner and Tolhurst, 2002, p. 2). Nevertheless, the fact I was an *inactive* placed me in a distinct position especially with regard to participants of Group A. I did not have a first-hand experience of having been officially shunned from the community unlike the participants. Moreover, because being appointed as an Elder is a male prerogative, I also do not have a first-hand experience of being an Elder. The lack of direct experience of shunning and being an Elder positioned me as being 'external' to participants of both groups and my position towards them was that of a learner.

Despite my willingness to understand and learn from my participants, I identified in my familiarity with the topic a possible pitfall. There was the concrete risk that I would not be as impartial as I wished. Being in a position to make assumptions about the experience of shunning could have made me blind or not sufficiently receptive or open to the unexpected. As Bonner and Tolhurst (2002) highlighted, the problems with being

familiar with the topic might lead to not seeking clarification or to taking for granted what participants narrate. Thus, the following strategies were implemented to promote balance between my familiarity with the topic and the necessity to be as open as possible to new ways of understanding and new insights (Noble and Smith, 2015; Slevin, 2002). For example, during the interviews, I asked for clarification. Every time a participant used the Jehovah's Witness jargon, I asked them to explain it. I asked them to describe procedures, policies, roles, and behaviours in detail although they are of common knowledge for a Jehovah's Witness. I tried my best to not take anything for granted about the participants' narration. Another strategy to enhance balance was the supervisors' involvement in the analysis process. Their feedback and expertise were sought in order to monitor the objectivity of the analysis, for example by cross-checking the coding process. A clear description of thought processes guiding data analysis and interpretations was recorded. Also, a constant comparison was made to seek out similarities and differences across participants' accounts.

One of the principal tenets of ethical research is not to deceive participants. I echo Oakley (1981) who endorsed the creation of a two-way relationship between researcher and participants to promote a relationship of trust. However, the non-deception principle has to be balanced with the possibility of priming participants. I felt that sharing personal details before the interview could have influenced the nature of the participants' narration. Therefore, I did not disclose my familiarity and involvement with the Jehovah's Witness community at the onset of the interview. I debriefed all the participants about my status as a *fader* at the conclusion of the interview, unless they explicitly solicited information about my personal background at the beginning.

During the interviews, I maintained a low profile not using, for example, the specific language which characterises Jehovah's Witnesses' speech. Also, I tried not to take for granted the information they provided, and not using my prior knowledge to make assumptions. I used follow-up questions to seek clarification. It was important for me to present myself as a learner, open to receive and willing to understand. Participants of both groups, assuming that I was foreign to the Jehovah's Witness culture, often asked me if what they were saying was clear to me or if I needed further explanation. This happened especially when they used the Jehovah's Witness jargon.

At the end of the interview, when I disclosed some details about my experience, some of them were surprised in hearing that I was a Jehovah's Witness. They perceived me as being non-judgmental and neutral which facilitated the frankness of the narration. The fact that I was an *inactive* did not seem to be an issue for them. Participants were sympathetic and supportive and some of them offered their availability if I needed to talk to someone. This is because the exiting experience which *disfellowshipped*, *disassociated* and, to some extent, also *inactives* share could deeply shake an individual's existence and there is awareness of the lack of support for people who leave.

Reflexivity was a fundamental process during the course of the research. Reflexivity was essential in order for me to be aware of my thought processes, to be in charge of the decisions I made and to be actively engaged in the knowledge production instead of being an 'unaware' researcher. The risk of being 'unaware' and not reflexive is that of not being able to justify one's own decisions and not being able to provide a rationale for the direction of the path taken (Yardley, 2000). It also impedes the planning of

appropriate measures to counterbalance one's own bias and to prevent one's own preconceptions prevailing over the participants' voices. Reflexivity is an essential tool allowing researchers to position themselves within their own research and to be mindful that personal background and experiences inevitably influence the development of the research. Acknowledging one's own bias and agenda is about being transparent (Willig, 2008).

4.4 Ensuring High Ethical Standards

The nature of the topic investigated in the present research could be considered sensitive and a number of ethical concerns needed to be addressed. Rodriguez (2018) acknowledged the fact that there is not a single and comprehensive definition of 'sensitive topic' in research. Rather, different factors contribute to the variability of its definition. For example, McCosker *et al.* (2001) argued that the degree of sensitivity is context and culturally dependent, and norms and values could influence the definition and conceptualisation of what a sensitive topic in research is.

Rodriguez (2018) argued that the sensitivity of a topic goes beyond the specific subject explored. The effects the dissemination of the findings could have on an individual or a group also concur in establishing the sensitivity of the research. Broadly, of particular ethical concern could be studies about traumatic events or other adverse experiences. These experiences, for their intrinsic nature, could cause acute stress reactions, anxiety, depression or embarrassment to participants as they recall, re-examine, or disclose the experience (Jorm *et al.*, 2007).

McCosker *et al.* (2001) defined sensitive research, as research dealing with private, stressful or sacred matters. Also, studies on stigmatisation, politically sensitive topics, sex or death could all generate distressing reactions. McGarry (2010) included in the definition of sensitive, topics linked to taboo and to what is considered intimate, discreditable, or incriminating. Thus, in accordance with the factors which could determine the sensitivity of a study, this research, exploring the experiences of those who have been shunned from their religious community and often from their biological family too, could be considered as sensitive.

To ensure the necessary ethical standards are met, the study received Ethical approval from the School of Human and Social Sciences Ethics Panel of the University of West London (UWL/REC/PSW-00878). To further ensure high ethical standards, the present research adhered to the British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Ethics and Conduct (2009, 2014). The principles of autonomy, respect for persons and beneficence guided this research (Miller, 2003). As Scott-Jones (2000) highlighted, during the whole research process, the possible harm to participants should be minimised, and the research contribution to the academic knowledge should be weighted, taking into account the possible risks and emotional burdens participants might be exposed to (Burns and Grove, 2005). Sharing an experience of exclusion may be emotionally challenging and a cause of distress. Upon consideration, whilst this may arouse emotional reactions by participants, on balance, the researcher felt that if certain measures were put in place, it could become a researchable topic. Moreover, issues of privacy and confidentiality were of central importance during the planning, the development and the operationalisation of the study and the

implementation of appropriate measures to protect the confidentiality of the data collected and the participants' identity and anonymity were strictly followed.

A practical aspect that was evaluated in light of the ethical guidelines was the recruitment process. The recruitment of participants, as Miller (2003, p. 130) clearly stated, should be planned, and conducted "in a way as to be noncoercive, inclusionary to the greatest extent possible, and representative of the population to which the research results may be applied". For that reason, aspects such as the research project advertisement, the screening process, and the representativeness of population merited special attention (Miller, 2003).

A further factor taken into consideration concerned the right of a participant to give their informed consent. According to Armiger (1997) the term 'informed consent' conveys the idea that an individual is fully in charge of their decision, meaning "that a person knowingly, voluntarily and intelligently, and in a clear and manifest way, gives his consent" (p. 331). As Beauchamp and Childres (2001), and Fouka and Mantzorou (2011) underlined, informed consent is the essential instrument by which the volunteers exert their right to autonomy, that is, the ability for self-determination.

The principle of informed consent emphasises the responsibility the researcher has to fully inform volunteers about each aspect of the research in an intelligible language (Sanjari *et al.*, 2014). Specifically, clear information about the aims of the research, the roles of the participants and the researcher and the way the results would be used (seminars, presentations, publications) were made available to and openly discussed with participants (Orb *et al.*, 2000). As Orb *et al.* (2000) pointed out, consent implies a

negotiation and renegotiation of trust between the involved parts. Thus, the informed consent was seen not as an isolated event rather as an ongoing process that saw the researcher and participants engaged in an honest communication, from the preparatory stage of the project to its conclusion (Hoeyer *et al.*, 2005; Sieber, 1992).

It is pivotal, while conducting research on sensitive topics, to consider the potential burden that qualitative enquiry may pose on participants in order to implement adequate counter measures. It is also crucial to acknowledge the impact the research process may have on the researcher. Research on sensitive topics could potentially affect not only participants but also researchers. For instance, Lee and Renzetti (1990) providing a definition of sensitive research, highlighted the reciprocity of potential risk to all parties involved. Participants and researchers are both engaged in the research process, and both parties are possibly at risk of being exposed to emotional and psychological challenges. Hughes (2004) argued that the potential for harm to both participants and researchers should be a concern at every stage of the research process and that “researcher safety must be paramount over data collection” (p. 934).

When considering the researcher’s safety, the physical as well as the psychological/emotional dimension of the researcher’s well-being need to be considered. As Albayrak-Aydemir (2019) argued, the researcher needs to be both physically and psychologically prepared for what researching a sensitive topic may involve. Researchers might be exposed not only to physical attack due to the participant’s unpredictable reactions but also to psychological distress as a consequence of the repeated exposure to participants’ accounts of traumatic events.

It is therefore important, as Fahie (2014) commented, to pay “specific attention to the importance of protecting researchers from harm” (p. 19).

Interviewing is a challenging activity which goes far beyond the researcher’s ability to ask the right questions (Fahie, 2014). An empathic approach together with a genuine interest and sensitivity towards participants are all desirable interviewer’s skills (Hynson *et al.*, 2006). Nevertheless, according to Billings *et al.* (2015), these same skills could be a downside for the researcher. They argued that bearing witness to participants’ experiences of distressing and traumatic incidents, and “engaging with their stories emotionally and with empathy, can create similar responses in researchers as have previously been reported by trauma workers” (ibid, p. 3).

Researchers who conduct qualitative studies are active parties in the process. Their involvement with the interviewees’ accounts may trigger an emotional response in them as well. As a consequence of such emotional response, the researcher may experience the distress at second hand (Fahie, 2014). This phenomenon is called ‘vicarious traumatisation’. Kiyimba and O’Reilly (2016) explained vicarious traumatisation as the emotional impact, or pain-by-proxy, the researcher is exposed to when empathically listening to stories of trauma and violence repeatedly. Vicarious traumatisation is “experienced as a form of emotional residue of exposure, resulting from listening to other people’s trauma narratives and witnessing their pain” (ibid, p. 471). This risk of experiencing vicarious traumatisation increases when the researcher and the transcriptionist are the same person. In fact, the transcription process exposes the researcher to the sensitive data collected multiple times. This repeated exposure, as Kiyimba and O’Reilly (2016) discussed, “risks causing a cumulative effect” (p. 472).

The interviewing process was at times challenging due to the sensitive and complex nature of some experiences which the participants shared with the researcher. As a means of debriefing and understanding what the participants' narrations triggered, the researcher contacted the counselling team at the University of West London and counselling sessions took place. Also, yoga and physical activity proved to be effective strategies to relieve the emotional tension. Self-care and one's own safety in research are primarily a responsibility of the researcher. Self-care through reflexivity, and the researcher's awareness of the possible risks, are essential aspects to ensure, as Fahie (2014) argued, that their research journey is ethical, methodologically sound, moral, and ultimately, honest (p. 30).

4.5 Summary

The philosophical stance and the methodological approach framing the present research were the main topics covered in this chapter. The motivations which have led the researcher to choose a qualitative approach to address the topic were outlined together with the limitations of this method. The recruitment process, the data collection and method of analysis were described in detail. The analytic process as conceived by Braun *et al.* (2019) and Braun and Clarke (2006), was described in detail. The reflexivity section occupied an important part of this chapter; this was to help position the researcher within the present study and to share with the reader the thought process that accompanied the development of the research. Lastly, the ethical principles guiding the study were delineated and explained along with the necessary measures taken to guarantee the high ethical standard of the study. The next chapter

will address the first research question and present the types of incidents which those shunned from the Jehovah's Witness community had experienced.

CHAPTER 5: THE LIFECYCLE OF RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION

This chapter will consider the lifecycle of religious affiliation. Therefore, in this chapter the findings of the analysis conducted on the thirty-three interview transcripts, twenty-one of the participants from Group A and twelve of the participants from Group B, will be presented. Group A consisted of people who have identified as being officially shunned from the Jehovah's Witness community, and Group B consisted of *physically in but mentally out* (PIMO) Elders and former Elders of the same community. The interviews with Group A were aimed to provide an insight into the experiences of being shunned from a gated religious community. This was to explore and gain an understanding of religious shunning. On the other hand, the interviews conducted with the PIMO and former Elders, the participants of Group B, provided an insight into religious shunning from their viewpoint, as the Elders are directly involved in the judicial process and ultimately have the authority to shun a member. Therefore, seeking data from these two groups aims to encompass a more wholesome picture, presenting both perspectives.

Considering the lifecycle of religious affiliation provides the groundwork for understanding the experiences of individuals who have been shunned from their religious community. Thus, this chapter will describe the complex journey from officially joining the community to being shunned. The first section of this chapter will elucidate the reasons which led the participants to be baptised as Jehovah's Witnesses, as well as their lives as members of the community. This section will also shed light on the way internal and external drives play an important role in directing the individual's choices along their journey. On the other hand, the second section of

this chapter will explore firstly, the respondents' reasons for being shunned, and secondly, it will illuminate the judicial process which aims at determining whether a member should be shunned. This section will also describe the community's reactions to the individual's loss of their membership status. Lastly, the steps the individual needs to take to be reinstated will be explained, and the motivations for seeking reinstatement will be presented.

The tables below display some elementary information about each of the thirty-three participants for Group A and Group B whose interview data is analysed in this chapter, and in chapters 6, and 7. Some individuals of Group B exerted their right in deciding whether to and the extent of disclosing personal information. For detailed vignettes of participants, please refer to 'Situating the Sample' in Appendix 15.

Table 5.1 Interview respondents' profile for Group A

Group A							
	Age	Gender	Born in/Raised into/Converted	Year of Baptism	Year of Disfellowshipping	Current Status within the JW Community	Current Belief
Emma	51-60	F	Born into	1992	1998	Disfellowshipped	Anti-theist
Angie	31-40	F	Raised in	2001	2018	Disfellowshipped	No Religion
Tom	51-60	M	Born into	1978	1983	Disfellowshipped	No Religion
Susan	51-60	F	Converted	2006	2018	Disfellowshipped	Christian
Gaby	51-60	F	Born into	1967	Disfellowshipped in 1979. Fader when 26 Disfellowshipped in 2016	Disfellowshipped	No Religion

	Age	Gender	Born in/Raised into/Converted	Year of Baptism	Year of Disfellowshipping	Current Status within the JW Community	Current Belief
Liza	31-40	F	Raised in	1993	2017	Disfellowshipped	No Religion
Samuel	51-60	M	Born into	1978	Fader since 1996 Disfellowshipped in 2001	Disfellowshipped	Christian
Oliver	31-40	M	Born into	2001	2015	Disfellowshipped	No Religion
Jacob	61+	M	Converted	1963	1999	Disfellowshipped	Christian
Grace	61+	F	Raised in	1962	1999	Disfellowshipped	Christian
Liam	61+	M	Converted	1978	Fader since 2016 Disassociated in 2019	Disassociated	Christian
Rose	51-60	F	Converted	1982	Fader since 2016 Disassociated in 2019	Disassociated	Christian
Noah	31-40	M	Born into	2001	2016	Disfellowshipped	No Religion
Erin	21-30	F	Born into	2010	2015	Disfellowshipped	No Religion
Luke	41-50	M	Converted	1994	2008	Disassociated	Christian
Dylan	41-50	M	Raised in	1987	Disfellowshipped in 1996 and in 2016	Disfellowshipped	No Religion
Eric	51-60	M	Raised in	1981	1999	Disassociated by action	Christian
Robert	61+	M	Raised in	1968	2001	Disassociated	Christian
Maggie	51-60	F	Born into	1976	Disfellowshipped in 1981 and in 1984	Fader	No Religion
Charles	51-60	M	Converted	1989	Around 2000	Disassociated by action	Christian
Carrie	51-60	F	Born into	1982	Around 2000	Disassociated by action	Christian

Table 5.2 Interview respondents' profile for Group B

Group B								
	Age	Gender	Born in/ Raised into/ Converted	Year of Baptism	Year of Appointment as Elder	Year of Leaving	Current Status within the JW Community	Current Belief
Aaron	/	M	/	/	/	/	PIMO Elder	/
Elias	51-60	M	Raised in	1973	1990	2019	Disassociated	No Religion
Horace	21-30	M	Converted	2007	2014	/	PIMO Elder	Christian
Zack	/	M	/	/	/	/	Fader	/
Toby	41-50	M	Raised in	1973	1990	/	Fader	No Religion
Marc	41-50	M	Raised in	1984	1997	2019	Disfellowshipped	No Religion
Gilbert	/	M	Born into	/	/	/	Disassociated	/
Elliot	61+	M	Converted	1974	1985	Before 1999	Non-officially disfellowshipped	Christian
Jordan	41-50	M	Converted	2004	2011	2020	Fader	Christian
Nate	51-60	M	Converted	1987	1992	2016	Fader	No Religion
Ross	21-30	M	Raised in	2005	2016	/	Disassociated	No Religion
Steve	31-40	M	Born into	1997	2014	2020	Disassociated	No Religion

From the analysis of the participants' accounts, various themes and sub-themes emerged which are presented in the Cognitive Map below (Figure 5.1).

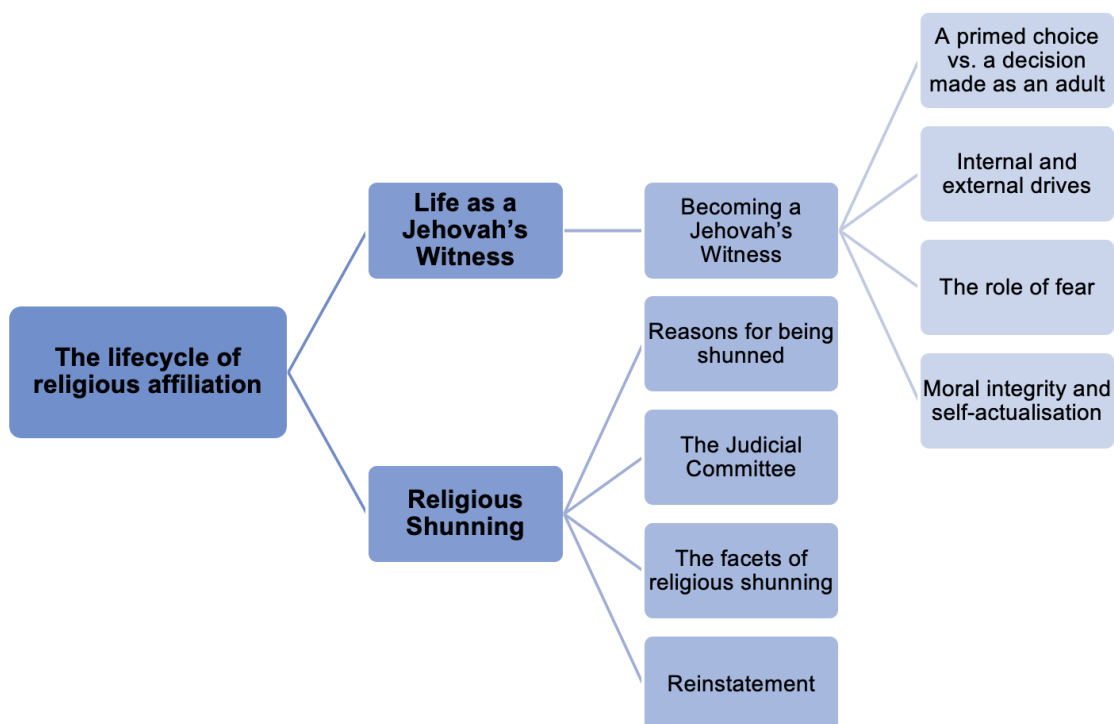


Figure 5.1 Cognitive Map of Themes and Sub-themes for Research Statement 1

This chapter will primarily focus on the events and behaviour which led to the public announcement of the participants' formal shunning. Nonetheless, a quick overview on the participants' life in the community since they joined the Jehovah's Witnesses will be provided to give the reader some context. For each emerging theme and subtheme, significant and representative quotes from the participants' accounts will be included and interpreted.

5.1 Life as a Jehovah's Witness

'Life as a Jehovah's Witness' is an overarching theme which surfaces from the respondents' narratives. Despite the unique experience of each participant, a common thread connects their accounts. They were all baptised members of the Jehovah's Witness community who were officially shunned. The participants' narratives begin with the circumstances which led them to join the religious community and the way they experienced being part of the community.

5.1.1 Becoming a Jehovah's Witness

The sub-theme 'Becoming a Jehovah's Witness' is a leitmotif across the participants' accounts. It represents a crucial point in their narratives as it marks the beginning of their journey as members of the community. Overall, nine participants, Emma, Tom, Gaby, Samuel, Oliver, Noah, Erin, Maggie, and Carrie reported to be 'born into' the Jehovah's Witness community. They are the second or third generation in what is often an extended family of devout Jehovah's Witnesses. In terms of the twelve participants who were not born into the Jehovah's Witness community, Angie, Liza, Grace, Dylan, Eric, and Robert were 'raised in', following the conversion of their parents, and Susan, Jacob, Liam, Rose, Luke, and Charles converted, joining the community as teenagers or adults.

5.1.1.1 Growing up in versus a made choice

From the accounts of those participants who were born into and raised as Jehovah's Witnesses, it appears that the individual has been primed to choose a life as a Jehovah's Witness. That path was not a complete choice, as Oliver highlights:

My parents were already Jehovah's Witnesses prior to me being born. So, you know, that's how I was raised and that was all I had known growing up (Group A, lines 4-6).

Being born into and being raised according to the Jehovah's Witness beliefs are two concepts which seem to have shaped the participants' early life. This is because the family and the community the participant grew up in, all followed the Jehovah's Witness creed. For example, Erin says:

So, I was born into the religion; my parents, my grandparents were all Jehovah's Witnesses. They still are now (Group A, lines 3,4).

Being born and raised in the community may have important implications for the individual as leaving the religion can imply leaving not only the community but also one's own family. This is what can be evidenced from the account of Carrie. She says:

And bear in mind that all of my family were Jehovah's Witnesses. All of my friends were Jehovah's Witnesses. And I knew that obviously [being shunned] could have massive repercussions for me because, well, your whole social structure, your family with your friends, everyone I've ever known, 32 years of my life (Group A, lines 348-351).

Emma elaborates on her experience of what it meant for her to be born into the community, by saying:

I was born and raised into the cult, so I had absolutely no choice and I was brainwashed from birth (Group A, lines 3, 4).

Emma's perspective reveals the way the individual may view retrospectively their experience as a child born into the community. For example, Emma describes being born into and raised according to the beliefs of a religious denomination which she defines as being a cult, as a psychological manipulation which compromised her freedom of choice. This is in line with Zimbardo (2002) who argued that in social groups such as authoritarian systems and cults, members are exposed to an extreme mental and behavioural manipulation which may impair their freedom of choice.

On the other hand, some participants joined the community as adults. Religion is often inherited, a family tradition which is passed onto the next generation. Nonetheless, later in life, the individual may decide to abandon the family's belief system and to embrace a new faith. Susan is an example of a person who abandoned her family religious tradition to join the Jehovah's Witnesses as an adult. Prior to her conversion, she describes herself as being a non-practising Catholic with no substantial knowledge of God or the Bible. Susan explains:

I was brought up as Catholic, but non-practising, as many Catholics are... My sisters were Jehovah's Witnesses. I became a Jehovah's Witness because I thought I wanted to change something about my life... I wanted to... Yeah, to know God from the Bible and live in a way He says we should live in the Bible (Group A, lines 2-13).

This quote highlights that one of the reasons that some people choose to convert to the Jehovah's Witness faith, could be the need to fulfil their spiritual needs more fully. It seems that the frame of reference provided by her religious upbringing and the way Susan was living her religion compared to that of her Jehovah's Witness sisters, led her to feel unsatisfied. Susan saw in the Jehovah's Witness teachings an opportunity to get closer to God.

Other reasons for converting to the Jehovah's Witness creed are provided by Rose and Liam, who state:

They talked about paradise. So, when you die, and you're resurrected... you'll live forever in a paradise earth. And that sounded appealing. And because I had lost my granddad and my grandma at that time, it sounded appealing, you would see them again. And that's what you want. You want to see your relations and your family again (Rose, Group A, lines 41-45).

It's fair to say when most people start studying with Jehovah's Witnesses, they know very little about the Bible and so, what they've been told, they believe because it's coming from the Bible, apparently. And so, Jehovah's Witnesses concentrate very much on... when the earth will become a paradise and how soon there will be a tribulation. And it's only those that really are God's friends are the ones that are going to be saved. But the

thought of a paradise where everybody will be perfect, no health problems, to see your loved ones again, that is very appealing. I don't think anybody in their right mind, you know, they wouldn't feel any different, they would want to have these conditions. And also, the fact that you could build up a good network of friends within the organisation, or what we thought were friends. So, they're the main things (Liam, Group A, lines 47-58).

The accounts of Rose and Liam illuminate the main reasons for the appeal that the Jehovah's Witnesses may exert on the layperson. These are an alluring message, a skilful use of the Bible, the possibility to survive God's doomsday if joining the community, and the creation of a good network of friends within the community. As it can be evidenced from the respondents' accounts, it seems that the void the individuals experience is used as a leverage by the Jehovah's Witnesses. This sentence of hope attracts the individual towards the community.

5.1.1.2 Internal and external drives

The baptism represents a milestone in the life of any Jehovah's Witness. No matter if the individual was born into, raised in, or converted to, they officially become members of the community once they are baptised. Erin describes the baptism as “a *life changing decision*” (Group A, line 70). The baptism seems to be an expected step within the community and for the individual a logical choice which is made deliberately and spontaneously. Oliver develops this aspect:

It was something that was encouraged, you know, it was like a natural progression... it was expected to build up the spiritual qualifications to get baptised. So, it was expected, you know, you expected it from yourself as much as it was expected from [the community]. Yeah, my parents, you know, they put a lot of focus on having that as a goal, working towards that. And I invested in that (Group A, lines 81-90).

Liza adds:

It was expected. I was 13 when I was baptised, and two of my close friends had already become baptised, and it was going to make everybody happy. My parents were happy. The congregation was happy. I believed it was the

step that I had to take to be able to be in a paradise, to live forever. So, it was just something I had to do. And, growing up, I never considered not doing it. And so, it was just a natural step to take (Group A, lines 77-83).

For participants who were born in or raised into the religion, being a Jehovah's Witness was the result of a combination of different factors. For example, the account of Oliver and Liza highlight two strong drives which act in directing the young individual's choice. On the one hand, there are the community's expectations. On the other hand, there is the development of internal expectations which result from the internalisation of the goals set by the parents and the community. Moreover, the quote of Liza introduces another factor that can influence the individual's decisions, which is the concept of being rewarded. The promise of living forever, in an earthly paradise is used by the community to elicit desired behaviours.

Lifton (1961), studying the behavioural modification processes, found that humans are easily susceptible to systems of influence. Nevertheless, youths are especially vulnerable to systems of influence (Steinberg and Monahan, 2007). This is because, their self is still in formation, and family, peer culture, and social interactions play an important part in shaping their developing concept of self (Raburu, 2015). Maggie and Noah provide further depth about the way peers and family could influence the decisions of a young individual. Maggie became a baptised member of the community when she was 15:

It's not to please the parents more than to please God...So, it's easy, just get baptised. Get lots of presents. It's fine. Have a party. It's fine. But that's really more an expectation to please the faces you can see, and the one you can't (Group A, lines 160-166).

Noah also says:

[The community is] saying that you should be baptised because you want to be, because you love Jehovah. But that's not true at all. I only did it

because my friends and my relatives were putting pressure on me. They got baptised so I felt as if I also had to get baptised (Group A, lines 60-63).

He concludes:

There is a massive amount of pressure on young people to get baptised before they are ready to, before they realise what it means. You know, it means that you could potentially lose your family for the rest of your life. And it's just, it's terrible. It's really bad (Group A, lines 67-70).

Maggie and Noah were baptised when they were teenagers. According to their accounts, some of the reasons which led them to be baptised were peer pressure and the community's expectations, showing the extent the social environment could mould the individual's behaviour. The power that peer-influence exerts on the individual increases in gated communities. This is because in gated communities, the individual's social life strictly develops within the community. The group is everything, and the separation process from people who are not part of the community starts at a very young age, as the participants explain:

That was frowned upon if you had friends outside... We only associated with inside kids. Outside school, we weren't allowed to do anything with [the schoolmates] (Oliver, Group A, lines 47-51).

Everyone I had ever known was in this community. And of course, we were told very, very strongly, never to establish ties with anyone outside of the community. So, when you leave, you quite literally have no one (Emma, Group A, lines 409-411).

As the quotes indicate, the bonds within the community become central in the social network of members. This fosters interdependency and discourages members from leaving. The insulation from the external world encouraged by the community leadership mirrors the tactic of isolation that the perpetrators of domestic abuse adopt to facilitate the subjugation process of their victim (Wiener, 2017). Moreover, as in some cases of domestic violence, the life of members of gated communities and cultic

groups is highly standardised and monitored in order to further reduce contacts with the wider culture:

I thought that going to meetings on a Tuesday and Thursday and on Sunday, and going preaching on Saturday morning, I thought that it was just normal life. I didn't know anything else... So, it was just, it was just life (Noah, Group A, lines 48-52).

Furthermore, it appears that the fear of peer rejections and the need to fit into one's own social context are other strong factors for youths to conform to the community expectations. For instance, some of the participants have experienced the community to negatively judge an adolescent who has been brought up as a Jehovah's Witness but who is not baptised:

You get a certain type of question mark on your head. "Why are you not baptised?" (Maggie, lines 163-164).

There is a very, negative view, in the Jehovah's Witnesses of anybody who is, say, for example, over the age of 20, who is not baptised and been brought up as Jehovah's Witness. The question which will be asked, "Why aren't they baptised at the age of 20?" They'll be viewed as a non-spiritual person (Noah, lines 63-67).

As some of the respondents acknowledge, their decision to be baptised was based on limited life experience. Besides the fact that the social network develops exclusively within the community, Jehovah's Witness youths are also discouraged from pursuing higher education. In this way, the chance for young members being exposed to the outer social and cultural environment is further reduced:

I left school actually at 16. And I went to become a window cleaner and a regular pioneer... I left school because, right from a very young age, pioneering was set forward as the spiritual thing to do. And so, my parents had encouraged that from a very young age. I was totally accepting of everything that was Jehovah's Witness. So, I just follow the path that was presented to me (Eric, Group A, lines 7-11; 48-51).

The community, its worldview and its teachings were all that the individual has ever known. Thus, "*having no choice*" or "*it was all I ever knew*" is the way Emma, Gaby,

Oliver, Noah, Eric, and Maggie describe the start of their journey as members of the Jehovah's Witness community.

5.1.1.3 The role of fear

Fear seems to have a pivotal role in the lives of many Jehovah's Witnesses. It is a feeling which is internalised by the individual, and which directs the course of many of their decisions. For the youths born in or raised into the community, the fear of losing one's own family or disappointing the community appear to be the underlying reasons for the individual to officially join the community as a baptised member:

The absolute very real and already proven terror that if I did not conform to their self-imposed standards, within the cult, I would lose my family. Without doubt, absolutely (Emma, Group A, lines 7-9).

This quote emphasises the crucial function that the fear of displeasing the community and the threat of losing one's own family could have in determining the direction of a child's choice. It seems that fear rather than the fulfilment of a spiritual need was the incentive for some respondents to become a baptised member. There is a parallel between these experiences and some cases of domestic violence, where the fear of punishment is used by the perpetrator to manipulate the victim's behaviour (Stark, 2007). For instance, one of the core features of coercive control in domestic violence is the experience of a credible threat which makes clear to the target that "not only the means for coercion are available", but also that the perpetrator is willing to adopt such means if non-compliance occurs (Raven, 1993, p. 19). As Emma points out, the fear of losing her family if the expectations were not met was real, and the terror proven. Despite her young age, Emma knew and understood the implications for non-conformity.

Feelings of fear become early ingrained in the life of members, becoming a salient feature which characterises the dynamics within the community in the same way as fear characterises abusive relationships where it is used to control and coerce the victim (Pain, 2012). Maggie highlights the following:

We were taught fear. We were taught to fear Armageddon. We were taught to fear displeasing God. We're taught to fear displeasing our family, our brothers and sisters. We don't appreciate, I think, the full impact of that as a child until we're an adult, and we also, you know, become free from it. Jehovah was always watching. The Devil was always watching. And when we look at that, being an adult, looking at a child having that, that is not normal. We thought hard about the end of the world. We really thought about living and dying. Very young. We believed if we displeased God, we would die. So, I learned about death very early. And, and it was part of your life to think about dying and how you would die (Group A, lines 24-36).

In the same way that the idea of being rewarded may mould the direction of the members' lives, the concepts of punishment and death seem to have framed the existence and choices of the respondents whilst in the community. The consequences for disobeying, according to the leadership, are dramatic as the life of the individual is at stake. Children too are exposed to this belief. Oliver comments on this further saying:

One thing that I distinctly remember from being a child was the impression... that there was no point really in building relationships with [non-Jehovah's Witnesses] because they, you know, they were going to die, and they weren't going to get the benefit of an everlasting life that I believed we would have, if you see what I mean. Which is sad. It is quite an upsetting thing to have to accept as a child. Especially as a child. But yeah, that's how things were built on at that time (Group A, lines 65-73).

The respondents' quotes shed light on the reality experienced by many children born in or raised into the Jehovah's Witnesses. Firstly, it seems that children in the community, being exposed to and dealing with loaded concepts such as death, punishment, and fear, are rushed into adulthood, losing part of the light-heartedness which usually characterises childhood. A similar developmental pattern occurs with children grown in abusive environment, where their caregivers attribute unfair

responsibilities onto the child and pressure them with unrealistic expectations (Elkind, 2001). Secondly, Jehovah's Witness children are also exposed to the judgmental and discriminatory mindset which prompts separation from people who do not belong to the community. Trying to create connections with people outside the community is presented as being a waste of time as well as dangerous as these individuals are already condemned. From the account of Oliver, it can also be evinced that the stereotyped attitude promoted by the leadership may foster a superiority complex, as the Jehovah's Witnesses, according to the community's perspective, is the designated group who will survive Armageddon, *"They weren't going to get the benefit of an everlasting life that I believed we would have"*.

The participants' testimonies suggest that the commitment the individual makes in these circumstances is a 'bounded choice' (Lalich and McLaren, 2018). The early exposure to the community's teachings, the internalisation of the peers' expectations, the desire to please others and to feel accepted, the community's segregation, and the fear of the consequences for non-compliance, all concur in influencing the direction of the individual's journey.

Looking back at it retrospectively it wasn't something that I would have chosen today... At that time, I was 17-18 when I was baptised. And at that time, it was something that I wanted to do, I wasn't forced. I didn't feel pressure. But at that time, you know, I did believe the productions that they teach (Oliver, Group A, lines 77-80).

Although, when in the community, the Jehovah's Witness lifestyle is considered as the normal way to live, and each step undertaken is seen as a personal choice, once the individual leaves the community, they realise that most of the decisions made were influenced by their confined social and cultural environment.

5.1.1. 4 Moral integrity and self-actualisation

The data reveal that the individuals, being fully immersed in the ingroup culture, adopt the social norms within the community as a frame of reference to navigate their life. Nonetheless, the life within the community, as it emerges from the participants' accounts, presents a public and a hidden façade. This double façade may have important effects on the individual. For example, Elias was born into the community, the fourth generation of an extended family of Jehovah's Witnesses. He served as an Elder for 29 years and held various responsibilities. Although Elias' journey as an Elder of the community appears as being overall a positive experience, he decided to resign from his role and subsequently to disassociate. He explains the antecedents which led him to take this decision:

Because of the hypocrisy I saw, you know... because I had a lot of responsibility and I dealt, you know, in the past, with members of the Governing Body. I dealt with circuit overseers. And I saw how they really are. And they, they actually treated people very, very bad. Behind the scenes, they were egotistical misogynistic, self-centred, narcissistic individuals. And it was difficult for me to, you know, deal with that. And so, then that just led me to know that, you know, all my life, everything we were taught was nothing but a lie (Group B, lines 157-162).

According to his account, the path which led Elias to leave the community was the result of witnessing a high level of hypocrisy at the top level of the community hierarchy, which made him realise that his life and religious belief were based on a lie. Following a period as a PIMO member, he disassociated himself. He left the community as a mature man. According to his account, the main reason to step back from his role and to leave the community was not because he was dissatisfied with the religious teachings. Rather, moral integrity appears to be the underlining reason for him to leave.

Hypocrisy and scandal among the representatives of a religious denomination are reported as being some of the reasons which may lead members to disaffiliate (Schulz, 2018; Wright *et al*, 2011). The hypocrisy is experienced by the individual like a betrayal. As Schulz (ibid) stated, “The longer one has been a member of it [the community] and internalised its values, the deeper the betrayal of hypocrisy” (p. 10). The individual faces a moral dilemma of loyalty: silencing one’s conscience being loyal to the leaders or safeguarding one’s own moral integrity by leaving the community. Both alternatives are challenging decisions, both possibly having important effects on the individual’s life.

Although Elias witnessed the leaders’ hypocrisy, he did not decide to leave straightaway. Rather he started to mentally distance himself from the community ten years prior to leaving. Nonetheless, silencing one’s own conscience and living a life as PIMO may lead to a breaking point which was what Elias experienced. He says:

It was really killing me. I got sick and wound up, staying in the hospital for eight days because there was such a mental torture (Group B, lines 165,166).

Leaving the community eventually had positive effects on Elias. He says:

I want to tell you the truth. This year and a half, I mean, I feel great. I absolutely love my life right now. I do volunteer work, you know, as a mentor. I'm involved in, you know, I love politics, which is one thing I always did. And I love my job. I'm very happy and a lot of, a lot of people have noticed that, too... I feel great. That's all I could say (Group B, lines 173-177).

Experiencing an enduring moral incongruence compromised Elias’ wellbeing. Living in such a way became unbearable. Resolving the moral incongruence by leaving the community, was a fundamental step in his recovering.

Safeguarding one's own moral integrity is not the only reason for members to leave. The tension between intrinsic and extrinsic goals and expectations which the individual experiences at times, is another reason for departing. Noah depicts this well:

So, as I got older, I was fighting these two different lives, conforming to the Jehovah's Witness standards, and then wanting to do my own things, to live my own life, to create my own personality. I always felt that was very difficult. For probably 10 years I was fighting that battle between being a good Jehovah's Witness and being who I wanted to be deep down (Group A, lines 12-16).

The experiences of Elias and Noah present some common features. For example, they both grew up in an extended family of Jehovah's Witnesses, and both resolved to leave the community. Nonetheless, the triggers which later led them to reject a life as Jehovah's Witness are distinct. For example, Noah described the struggle he experienced in complying with the Jehovah's Witnesses' standards as an internal fight, a battle. The concept of living a double life emerges from his account.

When the external directives, such as goals and social norms, are perceived as controlling and imposed, the individual's "strivings become disconnected from their true psychological needs" (Koole *et al.*, 2017, p. 18). This is because human beings unlock their full potential through a process of self-actualisation (Rogers, 1959, 1961, 1963). It is argued that ideally, self-actualisation is attained when the individual is able to express their true self by satisfying the psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Waterman, 1993). When the fulfilment of these basic needs is hindered by external factors, the individual experiences an inner conflict, such as the inner battle Noah described.

Living in dissonance with one's own inner self could lead to a breaking point which Noah describes saying:

And it got to the point where I just couldn't carry on anymore. I didn't, I just couldn't. I couldn't live, fucking live these two lives anymore (Group A, lines 145,146).

Despite the consequences, he found in being shunned a way towards self-actualisation, to stand on his own. Angie too by emancipating herself from the family's and community's values, could pursue authenticity. Although she was shunned because of her issues with alcohol, leaving the community gave her the possibility to live according to her sexual orientation:

I'm a lesbian and in that religion, I couldn't live with the values of that, because... They are strongly against it (Group A, lines 243, 244).

Similar experiences are reported in Packard and Ferguson (2018), who found that “a narrow focus on certain moral proscriptions” (p. 449) and moral inflexibility can drive people away from an inherited belief system which is experienced as being unsupportive for the individual's self-actualisation.

Reflections on fear - I lived my life as a Jehovah's Witness without being fully conscious of how fear impacted my perception of my surrounding environment, my thoughts, and my behaviour. Whilst analysing the participants' narratives, I was struck by how much I could relate to their experiences. When the concept of fear emerged from the interviews, I came to realise the heavy burden that children who grow up in the community may carry because of fear. This appears to be likely as fear is a powerful emotion that could be used as a leverage to control another individual (Stark, 2006). In a hierarchical understanding of imbalance of power and abuse, fear plays a relevant role in directing the individual's pathway by diminishing the individual's ability to exercise agency and autonomy (Stark, 2007).

Indeed, as Maggie mentioned, fearing demons and the Devil or feeling that she was being watched by some supernatural entities, it is apparent how fear could be

used as a means to control and subject members from a young age. I can relate to this. Fear had been akin to a white noise for me; difficult to identify but constantly present. A feeling that pushed me to walk through life as a member of the community on tiptoes, almost like holding the breath, fearing (fear again) of making too much noise and being spotted. At the same time, there was something inside me that wanted to challenge that fear, and I found my way to challenge it, by being defiant. Defiant in wearing colourful tights and high heels. Defiant in attempting to think outside the boxes. For this, I thank my father, with his “hair like a crazy man” (as he was reproached by another Elder), his bow ties, and his relentless search for a personal ‘truth’. Perhaps, it is the same vein of defiance that led me to also conduct this study.

This section explored the beginning of the respondents’ complex journey as members of the Jehovah’s Witness community. As the analysis highlighted, this journey was not a free choice especially for those participants who grew up in the religion. Rather it was a path they followed because of the lack of external points of reference, the limited life experience, the internalisation of the community’s culture, and the role that internal and external drives play in moulding the individual’s behaviour and choices. For those who joined the community as adults, an alluring message of hope, the opportunity to get closer to God, and the possibility to survive God’s doomsday were the main reasons described which led the participants to embrace the Jehovah’s Witness creed.

5.2 Religious Shunning

'Religious Shunning' is the second overriding theme which emerges from the analysis. The participants of Group A eventually experienced a turning point in their lives, represented by being officially shunned as the consequence of *disfellowshipping* or *disassociation*. Although *disfellowshipping* supposes culpability and non-repentance, whereas *disassociation* follows the individual's decision to leave the community, the end result is the same:

I am treated the exact same way as if I was disfellowshipped, even though I haven't done anything wrong. The only thing I've decided is I don't want to be a member [anymore] (Zack, Group B, lines 194-196).

5.2.1 Reasons for Being Shunned

The Elders' decision to shun heavily weigh on two factors: committing what the community considers as a sin and a perceived degree of repentance. For participants of Group A, there were various reasons which led to their formal shunning. For example, Angie had a history of alcohol misuse. Discussing her experience, she says:

I've had a history of alcohol misuse issues, which I'm now part of a 12 steps programme to help support and kind of maintain my sobriety from alcohol. But while I was in the religion, [the Elders] kept setting up meetings... because, obviously, I kept getting drunk (Group A, lines 35-38).

Angie started to attend Alcoholics Anonymous sessions which initially helped her. She abstained from alcohol for twelve weeks but then she had a relapse. As a consequence, she was shunned for the third time. On these three occasions, shunning was due to her issues with alcohol. As she further explains:

[The Elders] told me because it wasn't a one off and because being drunk was a repeated behaviour, and it was a pattern, then they were left with no option but to disfellowship me (Group A, lines 91-94).

Angie's experience is in line with Erin's; being shunned was due to their repeated misbehaviour. Erin explains:

And I started doing stuff. That was a bit, that was when I first started having sex basically with [my boyfriend] and started smoking, going out partying, drinking. I also tried drugs. I sort of went a bit crazy and started doing things that [the Elders] really, really would have been quite angry about... And I decided to actually go and confess again... I went to them and said, "I've done this, I feel bad about it. I want to confess; I want to be forgiven". And, and I still at that point wanted to be a Jehovah's Witness. So, I was a little bit surprised that they decided to disfellowship me. However, they said their reason was the fact that I kept going against the rules and making these mistakes. I was clearly not sorry. The fact that I've kept repeating the same, so that's why they decided to disfellowship me. Which as a 20-year-old girl is quite hard (Group A, lines 134-137; 140; 162-168).

Both Angie and Erin were shunned because of their recurrent misconduct. The repeated pattern of behaviour was interpreted by the Elders as a lack of repentance, and Angie and Erin were shunned. Erin wanted to be part of the community and be a Jehovah's Witness, as she often underlined during the interview. Despite her misbehaviour, she wanted to make amends and that was the reason she contacted the Elders in the first instance so as to confess. Nonetheless, her expressions of remorse were unheard, and the Elders decided to shun her in any event. The testimonies of Angie and Erin highlight the fact that, in some cases, the decision of whether a member should be shunned or not is based more on the Elders' personal interpretation of the situation than on the underlying reasons for a member 'sinning' nor on the member's level of remorse.

As Elias comments, shunning appears as a decision based on the Elders' personal judgment of the events which seem to have little to do with the individual's feelings and degree of remorse. Although the way the person feels about their behaviour should be considered during the judicial process, Zack and Aaron admit:

We tried to interpret their repentance and giving up of bad activity (Zack, Group B, lines 28).

In nearly every case, we know, although would never admit, whether the person will be disfellowshipped even before we meet with the person. This is based on our personal knowledge and history of the person (Aaron, Group B, lines 21-23).

Elias recognises:

Sadly, within the organisation, there're many people who don't understand the complexity of life, the nuances, what brought a person to the situation. So, a lot of times they just see, it's either black or white (Group B, lines 75-78).

According to the PIMO and former Elders, the process which could change the life of a member drastically, appears to be biased and impaired by the Elders' subjective interpretations. Moreover, as Aaron discloses, it seems that the whole judicial hearing is nothing more than a formality, since the final decision about whether the member should be shunned or not is often predetermined.

Unlike Erin, Noah and Tom attended the judicial hearing willing to leave the community. Noah recalls the events which led him to be shunned as follows:

At the end, I went to the Elders again, I admitted that I've been seeing a girl who is not Jehovah's Witness. That ended up in me getting disfellowshipped basically... The problem is by this time I already pretty much said that I was not repentant, and I didn't want to really come back. I didn't feel sorry for what I'd done, so, it was inevitable really that I would be disfellowshipped. I went into that meeting, you know, expecting it. It's not as if I was surprised by what happened at all (Group A, lines 48-150; 170-174).

Tom also relates:

When I was 21, I started dating somebody at work. One thing led to another; we were fooling around... And the very next morning, about five o'clock in the morning, I was sat in my car outside my favourite Elder's house, waiting for him to wake up so I could go in and confess. So, I went in, confessed, and the Judicial Committee was formed, and they tried to work out whether I was repentant, and they ultimately came to the conclusion that I was sorry, not repentant (Group A, lines 69,70; 74-78).

Unlike Erin, Noah made it clear during the judicial hearing that he was not repentant. Also, unlike Erin, he made it known that he did not want to be a member of the community anymore. Tom, on the other hand, was considered by the Elders to be sorry but not contrite. Although the behaviour of Erin, Noah and Tom revealed differences in their attitudes, the end result was the same and they all were shunned. Despite the implications for the individual, shunning a member appears to be the Elders' arbitrary decision. The experiences of the respondents bear this out, regardless of whether the individual is remorseful or not, and regardless of their personal circumstances, shunning was the end result. In recognising this aspect, Elias and Horace say:

I think it goes beyond human beings' right to take that action against another person... recognising how life-altering it is for so many people... I feel that, you know, it's just beyond what humans should be able to, are entitled to because, you know, [the Elders] are only human (Elias, Group B, lines 6-10; 36-38).

I find it wrong...to pass judgement... recognising myself as an imperfect human being as well, with flaws and everything and me passing judgement on someone else. That's also imperfect (Horace, Group B, lines 164-168).

The experiences shared by Maggie and Oliver shed more light on the way the decision to shun a member is applied in a discretionary way by the Elders. Maggie at the age of 20, *faded away*. She stopped attending the meetings and taking an active part in the Jehovah's Witness' life. She craved for a little education and as she says:

I sneaked to college. Sneaked. Didn't tell anyone and got a little bit of education, off the radar. My mother, it was a secret. We didn't talk about this. But of course, you fall in love. And I fell in love. And to cut a long story short, I went home, barefoot and pregnant. The father of the baby was murdered. So, I went home. My mother looked after me, but of course, [the Elders] disfellowshipped me (Group A, lines 52-57).

She follows by saying:

And I begged, begged, "Please. Don't take my support away. I'm 21. I need support" (Group A, lines 57,58).

Horace provides further details about the line of action the Elders may determine in circumstances such as Maggie's:

If [the sin] becomes of public knowledge and... other members of the congregation know about it... because of the appearance, it might seem that the Elders aren't taking action if disfellowshipping doesn't occur... I see it as showing that like justice will serve, I guess... and it's possible that remorse will not matter (Group B, lines 97-100; 102; 115).

Maggie was single and pregnant, a medical status difficult to dissimulate in the community for a long period. Despite her need for support, her young age and her plea, shunning was deemed necessary. As Horace points out, between keeping the reputation of the community intact and remorse, perceptions seem to prevail over the individual's repentance, influencing the Elders' decision. This suggests that when the 'sin' has become public, shunning might be used by the Elders as a reminder to the community that non-compliance is severely punished.

Oliver was formally shunned one year after *fading*. His shunning process took an unusual course. He reports:

When I told my dad I was joining the Navy, he said to me that I would be disfellowshipped. But I never had any contact [with the Elders]. Nobody contacted me to say that I was being disfellowshipped. It was done without me being there, really. And no, no, that's not the normal process. I know normally you would have a meeting [with the Elders] and you would be there, and [the Elders] would tell you about the decision at that meeting but that didn't happen with me (Group A, lines 343-348).

Although shunning is a life-changing event, occasionally the formal protocol is not followed, and the Elders take the decision without summoning the individual for the judicial hearing, as Oliver had experienced. The person is not even notified of the final decision to shun. In this way, the individual is deprived of the opportunity to defend their case or to appeal.

The experience of Gaby shed further light on the authoritarian system implemented by the leadership. The first time Gaby was shunned, she was a teenager. After a period outside the community, she decided to come back, and she was reinstated. Nonetheless, when she was 26 years old, as a consequence of dissatisfaction and mistrust towards the leadership as well as the other members of the community, she disassociated. After many years, Gaby came back and was reinstated a second time. In that period, she found herself in financial need. Her husband, after divorcing her, left her without financial support. Homeless and penniless, she received support from a non-Jehovah's Witness woman who was disapproved of by the Elders.

She let me move into her house and said, you know, I could start my divorce from there. My ex-husband did things so that I didn't get anything financially so I couldn't afford to actually get a place of my own.... And so, [the Elders] called me after being reinstated. And they said that I had to move out. And I could never see this woman again... The problem was the occupation that she had, because she'd been into witchcraft (Group A, lines 391-393; 395-397; 404,405).

The events which led Gaby to be shunned highlight some relevant aspects not only in connection with this practice but also with regard to the community's environment. For example, although she was reinstated as a member of the community, the only support Gaby received was from a non-Jehovah's Witness lady. The woman was involved in witchcraft, an activity which Jehovah's Witnesses condemn. Gaby then says:

The Elders found out where I was living and didn't like it (Group A, lines 394,395).

Gaby's account provides an example of how, in cultic groups and gated communities, the life of members is constantly scrutinised. The system of control which these communities create can be compared to a patrol system where members survey each other, and often the Elders are those who take the lead in monitoring the activities of the other members. A parallel can be drawn between the monitoring system to which members are subjected and the strategy perpetrators of domestic violence adopt with

their victims (Stark, 2012). It seems that similar to perpetrators of domestic violence who strictly monitor the victims in order to subjugate them and to reassert their position of dominance, the leadership within the Jehovah's Witness community implements the monitoring system to facilitate the control they exert on the community's members by prompting in the individual a state of constant alert. Once the Elders found out where Gaby was living, they expressed their disappointment and clarified the steps Gaby was required to undertake in order not to lose the good standing in the community she had recently regained. The members' behaviour is regulated by strict directives and the Elders are the designated authority who enforce the rules. Nonetheless, except for the demand to adhere to these rules, there is a lack of a genuine interest for the individual and their needs. Unlike the non-Jehovah's Witness lady, the Elders did not offer Gaby any practical help.

They didn't offer me any help at all. They just said to me I had to get out of the place I was living in. And it was not possible for me to do that at that moment. And I wouldn't have done it anyway (Group A, lines 400-402).

Not only was no support offered to a member in need, but the support which came from outside the community was frowned upon. Gaby continues her narrative as follows:

They said that I had to move out and that I could never see this woman again... And I disagreed with them. And I said, "There's nothing wrong, she, you know, she's been nothing but kind to me". So, basically, they disfellowshipped me for that (Group A, lines 396-400).

The Elders disregarded Gaby's viewpoint and her ability to evaluate the situation logically. A common concept which surfaces especially from the accounts of the respondents of Group B, is the totalitarian approach of the leadership in handling members' issues. The leadership is often compared to a dictatorship. For example, Marc states:

I don't see any difference. I think the organisation acts as a bully, as a horrible dictator like the North Korean government (Group B, lines 279-280).

Members who do not comply with the group's directives, are bullied and could be shunned.

In order to avoid direct confrontation with the Elders, Emma decided to leave the community by communicating her wishes in writing with the Elders. Her journey to exit the community followed an emotionally costly path because of the measures she needed to adopt in order to emancipate herself. She starts explaining:

I honestly was just really becoming more and more dissatisfied, more and more unhappy with the [marital] life that we were living, more and more frustrated and angry about the denial of opportunities to me as an intelligent female (Group A, lines 240-242).

She then says:

And eventually, I asked [my husband] for divorce, which of course, it's also completely prohibited. And I can remember very clearly that he said to me, "The only, absolutely only, reason that I would agree to a divorce is if you are sexually unfaithful and sleep with someone else" because that's the only approved method of divorcing one's partner within the cult (Group A, lines 240-247).

She follows by saying:

I went and found someone and had sex with them. I absolutely have to state that I did not want to. I did still love my husband at that point. But I could see that our lives were taking very, very divergent paths. I did not see how it would be possible for us to continue either living together or maintain any sort of marriage together. And so, I felt this was my only escape route, actually (Group A, lines 250-254).

Emma, because of the community's rules about divorce, knew that being unfaithful was her only escape route. Nonetheless, this choice put her in an uncomfortable situation:

It was not a pleasurable experience. I didn't like it. I didn't want to do it. But then I came back to him and said, "Okay, and so I have now had sex with someone else" (Group A, lines 254-256).

Despite her infidelity, her husband, who was advised by the Elders, forgave her. She decided to leave the marital home. The Elders tried to contact her:

They used my family, particularly my mother to try to establish contact with me, repeatedly. My mother was extremely adept at manipulation and emotional blackmail (Group A, lines 295-297).

Emma ignored the Elders' requests to meet.

There was a period of time, some months, where I was sort of left alone, if you like, in terms of not being harassed. It was harassment, there's no two-ways about it, by the people in the congregation, but my mother particularly pushed to be some sort of action taken (Group A, lines 298-301).

The Elders' requests started again. At this point she sent them a letter. She explains:

I wrote a letter, and I was quite frank. I said that I had had sex with somebody else, I said that I wanted divorce, I said that I didn't want to be a member of their cult any longer. So, I wrote this letter and just refused to meet with [the Elders] (Group A, lines 306-308; 313,314).

Emma clarifies the reason to refuse to meet the Elders:

Primarily one of the things in my mind at that time was how humiliating and vulgar and distasteful the last meeting with them had been, where I had to graphically describe intimate sexual acts I had done with my husband to a bunch of window cleaners [the Elders]. And I was just no longer willing to subjugate myself in that way (Group A, lines 314-318).

Manipulation, harassment, emotional blackmail, and humiliation are some concepts which emerge from Emma's account. From her experience, it appears that there is no easy way to live one's own life within the community, especially for a person who tries to pursue self-realisation and independence. Nor is there an easy escape route. Often the individual has to adopt strategies in order to break free which makes the person feel uncomfortable. In this respect, Zack points out:

It's a one-way contract. You can only go in and there's no dignified way to get out (Group B, lines 203).

For some participants being shunned for their 'sins' represented an escape route from a life they no longer wanted to live. This can be drawn from the experience of Tom, who seized the opportunity to free himself which being shunned offered. He explains:

Subconsciously I knew that this was the only way I was going to escape the religion without destroying my mother... If I was to succumb to the sins of the flesh, my mum would be able to understand that because "It's temptation and it is the evil wordling, and one day, he can come back and repent". And so, it sorts of made it easier for her to take it (Group A, lines 457-463).

He then adds:

I wouldn't go so far to say I planned it. But I think my subconscious did. So, I wasn't that bothered about the ultimate decision [to be disfellowshipped]. It took a weight off my shoulders because... I had always told myself, "When my mum dies, I'd walk away from the religion", because I didn't believe it, but I wouldn't, couldn't ... because I was a mommy's boy (Group A, lines 464-468).

As it can be evinced from Tom's quote, the fear of disappointing other's expectations is well rooted in the individual. Thus, 'committing a sin' becomes a tactic subconsciously implemented to gain freedom without crushing the parents' hope to see their son repent and come back to the community. This point is further developed by Noah who says:

I think, looking back, I said the things that I thought would make them happy at the time, that I would be coming back and yeah, "I'll see you soon" ... I knew deep down that... it wasn't gonna be like that (Noah, Group A, lines 195-198).

Two different motivations appear to prompt the individual to mislead their parents, fostering the false hope they will come back into the community. On the one hand, it seems to be a strategy which the shunned child adopts in an attempt to sooth the parents' deep pain caused by the shunning of a member of the family. On the other hand, it may also indicate that the individual is not ready to publicly take ownership of the decision of leaving the community. Tom explains:

I think the disfellowshipping was an easy way out for me. And I would love to say that I planned it and executed it like some military campaign. But I think I fell into it and was happy to have done so. I'm always in awe of people who just wake up and decide to leave, just like that. I have nothing but respect for people who can do that but then I'm assuming they weren't born in, I'm assuming they had critical thinking skills before they joined and that they were able to apply them afterwards (Group A, lines 469-476).

Tom underlines that being shunned for sinning was an easy way out for him compared to the decision of leaving. Unlike people who take advantage of the judicial panel's decision in order to break free, the individual who “*wakes up and decides to leave*”, takes agency. Waking up and deciding to leave implies, as Tom indicates, the individual's ability to think critically and to overtly confront the leadership. It is a decision which, considering its serious implications in terms of losses, inspires respect.

The account of Tom also suggests that there are ways to leave the Jehovah's Witnesses which are considered more tolerable from the community's perspective. Sinning because of the weaknesses of the flesh, for example, is perceived as being more acceptable than leaving because of one's own choice. This is possibly because, in the case of succumbing to the weakness of the flesh, the individual is not to be fully blamed, “*It's temptation*”. The non-Jehovah's Witness person becomes the scapegoat and has to be inculpated, “*It is the evil wordling*”. These two factors act in mitigating the community's perception about the loss of the membership status, although shunning is nonetheless applied. On the other hand, leaving the community as an apostate, places the blame entirely on the individual. Marc, a former Elder who was shunned for apostasy, highlights another possible reason for the community's leadership to harshen their judgement towards an apostate. He explains:

They cannot allow an ex-member to express themselves. So, the minute I spoke out... then disfellowshipping is an authoritarian tool to basically

silence somebody. So, the congregation will not listen to that person. So, it certainly wasn't a loving provision for me in the hope that I would come back, you know, they know I'm not coming back. And they wouldn't even bother to try and encourage me to come back. Literally in my case, they just view me as evil because I'm an apostate. So, they use it as a sort of tool to separate me from having any influence on the congregation. I've even had an Elder who told me that I'm no longer the head of my wife, that now they are her spiritual heads and, and they are worried that I'm going to influence her. You know, they feel like they own her and that I'm a threat to my own wife... They're sort of suddenly trying to influence her to leave me because I might influence her to leave as well. So, my opinion now, it's all about control (Group B, lines 47-61).

An apostate takes a clear stand against the leadership, questioning the legitimacy of their authority. This attitude endangers the leadership's position of power and compromises the possibility to control members if the apostate is not promptly removed from the community in order to avoid the spreading of dangerous thoughts. The threat an apostate poses to the leadership's position of authority is well depicted by Marc who says:

When you come into the Truth, as they call it, you know, they claim to have all the answers that other religions don't have. And they have the whole worldview that explains everything. But as soon as you start thinking a little bit deeper and going outside the approved questions and answers, they don't have any answers. They can't answer the challenging questions. And suddenly, they don't like them, and they're scared. And they want to just hide them away and bury them and that's why they don't want you talking to other people because those people will then realise it's like... do you know the Wizard of Oz? They like show all the powerful things and all the answers and that can solve all your problems. But of course, the wizard couldn't do that. The Tin Man has already had a heart, Scarecrow has already had brains. The Wizard didn't give them anything, they just found those things within themselves. And that's the same when people pull back the curtain and realise the wizard is just a man, then they lose the sort of... It's a magical mystique. And you pull the curtain away and take away their mystique as sort of God's authority, there's nothing left (Group B, lines 179-195).

He then follows:

How can you respect these people any more than anyone down the street when you realise that they're not appointed by God? And that's what they can't let go. As soon as people realise that they don't have any authority, they lose control over you. And when they lose control, they lose all the donations, they lose their lifestyle. They lose everything. So, I think that's

what it is. They fear of losing their authority. It's all about authority and control. And once you allow people to question that, then your authority is questioned because you don't have it (Group B, lines 195-202).

According to Marc, the Jehovah's Witnesses have vested themselves with power, legitimising their position of authority as it was the will of God. This aspect is highlighted by the powerful analogy between the Wizard of Oz and the Jehovah's Witness leadership Marc proposes. They both hide their being nothing but humans behind a "*magical mystique*". As Marc emphasises, the structure the leadership has created aims at consolidating their power and subjugating members. Nonetheless, the structure is fragile as deception is the foundation of their power. As soon as an individual questions the authority, the curtains are pulled back, revealing the deceit. Once the deceit has been unveiled, the apostate will never cease to be a threat to the interests of the leadership. There are therefore no mitigating circumstances for an apostate, and there is no coming back from that.

Another example which highlights the fear of the leadership losing control is provided by Susan who was shunned for apostasy. Susan wanted to raise awareness among her fellow members about the Australian Royal Commission investigation into child abuse, which involved Jehovah's Witnesses along with other organisations. As she says:

[The Elders] *had to stop me somehow* (Group A, lines 272).

As it can be evinced from the experience of Susan, and as Marc underlines, shunning an apostate appears to be a tool used by an authoritarian leadership more to protect their power than to regain the individual back to the sheepfold.

The account of Marc also highlights the intrusive, and harassing behaviour of the Elders in interfering with his marriage which can be metaphorically compared to the Elders' attempt of emasculating the individual. The concept of psychological emasculation emerges across different accounts when participants describe the way the Elders handled judicial matters and considered the respondents not apt to be regarded as the head of their households (e.g., Luke, Jacob, and Jordan).

This section highlighted that although the reasons for being shunned differ from one individual to another, at the same time, the participants' experiences are also similar. Their actions and behaviour were all considered as going against the moral and spiritual standards set for the members of the community. Also, in the case of the participants who were shunned for apostasy, their behaviour was appraised as a threat to the leadership's position of authority.

A degree of uncertainty and being at the mercy of the authority seems to characterise the respondents' experiences. Regardless of the individuals' levels of remorse, their need for support, or the underlying reasons for misconduct, the end result is the same. The individual is shunned. Moreover, as it emerges from the participants' accounts thus far, there is no consistency in the protocol followed by the Elders. At times, the Elders seem to chase the individual which is experienced by the member as harassment. Other times, the Elders do not invite the individual to the judicial hearing, nor is the member notified that they have been officially shunned.

The controlling nature of the structure created by the leadership takes shape across the respondents' testimonies. It is a structure which aims at reinforcing the leadership's

position of power by subduing members with threats, fear, and punishment. Members have to conform to the community's standards of behaviour and to subjugate to the group's demands and expectations, or they will suffer the consequences.

5.2.2 The Judicial Committee

The judicial process which the individual often has to deal with, is another aspect which bonds the experiences of those who have been shunned. According to the respondents, the whole judicial arrangement seems to be designed in order to create the ideal conditions for confession, self-exposure and shaming. For instance, during a judicial hearing, the individual has to face the panel of Elders without the presence of moral or legal support:

They didn't allow me to record the meeting, you know, you can't take note, you can't have a witness with you, even though they actually told us we could. They told us we could do that, but when we turn up with the person, they didn't let him in (Jacob, Group A, line 976-980).

The segment emphasises the way the men who conduct the process have complete power over the individual. The Elders have things done according to their liking, there is no ethical protocol. As soon as something has been agreed between the parties, it can be easily disregarded, as the account of Jacob underlines.

Marc, a former Elder, provides a graphic description of the faults within the judicial process saying:

It is basically a "kangaroo court" ... It looks like a court but it's not a real court. It's like a pretend court, with no proper jurisprudence or procedure. So, these men have total power. And as soon as you do not allow proper procedures or witnesses, it becomes very obvious that... this power can be abused, basically, that's why it's done in secret... They are working for an organisation which is wanting to control things. And the best way to control things is to do things in secret... For instance, the reason they wouldn't put anything in writing is because... they don't have the courage to stand by

what they're doing, what they're saying. So, they will not put it in writing because they don't want it to be exposed (Group B, lines 84-98).

The concept of 'illegitimate procedure' emerges from the account of Marc, which has a twofold implication. Firstly, the judicial hearing does not have proper jurisprudence and the decisions taken have no legal recognition. This is similar to the Sharia councils which do not possess any legal authority in the UK and their judgements have no backing from the English law (Torrance, 2019). Secondly, secrecy and abuse of power seem to characterise the process. There is a deliberate disregard for the individual's rights which a legal court would normally grant. The above quotes raise doubts about the real aims of the leadership in not allowing the individual to take notes or to have a witness, questioning the honourability of the procedure.

The description provided by Emma, Maggie, and Erin about the judicial process they were involved in is representative of how inappropriately invasive the judicial process is:

Three Elders you talk to, and you confess everything... And it's a very, very emotionally draining and quite traumatic experience to tell them about the things you've been doing with your boyfriend. I was crying hysterically throughout it. It makes you feel quite shameful and guilty about what you've done wrong (Erin, Group A, lines 96-104).

There were six Elders at the hearing who asked me very personal, personal, personal questions, inappropriate to a young woman in a room of six men (Maggie, Group A, lines 58-60).

A group of window cleaners and electricians to ask, demand answers to incredibly intimate, sexual questions. I question why I accepted that as okay (Emma, Group A, lines 154-156).

According to the participants, the judicial process is an arrangement which further proves the level of control which members are exposed to. As Erin, Maggie and Emma highlight the judicial hearing is an upsetting process during which the most intimate

and private information is requested to be described in great detail. As Horace points out:

[The Elders] will sit with this person, go through the facts. Depending on the scenario, it can be very uncomfortable for the individual because the Elders can get very detailed into what occurred (Group B, lines 34-36).

Nonetheless, the Elders' request for detailed information seems to be motivated more by a morbid curiosity than by the necessity to establish facts and events:

These self-appointed busy bodies. I have absolutely no doubt, in my mind, that some [questions were] motivated by their own sexual predilections. The questions were distasteful. They were vulgar. Yes, it was, I would say that it was also a very damaging experience (Emma, Group A, lines 156-161).

The way the judicial committee is structured and handled appears to fit within the ideological narrative of dominance in the construction and maintenance of group-based inequality. During the judicial process, the dominant group reinstates its supremacy over the arbitrary-set subordinate (the unrepented wrongdoer). However, although both men and women seem to be equal victims of the discriminatory practice and treatment in terms of level of control, intrusiveness, and subjection, it also seems a process through which male dominance and gender inequality are reinforced and sustained (Pratto *et al.*, 2006). Coupled with this, according to Lifton's (1961) Model of Thought Reform, one of the techniques which may be adopted to promote people's acquiescence is the Cult of Confession. The core concept of this technique is that there is a fine line which demarcates what the authority is entitled to know about a person's life and which aspects of one's own life the individual can keep private. In extreme systems of control and influence, the concept of privacy is almost non-existent. In such an environment, the individual "may slowly lose their sense of balance between what is private and what should be shared" (Lalich and McLaren, 2018, p. 94). Elias explains:

It is about mind control, behaviour control and abusive relationships. And that is the best way that I describe the whole organisation, that it is abusive. They have to know, they want to know what you're doing, how you're dressing, what movies are you watching, who you're sleeping with, you know, how you are sleeping with them. And that's abusive (Group B, lines 192-196).

Furthermore, the judicial hearing can last several hours:

Their confrontations are always long, the objective point is to break you psychologically (Emma, Group A, lines 180-181).

The individual is completely exposed, and their behaviour examined in great detail.

Shame and guilt are heightened. In these circumstances the psychological pressure is such that, as Eric says, *"I just admitted everything"* (Group A, line 79). Jacob and

Grace conclude:

There's no God in this. There is no, no search for truth, no concern about people's ultimate destiny, well-being. It's just, men following orders (Group A, lines 911-912).

In gated communities, cultic groups and high-control groups, members' compliance and adherence to the expected standards are achieved through what appears to be as an intrusive system of control and influence, and abuse of power. Strict rules, and a system of discipline based on fear, guilt and shame seems to be effective deterrents to regulate members' lives.

[Disfellowshipping] is used as a punishment... You are punished. The fear of it is enough to punish. It controls you. "I don't want to be disfellowshipped. I don't want to go through that. It will hurt my family. It will hurt my friends. It'll hurt me or hurt my kids" ... They'll shun your kids as well. So, it keeps you, keeps you down. The fear is enough [to keep you down] (Maggie, Group A, lines 205-210).

Massaro (1991), and Piers and Singer (1953) explained that the efficacy of the shame sanctions is endorsed by the fact that the feeling of shame reshapes and redefines the individual's self-image through a process of devaluation and dehumanisation. Buss (1980) argued that the power of shame relies on the presence of an audience who condemns the individual's behaviour. If the offence is not acknowledged by

others, and especially by significant others, “there is no basis for shame” (Buss, 1980, p. 159).

The feeling of anxiety that the public shaming produces is related to the fear of abandonment, exclusion, and shunning. This is what can be evinced by Nate, who says:

When somebody is disfellowshipped, their name is announced... And that is the deterrent for everybody else, because that person would then be shunned. It's a scare tactic... because it's so frightening to think that you would lose all your family and friends and everything you've ever known (Group B, lines 148-153).

As Piers and Singer (1953) explained, “Behind the feeling of shame stands not the fear of hatred, but the fear of contempt which, on an even deeper level of the unconscious, spells fear of abandonment, the death by emotional starvation” (pp. 16-17).

From the accounts of the participants, it can be evinced that the compliance and retention of members are achieved over a period of time using different tactics to control members (Lalich and McLaren, 2018). Jehovah’s Witnesses employ fear and religious shunning to ensure compliance and to discourage their members from leaving.

5.2.3 The Facets of Religious Shunning

After the judicial hearing is concluded, the individual is invited to leave the room and to wait. After some time, the Elders communicate their decision to the person. If shunning is deemed necessary, the announcement will be made in front of the

community. The public announcement represents a drastic turning point in the life of the participants but also for the community. Aaron explains the consequences saying:

The result is that those who are Jehovah's Witnesses are no longer allowed to associate with the disfellowshipped person. In effect, the disfellowshipped person is shunned by all other Jehovah's Witnesses. Jehovah's Witnesses who continually do not support the disfellowshipping arrangement will also be disfellowshipped and shunned (Group B, lines 5-9).

Liam and Rose, a couple in their 60s, became inactive and then they disassociated.

Liam explains the effect of such decisions on their friendships within the community:

Most people had started to not speak to us before we disassociated because they had heard rumours. And so, they stopped speaking to us, but about three, four... people would speak to us still. And then after we disassociated, we told them, we said, "Look, we've disassociated" and they said, "Well, we can't speak to you any longer". So, we lost everybody. And we didn't have any friends outside the Jehovah's Witness community. We didn't have anybody because as I said earlier, they're all in the world, worldly people. So, we didn't know anybody, even though we've been in [this place] for 22 years, we didn't know anybody (Group A, lines 446-452).

Liam and Rose were shunned by the community before disassociating, which happened four years later. This suggests that shunning an inactive is adopted by most of the members of the community discretionary as a preventive measure. Once the individual officially leaves the community, then shunning is required with the result

Rose underlines:

We have no friends. We lost our network of friends. We lost everybody (Group A, lines 442-443).

Samuel and his wife too have experienced the harsh treatment enacted by the community. Samuel says:

Generally, they will cross to the other side of the road or pretend they haven't seen me. That's usually the case. Quite often, it's a sudden thing so you turn to corners, and you meet these people, and I say "Hi". And they say, "Hi", and then they realise the terrible situation they put themselves in, and then they quickly close their eyes and... And my wife had a couple of occasions early on, where she was in tears because she was in a shopping centre, and someone who had been a close friend came up close and then,

and my wife would just automatically say "Hi". And they would just turn and walk the other way (Group A, lines 532-539).

Religious shunning determines a severing not only of friendships but also of family ties. Angie describes the relationship with the members of the community, and especially with her mother, since being shunned:

None of them talk to me since... and that included my mum since I was disfellowshipped (Angie, Group A, lines 125-126).

Susan, whose sisters are still members of the Jehovah's Witnesses, recollects a recent episode involving one of her sisters and her brother-in-law:

Even, like my younger sister. A few weeks ago, she was walking with her husband. She lives near, near here. And I was walking on the seafront, and I said "Hello" to them. And she was just, had stone-faced, and he just shook his head in disgust, in "How dare you even say hello!" (Susan, Group A, lines 197-201).

Rob and his wife have three children, two of them are active Jehovah's Witnesses. He explains what happened to his relationships with them:

My two children... they continue to shun me. And my wife... she got abusive in the things that she would say about me that, that I was the most disgusting person on the planet for having turned my back on Jehovah. That was rather hard to take and not to get upset about (lines 484-490).

Rob's wife put an end to their marriage. Both Susan and Rob experienced expressions of disdain from their families. As mentioned earlier, apostates are a threat to the leadership, and they are presented by the leadership as hideous people who have rejected and betrayed God. This results in members' evident signs of disgust or the vocalisation of such a sentiment.

When Gaby was shunned for the first time, she was still living under her family's roof.

She describes the effects of this on the family's interactions:

The atmosphere at home was really awkward because my parents moved me out of my bedroom with my sister, and put me in a room on my own, because they said they didn't want me to influence her... Jehovah's

Witnesses do not speak to you when you're disfellowshipped. Now all the ones you've ever known won't speak to you, and, you know, obviously within the family household conversation is kept to a minimum (Group A, lines 130-132; 157-161).

The quote suggests that the shunned individual is regarded as a contaminant which presence could infect others. Although Gaby was allowed to live with her family, she was removed from the bedroom she shared with her sister, and she experienced estrangement within her family home.

Oliver tried to keep in contact with his parents after being shunned. On many occasions he expressed his love to them and his desire to have a relationship with them. Their terms to resume the relationship with their son were made clear:

So, from that, from that point, I have my family, they were in the organisation, none of them would talk to me after that. Including my parents. It was just, there's just no contacts and they wouldn't have any relationship with me anymore, which is quite upsetting... I miss them and I still want a relationship with them if they, if they want to back up. And their response was always the same that they would only have a, they would only want a relationship with me again if I wanted a relationship with Jehovah again. (Oliver, Group A, lines 355-358; 364-367).

The behaviour of Oliver's parents towards him, and the fact that in shunning an individual, members are "just following orders, basically" (Erin, Group A, line 241), highlight the extent the systems of control and belief are taken to extremes in some communities. Despite acknowledging the emotional pain and the unnatural behaviour, parents shun their children anyway, and refuse to have contact with them unless they re-enter the community. This appears to be an emotional blackmail where the need to belong and to feel loved are used as a leverage to force the individual to seek reinstatement. One of the last conversations Erin had with her mother helps to clarify this aspect:

And I spoke to my mum on the phone, actually, and she said, I remember her crying saying that what they were asking her to do, not speak to me,

goes against all her natural, motherly instincts, which is to love me (Group A, lines 282-284).

Family ties and friendships are to be sacrificed when the individual does not reflect the expectations of the community (Rodriguez-Carballeira *et al.*, 2015; Lifton, 1961).

[A mother who shuns her daughter] is showing her that her loyalty is to Jehovah, not to her family ties. And even though it crushes her soul ... they're separate because it's considered to be loyalty to Jehovah (Horace, Group B, lines 254-259).

Horace's testimony brings to light the issue of power and the way the leadership exerts control over the community by hiding their aims behind the presence and will of a supernatural entity. Apart from using the existence of a deity to legitimise their position of authority, it seems that the existence of God and the allegiance to him and the Bible have been used "for keeping beasts of burden patient while they were being overloaded, and to keep [them] in order" (O'Hanlon, 1993, p. 4).

Gated religious denominations, high-control groups and cults achieve a mind-numbing effect through a systematic, rigorous teaching programme and through other techniques of manipulation, influence, control, and coercion (Lifton, 1961; Rodriguez-Carballeira *et al.*, 2015). Members, slowly but inevitably, undergo a process of internalisation of the group's rules, beliefs and worldview which lead to "the individual's identity reshaping to fit the rigid contour of the doctrinal mould" (Lifton, 1961, p. 431). The doctrine takes precedence over people. The individual is persuaded to "give an absolute value to the group doctrine placing it above people and social laws" (Rodriguez-Carballeira *et al.*, 2015, p. 33), and to "submit to the demands of the cult and obey without question" (Lalich and McLaren, 2018, p. 64), shunning their family members or friends by one such example.

Noah describes his experience of being shunned from his family saying:

I've not spoken to any of them for four and a half. Four years, four years, I think it is. I wrote a couple of text messages. Nothing. I sent a lot of text messages once and no reply (Group A, lines 226-228).

There are, nonetheless, some exceptions and at times a member is permitted to have some contact, though minimal, with a shunned person. Elias describes this instance as “necessary business” (Group B, line 96). Erin adds some more details saying:

It includes if somebody was ill or dying or something that affected the family that they, they felt the disfellowshipped person needed to know about (Group A, lines 342-346).

Emma was contacted by her mother for a serious health matter, she had breast cancer. After years of shunning her daughter, she visited Emma to inform her about the fatal diagnosis. Emma recalls her mother’s words:

“I maybe have about a year, at most, to live. But I still don't want any contact with you, and you are still dead to me”. And then she got into the car, and she drove away (Group A, lines 663-665).

For the next six months, Emma tried to reconnect with her mother, contacting her by phone, by letter or visiting her at home. The result was not the one Emma hoped:

Every single day, for six months, she rejected me and refused to speak to me. And it was the most agonising time in my life. The only news that I had was from my second sister who by then was not a Jehovah's Witness but hadn't been excommunicated so my mother spoke to her (Group A, lines 666-671).

A Jehovah’s Witness lady interceded in her favour. She talked to Emma’s mother. As a result, she agreed to meet Emma but under strict conditions:

Some of those conditions for example were, if a Jehovah's Witness, she was having palliative care at home, if a Jehovah's Witness came to call, I was not allowed to speak. I had to remain absolutely silent. And I had to either go to the corner of the room and pretend that I wasn't there, or I had to leave. There were a lot of conditions that she imposed like this. I agreed to all of them because I wanted some contact with my mother before she died. And quite honestly, I would have done anything. I would have agreed to anything. They were utterly humiliating (Group A, lines 678-686).

Emma's sisters were present when their mother finally passed away.

When she died, my sisters were with her, and they made the decision not to call me until after she had died. So, I was specifically denied the opportunity to say goodbye. I was allowed to have five minutes with her, alone, her dead body. And that was not the worst part actually. You would think that it was. The worst part was attending a funeral, where there were 500 Jehovah's Witnesses, and every single one pretended that I was invisible. Not a single person spoke to me. Not one. And that was my mother we were buried. I just didn't exist. (Group A, lines 692-701).

Gaby had similar experiences. Sometimes after she was shunned, her brother passed away.

My brother... died in 2003. And so, I went to his funeral, but I wasn't invited to the wake... I waited at the graveside until they came out. And I saw my brother buried. None of the family spoke to me so I just went home after that (Group A, lines 360-366).

The conditions imposed upon the individual are humiliating, as in the case of Emma. They deprive the individual of their dignity. Moreover, despite a tragic circumstance such as the death of a family member, the individual is ignored. There is no social recognition of the individual's loss. The grief is overlooked and devalued, and the community's social support is denied (Doka, 1999; Doka, 2002; Gitterman and Knight, 2019). This is perceived as a cruel treatment. It appears that what is considered by the community a provision taken in the best interests of the community and of the wrongdoer, is instead a measure which affects the shunned individual's quality of life at different levels, and which may have long-lasting repercussions. Emma concludes:

An experience which will haunt me for the rest of my life. It was cruel, there is no other word for it. It was utterly cruel. That's what I would like to add. That's how Jehovah's Witnesses treat people (Group A, lines 702-705).

Not all the members of the Jehovah's Witness community strictly adhere to the expected behaviour, and some of them, despite the risk, keep in contact with a shunned person. For example, Noah describes that some of his friends have remained in contact:

Some still speak to me today, some of my friends, others have left as well since then ... Because, again, they are probably at a position where I was at as a Jehovah's Witness maybe 10, 10 years ago where I started to not really believe it and start to do things that I shouldn't be doing. Sort of speaking to disfellowshipped people. These contacts would not be public. So, we've never meet up face to face, but, you know, via text message or phone call. Yep, but we'd keep in touch (Noah, Group A, lines 201,202; 303-307).

Noah's account sheds further depth on the reality which characterises the life of some members of the community. Entrapped by a system which exploits the power of connectedness and belonging to its own advantage, and threatens its members with punishments such as shunning, some individuals lead a double life. Marc explains further:

I was reading a lot about North Korea; I was quite fascinated by the dictatorship there. But what I was reading about was when people escaped North Korea, they had to escape with the whole family. Otherwise, they won't even try. Because they know if they escaped, their family would be kept hostage. And they just can't do that, so they stayed and endured. And I think it's a very similar situation like people stuck in the religion, knowing that if they leave, their family will be held hostage. So, they just stay because that's the easy road. And when you make that comparison, that makes it sound quite evil, right? (Group B, lines 270-277).

Similar to people in North Korea who prioritised first family more than freedom, or as some victims of intimate partner violence who decide to stay in the abusive relationship, some Jehovah's Witnesses resolve not to leave the community, and choose enduring the challenges (Estrellado and Loh, 2019). The decision to stay is not a sign of weakness, as Wiener (2017) pointed out, "Survivors do not 'give in' to perpetrator demands because they are inherently weak or flawed as individuals. They obey because they are rightly fearful of the consequences if they do not. They understand the threat posed by the perpetrator because they know that he has access, and that he is dangerous" (2017, p. 508).

And when you tell them that the risk of losing their social network is in the line, of losing your whole family, that can be a powerful deterrent to make you stay in line, which is one of the reasons why I still am physically in,

because to lose, to lose all of the friendships that I've established throughout the years, it's hard (Horace, Group B, lines 474-478).

Living a life undercover is the strategy that some adopt to preserve their affective ties while trying to live according to their values and beliefs. These members often consider themselves as PIMO. Protected by an impeccable façade, the individual secretly questions and rejects the groups' precepts and teachings, and does things which are disapproved by the community, such as keeping in contact with a shunned person.

The life as a PIMO is well represented by the personal experience of Horace:

I'm still an active member of the congregation and I serve as an Elder. But even though I do all these day-to-day activities, I do the preaching and all that, my mentality no longer aligns with the Jehovah's Witness mentality or what it should be. So that's why I consider myself to be what's considered 'physically in but mentally out'. Even though for the congregation I appear as a strong, solid member, faithful, I am no longer in that mindset (Group B, lines 385-392).

He further explains:

I would say, it's mentally draining to try to keep the façade, to seem active, to maintain the appearance, to, to pretend like everything's okay. Mentally, I personally will deal with the whole process. I have my personal therapist for that to work through that. It's not easy (Horace, Group B, lines 493-496).

Although Marc suggests that not leaving is the “easy road”, living a double life is often a challenging and a solitary path because of the patrol and report system in place within the community. It has both emotional and mental implications, as the experience of Horace evidences.

5.2.4 Reinstatement

In order to regain what religious shunning has taken away, some individuals decide to go back, and commence the reinstatement procedure, as it was for Nate. Whilst he was still an Elder, he was shunned. He explains:

And being a believer, I was trying to come back into the religion. I had to go to the meetings. And, yeah, everybody just pretended that you did not exist as a human being. And I didn't have any friends or family that would talk to me. So, I quickly realised that something was not right. But yet I still believed (Group B, lines 28-30).

As Nate states, he tried to come back because he was still a believer. For a devout believer, being shunned has serious implications. It means being thrown into *the World*, at its mercy, in a condition of disgrace and disapproval which may prompt the individual's desire to atone in order to regain a good standing in front of God.

Nonetheless, Elias identifies in the reinstatement procedure a loophole:

You could never ever really tell a person's intention because a lot of times people want to be reinstated just so that they can continue to have a relationship with their family and their former friends (Group B, lines 111-114).

Jordan reiterates the concept by saying:

When you're in the organisation... that's your life. That's everything you have, everything... So, once you're kicked out of that, I can see why people want to come back (Group B, lines 100-106).

This is confirmed by what Steve explains:

Sometimes... being reinstated, you know that they did it just because of the emotional blackmail of having their family and friends taken away... I did have a family member who has been disfellowshipped twice... He actually said that if he still had contact with his family and friends, he probably would not have come back. And it was because of wanting to see them again, that's why he came back and is still a Witness today (Group B, lines 178-180; 188-193).

Akin to Steve's relative who sought reinstatement because of his family, the experience of Dylan also evidences the way reinstatement becomes a tool to reconnect with the loved ones and to regain a certain degree of manageability over one's own life. He says:

My motivation was purely more for the wife and her happiness... If I do this, it'll make things a lot simpler for her, a lot simpler for her family... And we all get the benefit of seeing my mum again (Group A, lines 256-259).

During the conversation Dylan had with the Elders, he concealed the real motivations for seeking reinstatement. He says:

It was something I kept for myself... So, I had to play along the Elders, "Oh yes, I'm really sorry... I will never do it again", but... you also have to express your love for Jehovah basically again. And I wasn't entirely convinced about going back in. And like I said, it was more for the wife. So, yes, I kept so much away, didn't tell the Elders all my main motivations because I probably wouldn't have been safe with it. They would have probably drawn it out even longer (lines 266-273).

As it appears so far, seeking reinstatement may have little to do with a spiritual need and the desire to reconnect with God. Deception can be used to be reinstated as there is no forum to determine the real intentions of an individual who asks to re-enter. Therefore, the Elders base their decision of whether to reinstate the individual or not on the following criteria:

The Elders' personal observation of the meeting attendance will come into consideration (Horace, Group B, lines 305-306).

If they show and demonstrate that they're sorry for their actions and they've stopped doing the behaviour that caused them to be disfellowshipped (Zack, Group B, lines 109-110).

Elias concludes saying:

We can't read a person's heart or their minds or their intention. We could just go by on what we observed and to what they tell us. And they could lie, it doesn't matter (Group B, lines 121-123).

As quotes indicate, the Elders are aware that there is a concrete possibility that the only reason for a shunned person to pursue reinstatement might be to socially reconnect with family and friends. The Elders are also cognisant that the individual could lie about their motivation. The individual's intrinsic intentions to re-enter are superfluous. It appears that the leaderships' interest is more for the number of members who form their ranks rather than the quality of the atonement.

Maggie, with a new-born daughter, mourning for the loss of her partner, and in need of the support of her mother, started to reattend the meetings as a shunned person in order to be reinstated. She recalls what happened to her:

So, I carried on going to every meeting, no one spoke. And I had to turn to the wall if a man went past me, I had to turn my face to the wall. And I did it (Group A, lines 57,58; 61-64).

Erin describes her attempts to be reinstated and the community's behaviour towards her as a shunned member:

You know that you can't talk to anybody. You are completely cut off... However, you are invited to try and be reinstated back into the congregation, but they don't make it easy for you (Group A, lines 187-190).

Erin started reattending the meetings with the hope of being reinstated and describes:

And I had to wait outside until just the very moment as it started, the speaker came onto the platform. I had to sit at the back of the congregation, no one's allowed to talk to me. No one's allowed to look at me really. And it's very humiliating. And it's probably the hardest thing I've ever done is walking through a congregation full of people. There's over 100 people, people who I've grown up with and have known me since I was a baby. My family, my friends. No one's allowed to talk to me. No one even looked at me (Group A, lines 226-232)

She goes on to say:

So, I was there every single meeting, and it was very hard leaving each time on my own knowing that no one would talk to me. And this is like you're not there, people don't acknowledge that you're there (Group A, lines 235-237).

The accounts of the participants suggest that the path to make amends is challenging. The reinstatement process adds further emotional pain and humiliation to the individual. The shunned person, in order to be reinstated, must attend all the weekly meetings. This puts the individual in a situation where religious shunning is experienced and re-experienced, two days a week, week after week, for a lengthy period of time. Horace explains:

[The Elders] see the length of time that has passed [since the individual has been disfellowshipped]. If they consider it to be a prudent time. There's no

set limit, there's no set timeframe to how much time an individual has to be disfellowshipped, but usually it won't be, reinstatement won't be considered anything earlier than I think six months to a year before (Group B, lines 305-310).

During the meetings, none of the family and friends would look at the individual. The individual's presence is purposely ignored. Nobody would talk to the individual despite their efforts to be reinstated. Nor would the Elders address the person unless a formal request to meet them has been made. Horace clarifies:

If the individual says, "Look, I'm trying to come back I want to be a member of the congregation again". And then the Elders, anytime that person requests an audience with the members of their Judicial Committee that Judicial Committee needs to schedule it, that's the instruction, you know, to speak to them... Other than that, there will not be any other emotional or physical support (Group B, lines 203-208).

When the individual feels that the Elders might accept their reinstatement request, the person needs to write a letter. A Committee of Reinstatement will be formed, and the request will be evaluated. Based on the Elders' personal judgment, the reinstatement request can be rejected, as it was for Erin. She says:

I felt so beaten really. I just decided to stop going along. And I thought, you know, "You're not actually doing anything for me. You're making it too hard for me. I wanted to be a Jehovah's Witness in the first place, and you shunned me, you disfellowshipped me. I've tried to come back". Maybe I didn't have enough fighting in me, I don't know, I was on my own, living on my own. I didn't have anybody and I just, I had to put my own mental health before. And at that point, it was too much for me and I couldn't keep going along to the meetings with nobody talking to me. People were looking at me, like, you know, dirt on the bottom of their shoe. It was just too much, and I and I called my dad and I said, "I'm sorry, but I won't be coming anymore, it's too hard for me. And I can't try to come back anymore, I think I'll end up doing something stupid to myself"... "I can't, I can't cope with that anymore. I had to look up to my mental health first" (Group A, lines 265-277).

As Horace highlighted, no emotional or physical support is offered to the individual during this period. The reinstatement process could be a traumatic experience, especially if the individual lives alone and, as for Erin, has not yet built a meaningful social web outside the community. Moreover, a rejected reinstatement request may

further compromise the individual's sense of belonging and self-esteem, with adverse consequences for their well-being.

Life as a tightrope walker - In analysing the respondents' experiences, the authoritarian system implemented by the Jehovah's Witness leadership powerfully materialised. I was astonished. I found it fascinating, from an academic perspective, the way shunning changes, and is used to manipulate, the social dynamics within the community. I have never experienced shunning first-hand, and in this respect, I was embarking on a journey of learning from the participants' experiences. However, although I have not been shunned, I was a shunner, an unsubordinated one but still a shunner. I have never thought about myself as being a perpetrator maybe because fundamentally I never agreed with the practice of shunning. Perhaps this is because I was exposed to two opposing cultures. On the one hand, the Jehovah's Witness culture, with my father and my Jehovah's Witness friends, and on the other hand, the worldly culture, with my worldly mother, her family, my cousins and aunt, and my worldly friends. I learnt to integrate these two cultures in my life without consciously realising the implications of this integrative process. To me, my worldly friends and family members were as good as my Jehovah's Witness friends. Also, and I see in this the influence of my father and his non-judgmental attitude and openness, I have always felt a certain degree of unwise in judging others, and the decision to shun another person is a judgment.

I now see how my Jehovah's Witness identity moulded my behaviour. Vignoles (2006) argued that the salient identity within the identity structure is enacted through behaviour. Vignoles suggested that the more a given identity satisfies the identity motives and needs, the more an individual would enact that identity in public. Other

than the fulfilment of the need to belong, other important aspects that play a relevant role in whether an identity is displayed in public or not are social pressure and the need to avoid confrontation. When I was in public, surrounded by other Jehovah's Witnesses, I avoided voicing, or even ignored, my disagreement with shunning another member. This provided me with a sense of coherence within the socio-cultural context I was in, and to avoid getting into trouble for non-compliance. I was a shunner. However, in privacy, nothing stopped me, for example, from conversing with a shunned member.

At the same time, the analysis also suggest that shunning could have a twofold connotation for a Jehovah's Witness: that of being the perpetrator of shunning and, at times, also becoming the victim of this practice. By way of example and especially compelling was the narration of the PIMO and former Elders that seem to indicate that for some of them the life as a PIMO and former Elders is a life of compromise, negotiation, and finally reconciliation. Compromise and negotiation between what they were, their role as enablers of an authoritarian system, and their new position as faders, formers, or pretenders. They poise like tightrope walkers, suspended between two edges: affections and human relationships that are tied to what they came to despise, and the life that they want to live. Not yet free. Still entrapped or feeling blackmailed.

This is what can be evinced, for example, from the experience of Jordan, torn between the love for his Jehovah's Witness wife and eldest son and the love for his disfellowshipped son and a life free from the community's ties. Jordan who is in the middle, in precarious balance, trying to wisely plan his next step in order not to lose

either side of his family. Or the experience of Horace, a PIMO Elder, who is living a double life while planning a strategy to leave the community. Neither leaving nor staying is an easy road. They both have implications and consequences. Some of the participants' experiences resemble those of battered women facing the losses and gains that result from their decision to stay in or leave an abusive relationship (Estrellado and Loh, 2019). Perhaps, this demonstrates further the power of shunning. I have been myself a tightrope walker, but now I feel I have almost reached the side I want to be in.

According to the participants' accounts, religious shunning manifests itself as a systematic practice, the roots of which are deeply embedded in the cultural system which characterises the Jehovah's Witness community, a culture based on fear, guilt, and shame. The community in its entirety takes an active part in the practice of shunning. Family and friendships ties dissolve and the individual's presence, which once was acknowledged, is now dismissed. Common concepts across the participants' accounts are humiliation, emotional blackmail, being treated as invisible, being considered as dead, and injustice. These concepts are the starting point for understanding the impact that religious shunning may have on the individual's life, which will be considered in the next chapter.

5.3 Summary

This chapter revealed that the journey from being a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses to leaving the community is a complex experience, illustrating the reasons which led the individual to embrace the Jehovah's Witness creed in the first instance, followed by an overview of the actions which led respondents to be officially shunned.

Several key themes emerged from the data. Firstly, becoming a baptised member of the community is often not a matter of free choice, especially for those who were born in or raised into the religion. Rather, various factors concur in the final decision of being baptised. For example, an inherited belief system, a limited life experience and peer pressure are some aspects which direct the course of the path the young individual undertakes.

Secondly, the participants' contributions emphasised the different internal dynamics and processes involved in questioning the religious belief system and whether or not to leave the community. The need for moral integrity, the striving towards self-actualisation, and becoming a PIMO as a strategy to preserve social ties, are some examples.

A third theme is the support which is denied once the decision to shun has been made. Regardless of the individual's needs, circumstances, or efforts towards reinstatement, no emotional or practical support is offered. Moreover, regardless of the underlying reasons of 'sinning' or the degree of remorse, the end result is often the same and the individual is shunned.

The final theme which surfaced is the community's systems of belief and control, and the systematic indoctrination programme which acts in redefining the individual's perceptions in order to fit with the community's worldview and doctrines. The community's rules are deeply internalised, and members are expected to acquiesce to the community's expectations without questioning. The doctrine outweighs family ties and friendships, and the individual shows loyalty to the supreme authority,

shunning the unrepentant relative or friend despite the emotional impact on those shunned.

The following chapter will explore the impact which being shunned has on the individual's life. It will aim to answer the second Research Question which is: 'What is the impact of being shunned on the individual's life?'.

CHAPTER 6: LOSS AND DISILLUSIONMENT OF BEING SHUNNED AND ITS IMPACT?

This chapter will explore the loss and disillusionment of being shunned and its impact. This will assist in elucidating whether being shunned from the Jehovah's Witness community has an impact on the individual's life and the extent loss and disillusionment frame the shunning experience. Emerging from the data were two dominant themes, 'Losses due to shunning' and 'The rebuilding of self post-shunning', from which nine sub-themes have emerged. The Cognitive Map below displays these themes and sub-themes (Figure 6.1).

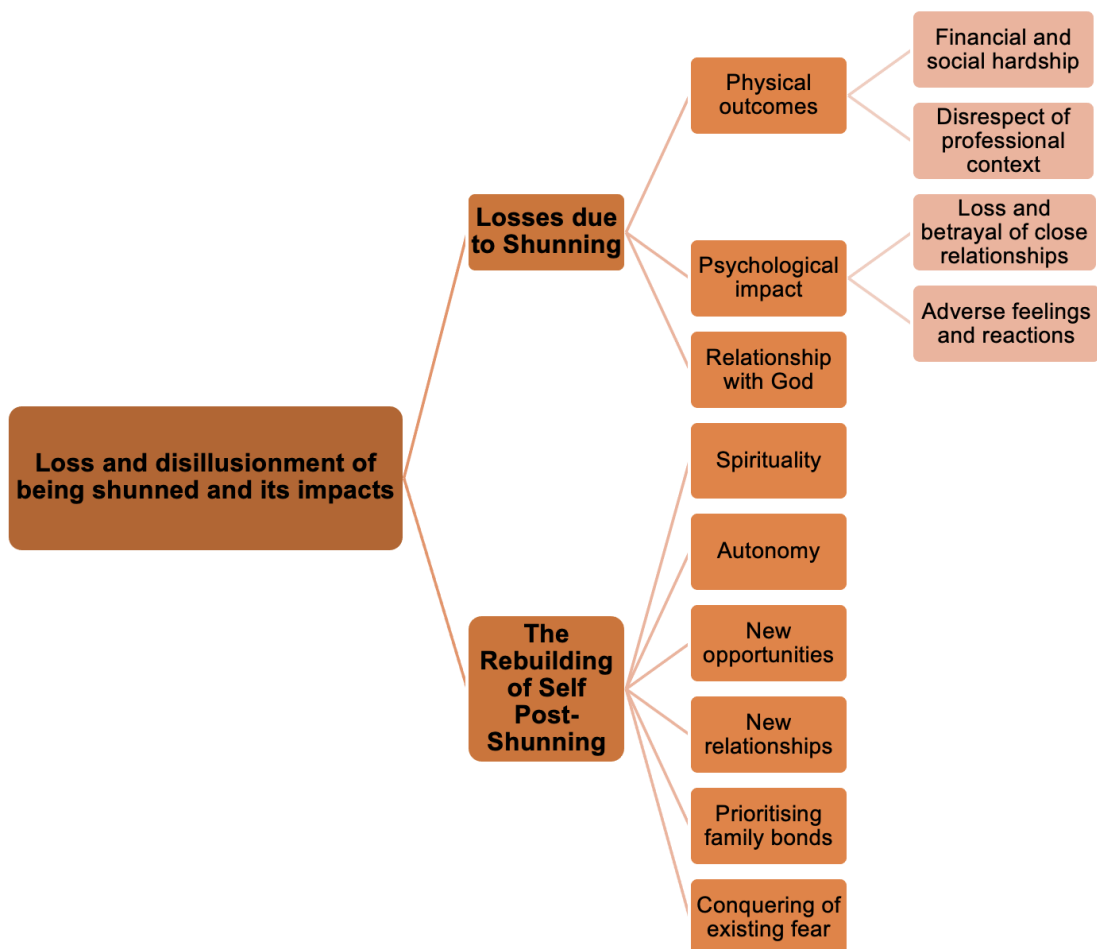


Figure 6.1 Cognitive Map of Themes and Sub-themes for Research Statement 2

Therefore, this chapter will first explore the losses which result in being shunned, and the impacts of this experience considering both the physical and the psychological impact. It will then be followed by an exploration of the positive outcomes which may characterise the experiences of those shunned from the Jehovah's Witness community.

6.1 Losses due to Shunning

'Losses due to shunning' is a predominant theme across the data. According to the respondents' narratives, religious shunning appears to be an experience of loss which has a serious impact on their lives. This experience by-and-large not only destroyed the social fabric of most of the participants, but often has impaired their physical and psychological well-being. In some cases, being shunned from the Jehovah's Witness community has also affected the individual's relationship with the supernatural entity, leading the individual to either consider God as cruel, or prompt them to convert to atheism.

The respondents provide various examples about the way being shunned was experienced as a challenging period in their life. The first theme of 'Losses due to shunning' encompasses not only the losses which result in terms of health outcomes but also daily challenges such as financial and social hardship, and the Jehovah's Witnesses' disrespect of professional context. This theme also explores the psychological impact of social segregation from friends and family, and its effects on one's relationship with God.

6.1.1 Physical Outcomes

According to the accounts of some participants, the experience of being shunned from the Jehovah's Witness community have had serious repercussions on their health conditions. The experience of Rose and Liam, a married couple in their sixties, provides an example. Rose says:

I obviously had about three mini strokes since coming out. So, it's been really hard... and I do get chest pains and other things. So yeah, it's hard, you know, as it had a big impact on our health. Big impact. After losing my hair, you know, I had problems, and obviously I'm diabetic as well, so that doesn't help, and Liam is diabetic and he's got problems and you know, it had a big impact on our health. A big impact (Group A, lines 481-488).

As Rose's testimony suggests, the physical outcomes experienced by the shunned individual may be severe. This is in line with previous research which has observed that emotional distress and cumulative load of trauma can elicit an adverse physical response (Husarewycz *et al.*, 2014). Being shunned by their daughters, coupled with not being permitted to see their grandchildren put a strain on Rose and Liam, weakening their already fragile health conditions.

It has been argued that "the most stressful experiences are typically those that strain or break social connections" (Hawkey and Cacioppo, 2004, p. 116). Although the reactivity to social and psychological stressors varies from one individual to another, the repeated exposure to negative interpersonal events may affect the immune function (Hawkey and Cacioppo, 2004; Berkman *et al.*, 2000). Carrie sees a possible connection between the process of coming out of the community and the subsequent deterioration of her health conditions. She explains:

I got incredibly ill during the process of coming out of the Witnesses. I got really, really bad flu... I was so ill I've never been ill like that before in my life. I was completely floored for about 6 weeks. I had no energy in my body. I've never had problems with my chest before. I couldn't breathe, I was

drowned... I did wonder at that time whether it's because I've been so emotionally drained from everything. But I was so worn out, not sleeping properly, you know, that maybe my body was more, had less resistance ... I was in a really bad state. It's like somebody had picked up and run out of any piece of energy out of my body. Even to get up to go to the loo I felt like I was collapsing. I was just in a mess. I had to ask somebody to come and look after the children after school. So, yeah. So, possibly, it has had physical ramifications to me from emotional trauma that I was feeling at the time (Group A, lines 662-684).

The account of Carrie underlines the role of subjectivity in the appraisal of an event as traumatic. The meaning Carrie assigned to the occurrence, the intensity of the reaction triggered by the experience, and the connection made between the health outcomes and the event, are all elements which led Carrie to consider the experience of shunning as being traumatic. Her health deteriorated, her immune function and sleep were affected. Moreover, it seems that for Carrie, who still suffers from chest and respiratory conditions 20 years after leaving the community, the exposure to the intense emotional stress has impaired the complete recovery of her immune functionality.

6.1.1.1 Financial and social hardship

Social support and assistance in terms of aid in kind, money or labour are pathways by which the individual may benefit from their membership status within a tight-knit community. The religious community could be a source of mutual help and information sharing about employment, business, housing, or health care (Bahk, 2002). Once shunned from the Jehovah's Witnesses, access to these resources is precluded to the individual, which may have a negative impact on their well-being. The financial ramifications are described by Tom. After being shunned when he was 21, Tom decided to move to a new city. He describes that period as follows:

And last, began six of the loneliest months of my life... I was living hand to mouth because I was new to [this city], knew nothing about it. So, more than half of my take-home was going on my rent. So, it's difficult to actually have any hoard, so skint for the first two years as well (Group A, lines 99; 102-104).

Alone, living in a costly city, with no financial support from his family, Tom struggled to support himself. As he highlights, he lived hand-to-mouth, unable to adequately provide for himself.

The challenges faced increase when the shunned individual is a child. Gilbert explains:

You would hear stories of children being isolated in their room, not being able to have dinner with the family. The plate is put on a tray and left outside their room, and they eat alone. You know, just total isolation inside the family (Group B, lines 318-320).

He further comments:

The [disfellowshipped] child is supposed to be an integral part of the family, but then they're not supposed to interact spiritually, but they're still supposed to be a part of the family. So, trying to unpack that is very difficult for a religion that says that their religion is their way of life (Group B, lines 314-317).

Toby adds:

There's a strong message which is "Oh the normal family relations continue", but then behind closed doors, if you continue those normal family relations, you're going to get in trouble (Group B, lines 347-349).

The accounts of Gilbert and Toby elucidate the reasons for the harsh treatment the family would adopt towards a shunned child. Firstly, the doctrinal component permeates every aspect of a Jehovah's Witness' life, becoming, as Gilbert commented, a way of life. Each life event is evaluated, and actions are performed according to the religious precepts, with no exceptions, not even for a child. Secondly, the threat for non-compliance weights on the way the individual will act. The message the leadership publicly presents, differs from the one that is privately endorsed, and a

family who does not shun their child would face serious repercussions. Thus, as Horace, a PIMO Elder, explains:

If it's a minor [the impact] can be even stronger depending on how strict their parents are, or how involved their parents are within the Jehovah's Witnesses... I've seen, I've heard of scenarios that the child is either kicked out of the home. And at 16, 15, it's difficult to, you know, to do something, even at 18... if they're studying or anything, to be kicked out and not have any other source of income. [The impact] can be significant (Group B, lines 242-348).

Emma was shunned when she was 16. She says:

It was so horrendous and had such a devastating effect on me... Absolutely devastating for me. To the extent where after about a year of managing alone, I think at 16 we can say one is still a child, when I was 17, I left the UK and went abroad (Group A, lines 60-66).

She then explains the way she sustained herself financially before leaving the UK:

At 16, when I left, I worked three jobs. I cleaned toilets in a disgusting pub in the morning from seven o'clock to nine o'clock. And then I went to waitress at lunchtime, and worked... illegally, because I was underage, [serving] drinks in the cocktail bar in the evening. And from there I progressed to doing various administrative jobs, etc. before I went abroad (Group A, lines 578-583).

The details provided by Gilbert, Toby, and Horace, and the personal experience of Emma offer further elements to evaluate the seriousness of the impact that being shunned has on the individual. As a consequence, the functional and emotional support from the community is withheld, and those shunned are often disowned by their families and either isolated within their own home or left without a roof over their head. Children can be shunned despite being minors. For those minors who are left without a place to live, the practical challenges escalate as they then face the difficulties of providing for themselves. Emma adds:

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 (Group A, lines 583-586).

This quote also highlights that for the minors that are shunned, a core factor that exacerbates the challenges they face in caring for themselves, is the lack of awareness in terms of legal rights and support available outside of the Jehovah's Witness community.

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

[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 (Group A, lines 1040-1050).

Luke too suffered financial hardship:

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 (Group A, lines 544-546).

These examples emphasise the tightly knit nature of the interactions which may characterise the Jehovah's Witnesses. These relationships often extend beyond sharing the same religious beliefs, to include business relationships. Nonetheless, the nature of these interactions and business connections is fragile, as such relationships are dependent on the membership status, and are terminated if shunned. Those who were less reliant were relieved when shunned. Gilbert describes the following:

I was appointed as an Elder just around the time that my daughter was born, just a little before. So, you know... I actually was glad that I didn't work for a Jehovah's Witness, or I didn't have Jehovah's Witnesses as my babysitter. We were able to take care of our daughter ourselves. And I worked for the federal government. So, I was not tied to the Witnesses (Group B, lines 206-211).

Gilbert was an Elder for 11 years. During this period, he was involved in all the judicial hearings as the chairman of the Judicial Committees. As a person who had a privileged insight into the shunning process, he was in a position to better understand and foresee the possible pitfalls of intertwining business relationships with or seeking hand-on help from other members. He adds:

This person comes into this meeting, they literally don't know what the outcome is going to be. And two hours later, everything in their life could have been broken. Everything... And listening to the person who's, who says, you know, "Okay, well, you know, I need to know if I'm going to get disfellowshipped because I need to... know who's going to be watching my son, that [the Witness babysitter] probably can't watch him anymore and I have to find a babysitter" (Group B, lines 199-206).

The account of Gilbert underlines that an individual who faces a judicial hearing experiences uncertainty and lack of control of their life. The individual attends the meeting without knowing the final outcome. They are at the mercy of the panel's judgement. When the decision to shun is finally made, the individual has to resolve the quandaries generated by the sudden change of their personal circumstances. Whilst a member of the community, the life of the individual is defined by a certain degree of stability and manageability. As the relationships among members of the community is akin to family, it may seem natural to rely on other fellow members for practical help, such as babysitting, or for business matters. Nonetheless, when shunned, the situation drastically changes. Moreover, as in the case depicted by Gilbert, shunning appears to have an indiscriminatory impact, affecting not only the shunned individual but possibly their children as well. This is confirmed by Samuel, who says:

I remember my wife was particularly hurt by the kids having some kind of party, and my children weren't invited. So, there was a sense when she knew that they were no longer including her children as part of the group (Group A, lines 413-416).

This demonstrates that whilst children may not be the direct target of shunning, they too may suffer the consequences of religious shunning as a collateral damage because of their kinship with the shunned member.

6.1.1.2 Disrespect of professional context

Shunning may also manifest itself into disrespecting the professional context. For instance, one participant highlights the Jehovah's Witnesses' reluctance to cooperate with authority when the authority is a former member of the community. Charles, who has been shunned, is a police officer. He is the only participant employed in a public capacity. He describes a particular incident when he was patrolling an area in search for a missing child and describes:

There had been a high-risk missing person, five-year-old child had gone missing. And so, I was a patrol officer... And then I saw the Presiding Overseer's wife... And I stopped the car... "Oh, you! You, go away. I don't want to talk to you". "Excuse me?" And I said, and this is where my power came in, my police power. I said, "You have to talk to me, or I'll arrest you, and you can talk to me at the station", "What for?" "Obstruction... of the law. I was just going to ask you, do you know, have you seen this child who's gone missing?" And she looked at the child. "Is that a no? Well, talk to me. Is that yes, or no?" ... "I've not seen that child No", I said, "have a good look please! Have some decency! Forget your religious cult". And I've perhaps shouldn't have said that... I said "forget your religious cult for a minute. And just think of this five-year-old child who has gone missing". "No, I'm not seeing him, now go away" (Group A, lines 1657-1668).

This episode is revealing in terms of the possible mechanisms triggered when a member has to deal with a shunned person. The woman did not refuse to interact with Charles the police officer. Rather, she refused to interact with Charles who is shunned and considered an apostate. Stuck in her religious world and its rules, she was not

able to appropriately evaluate the context and to discern between religious and secular circumstances. This seems to be because, for a Jehovah's Witness, there is no such a distinction, and there is a lack of ability to separate the two. She was unwilling to cooperate with the designated authority possibly because all she could see was Charles' betrayal against the community and the danger in talking with an apostate, rather than the failure to assist a police officer. Also, as Charles points out, she was the wife of the Presiding Overseer. Men in a position of authority within the community together with their wives are in the limelight. Being seen by other members of the community talking to a shunned person, and worst to an apostate, could put their status and reputation at risk.

Charles was involved in other episodes where some of his Jehovah's Witness former friends refused to follow his instructions whilst on duty because of the shunning policy. In one of these occasions, another Jehovah's Witness at first refused to stop the car and then to talk to him. Charles says:

[I asked] "Do you know why I stopped you?" And he would not answer. I said, "forget the fact that I'm an ex-Jehovah Witness, I'm asking you as a police officer, why have I stopped you?" ... "I tried to ask you to wind your window down [while the traffic light was red] but you, all you had was your shunning". "This says 'police' here [pointing at the badge]. You know, you should be able to respect that. You don't have to respect me but at least respect me that I'm a police officer, and if I'm going to talk to you, I'm going to talk to you for police matters not interested in talking to you about religion; there's a time and a place for that" (Group A, lines 1699-1725).

As these episodes emphasise, an all-or-nothing mindset seems to characterise the Jehovah's Witness community, which manifests itself in disrespect for the professional context. Regardless of the official role of the person they are dealing with, there is no compromise available for a shunned person. Nonetheless, this attitude has serious implications. Charles comments:

I was a victim during those incidents. [Although] I had 'Police' on my chest or on my cap, I was still the victim. And the repercussions of their actions can go far-reaching because not only annoyed me, but it made me act in a way that I didn't really want to act because.... I had to go down the police route of, you know, section 28, "If you are purposely not assisting me with my inquiries, you are committing an offence" (Group A, lines 1819-1838).

The concept of vulnerability emerges. Charles only used the term 'victim' in this context. When he describes the way he responded to other episodes of shunning, a sense of empowerment and defiant attitude pervade his narration. Nonetheless, when he has faced shunning whilst on duty, he describes feelings of victimhood. It appears that Charles is able to manage instances of shunning in his day-to-day life. Nonetheless, when facing similar experiences whilst he is wearing the police uniform, it places him in a position of vulnerability as it seems that the individual least expects to be shunned in these circumstances. The police uniform represents the state authority; it conveys the power and authority of the person wearing it, and it demands respect regardless the religious status of the officer. It appears that the Jehovah's Witnesses' behaviour symbolically deprives the individual of such authority and of the psychological protection granted by wearing a uniform, subjecting the individual to detriment and victimisation which had a profound impact on Charles. In order to reassert his position of authority, he must avail himself of the power he has as a police officer, imposing his status and using the threat of the law. Only after being threatened, the Jehovah's Witnesses agree to cooperate.

Although this attitude is possibly reserved for only those civil servants who have been shunned, this translates nonetheless into a lack of respect for what the shunned individual represents. It seems that the end result of decontextualising the circumstance is that the Jehovah's Witness are putting their religious rules above the law. Therefore, although the sub-theme 'Disrespect of professional context' emerges

only from Charles' accounts because of his insider knowledge, these incidents shed further light not only on the impact that religious shunning has on the life of the individual but also on its wider ramifications which result in disrespecting the professional context.

6.1.2 Psychological Impact

The impact that being shunned has on the person's life extends beyond the physical outcomes and the practical challenges. A theme across the respondents' accounts is the psychological impact of their family and friends refusing to maintain contact with them.

6.1.2.1 Loss and betrayal of close relationships

The sub-theme 'Loss and betrayal of close relationships' evidences the substantial adverse impact the loss of family and friends has on the individual's psychological well-being. Some of the participants experienced being shunned by their close relationships as a betrayal. Others reported self-esteem issues or depression. Some experienced loneliness, anger and ambiguous loss. Participants also reported to have experienced suicidal thoughts when shunned by family and friends.

Some of the respondents felt betrayed by their family and friends because of the denied opportunity to defend themselves and to explain the motivation which 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, Group A, lines 554-561).

Although the consequences of being shunned are known to the individual, there is a component of shock and abruptness when the shunned individual finally realises that the doctrine takes precedence over the individual. The individual feels hurt by betrayal when the meaningful people in their life do not value their relationship as they thought.

The respondents' accounts highlight further aspects of the psychological impact which may characterise the experience of being shunned by one's own family. By way of an example, Oliver says:

I don't feel like I'm a bad person, you know, I try and be a nice person, I try to treat people nicely, but it feels like been treated like you've done something wrong, and you are a bad person... And so, it did cause quite a lot of negative, have negative impact on my self-esteem, quite a lot, on my confidence and it took quite a lot of time, quite a lot of effort to change that, you know, and to kind of become functional again. Because it makes you feel quite worthless especially when it's your own family and your parents that treat you that way. I put a lot of work ... and I've done it successfully but it still every so often does bother me.... I do often dream about my parents. I don't speak to them but every so often I dream about them. I was very upset because yeah because they aren't around... It's like I'm dead to them now (Group A, lines 407-422).

This account underlines the impact on self-esteem as a consequence of being rejected and shunned by the family. 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, being that 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 vulnerable to rejection from family (Scharp and Hall, 2017). Therefore, poor family functioning has

been associated to an impairment of self-esteem and self-concept, as it seems to be the case for Oliver (Shi *et al.*, 2017).

Oliver's account also evidences the experience of ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999). Oliver's parents refuse to have any contact with him. He is dead to them. The metaphor of death has a twofold interpretation. On the one hand, the individual is considered as dead and treated accordingly by their family. On the other hand, the individual may experience processing the loss of family and friends as a grief. For example, Erin says:

I've accepted that my life and [my parents'] life isn't ever going to be one. I cannot have them in my life unless I go back to be a Jehovah's Witness. So, I've accepted that, and I've grieved that loss (Group A, lines 368-370).

The grieving process over the lost family and friends is ambiguous. This is because family and friends, although still alive, refuse to be part of the individual's life. However, as the account of Oliver highlights, despite the physical absence of his parents, their psychological presence remains vivid in the individual's subconsciousness, and the individual may experience the emotional loss as lacking a clear closure which prevents resolution. At the same time, the loss experienced is not socially shared nor recognised, and the individual has to deal with such an occurrence alone, which may intensify the emotional dysregulation and sufferance (Gitterman and Knight, 2019).

The accounts of Emma, Liza, Tom, and Angie add further depth to the impact of being rejected by family and friends on self-esteem and self-concept. For example, Emma explains her feelings when she was shunned as a teenager:

I genuinely thought it was my fault. I was a bad person, a terrible evil person who deserved to die (Group A, lines 586-587).

Liza says:

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 (Group A, lines 655-664).

Angie also says:

Well, it makes you feel as if you are not good, makes you feel worthless... I felt as if I let everyone down (Group A, lines 294; 298).

The extent to which self-esteem and self-concept have been shaped by the community's teachings becomes blatant once the individual is shunned. Worthlessness, feeling like a grounded child, or feeling that death is a deserved epilogue for their behaviour, are some elements which emerge from the respondents' accounts, and which underline the deep psychological impact of religious shunning on the individual's life. Tom adds:

I continued to be plagued by nightmares about Armageddon, continued to be convinced that Jehovah was going to find a way of killing me. And I went to see a clinical psychologist, because I was convinced that I was going to get AIDS... I became convinced that that's how God was going to get me (Group A, lines 107-114).

As the account of Tom suggests, despite being shunned, the group's cultural heritage seems to be deeply embedded in the individual. The group's beliefs, the perspectives about what is right and wrong, and the punishment/reward concept have become an integral part of the individual's mindset, moulding their perception and behaviour.

Toby, a former Elder, develops this point further by saying:

Armageddon is exactly what the word implies: a global disruptive war that wipes a whole bunch of people out. If you were disfellowshipped when Armageddon comes, you will be done, destroyed. You won't have a chance

of resurrection. So, essentially the person that's disfellowshipped is probably in a constant state of panic about that, especially if they're thoroughly indoctrinated... So that would create an incredible amount of stress in the life of a disfellowshipped person who not only has lost their entire social structure, but now is afraid that they're going to be eternally destroyed and not get to the utopian fantasy that they've been pursuing (Group B, lines 203-212).

Shunning is an unsettling experience. This is because the shunned individual endures both an external and an internal judgement. Firstly, the behaviour of the individual is judged negatively by the community as the individual has fallen short of the expected standards. Over and above this, the person self appraises themselves according to the criteria set by the community. As Oberg (1960) stated, the culture the individual learns, becomes a value according to which the world and the self is evaluated. As a result, the individual devalues themselves, in the same way the community does. Therefore, the healing process which involves a self-concept redefinition, may take a long time, as Jacob emphasises:

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 (Group A, lines 1181-1188).

6.1.2.2 Adverse feelings and reactions

The participants of this research report having experienced adverse feelings of anger, hurt, anxiety, depression, and suicidal thinking. For example, Charles says:

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 (Group A, lines 1621-1623).

As Charles points out, 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. For example, Angie was shunned because of her issues with alcohol. Without social support except for some new acquaintances from the charity Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), she says:

[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. And basically, at that time I was left, kind of, with no support, other than these friends [from the AA] that had only known a matter of a few weeks... [I was] very depressed (Group A, lines 157; 159-163; 166).

She then follows by saying:

I used to think, "Well, what's the point in living?" So, suicidal, basically (Group A, lines 166-167).

Once a member is shunned, they are deprived of the emotional support that the family and friends can provide, and the individual starts a solitary and challenging path.

Dylan, discussing the available support once shunned, says:

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 (Group A, lines 427-429).

As Dylan underlines, the social network is drastically affected once the individual is shunned. According to Angie's perspective, the emotional and practical support provided by one's own family enhances the meaning of life. Once the individual is shunned, they are divested high levels of support and therefore the meaning of life is questioned. Being shunned led Angie to think "*Well, what's the point in living?*". Losing meaning in life as a consequence of losing the social contour is at times so overwhelming that taking one's own life appears to be a plausible solution (Chen *et al.*, 2020; Steele *et al.*, 2014).

Nate, a former Elder, experienced the disruptive effect of shunning first-hand. While he was still a firm believer and an Elder, he was officially shunned. He then started the reinstatement process to re-enter the community. He explains:

Honestly, there were times when I was going through that process that I wanted to commit suicide. It's not normal to have people who treat you as though you don't exist... I just went through many, many sorts of mental issues as a result of it. And I, I believe this is what helped me to wake up from the entire religion. It's a very disruptive practice (Group B, lines 26-28; 36-38).

Nate's account helps to identify a possible dynamic elicited by being shunned, namely the individual attempts to be reaccepted by the community by starting the reinstatement process. It seems that the individual's reaction to shunning prompts their desire to secure the needs that have been threatened, for example by regaining their sense of belonging to the group (Williams and Sommer, 1997). Therefore, religious shunning appears to be an effective tool used to promote normative behaviour by eliciting mechanisms of reparation, such as seeking reinstatement, in order to remedy the loss of the groups' membership. At the same time, the experience of being treated as a non-existent person seems to compromise the individual's emotional well-being. This is the case of Nate, who considered suicide to alleviate the emotional pain.

The experience of Robert provides 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. He says:

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 (Group A, lines 41-51).

This quote suggests that as the consequence of his research process, Rob experienced a crisis which shook his certainties and beliefs and led him to leave the community. Kuhn (1962) argued that the trusted assumptions the individual holds, which he termed paradigms or conceptual worldviews, define their thoughts and perspectives. For a Jehovah's Witness the religious teachings are these paradigms. They provide the individual with a frame of reference to navigate life. Losing the structure which has given meaning to one's own life, is destabilising:

I have to say that the biggest impact in my life was the time between when I stopped going to the Kingdom Hall, told my wife and my children that it was over for me, but I didn't know what to do, and I didn't know where to go. I didn't know what to believe (Rob, Group A, lines 578-581).

The sub-theme of feeling lost as the consequence of losing the points of reference provided by the community's teachings emerges from the participants' accounts. By leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses and its culture, the individual leaves behind a way of living and understanding themselves and the world, and they may experience the inner turmoil caused by facing the unknown. The old certitudes have collapsed, and the individual's future appears to be uncertain. This crisis is faced alone since the support of family and friends is denied because the individual has been shunned. The transition from the old paradigm to a new one is a process which implies a drastic reorientation of perspective. When the individuals successfully transit from the old framework to a new one, they are the authors of a 'revolution' (Kuhn, 1962). However, the period in between the collapse of the old and the structuring of the new is often characterised by the absence of clear points of reference. Rob follows:

And I confess that, yeah, there was sometimes then, that I had suicidal thoughts. I live 100 metres from a very large river, and it has rapids, it has white waters, in the city limits, and a few times I went there, and I thought, you know, "If I jump in here, especially in winter, you know, I won't last very long in that icy cold water. And you know, maybe it'd be a good way to go" (Group A, lines 581-586).

The accounts of some respondents suggest that the experience of feeling lost, alone, and uncertain about the future may be so frightening and overpowering that the individual may consider ending their own life.

Religious shunning may be such a traumatic experience to such an extent that suicidal thoughts are acted upon. For example, Gaby says:

I am annoyed with what [the community has] done to people, and I've seen lots of lies I, I had a friend who committed suicide as well. So, I do know how many lives they've ruined by what they're doing (Group A, lines 521-523).

There are two aspects which the account of Gaby points out. Firstly, there is a component of annoyance and resentment towards the community in witnessing the harm caused by religious shunning. Therefore, shunning, besides being a personal trauma, is also a collective trauma, the impact of which reverberates and is amplified through the shunning experiences of other former members. Secondly, shunning appears to affect the individual at different levels, having a direct and an indirect impact. The individual who is the primary target of the discipline, may suffer from various physical and emotional consequences, as evidenced so far. Also, shunning could be such an unbearable experience to the point of compelling the individual to adopt drastic measures to sooth the pain, such as committing suicide. Nonetheless, shunning can also have an indirect effect on the individual, who can be affected by the impact that shunning has on others. Gaby lost a friend because shunning pushed this person to end their life. This suggests that shunning does not only deprive the individual of the connections within the community, but it may also result in the severing of the friendships the individual has created among the community of former Jehovah's Witnesses.

As the participants' accounts suggest, being shunned can push the individual to the limit. Dylan says:

I mean, being disfellowshipped and coming out of the Witnesses is hard on anybody, and it's hard mentally, and you have to be prepared. You're going to go into some really dark, dark places in your mind, because there's a whole process. You need to find the mental strength to get through it (Group A, lines 511-514).

The traumatic nature of being shunned is even experienced by minors. Maggie says:

They disfellowship 12-year-old children. They've just done that. The child committed suicide (Group A, lines 182-183).

Despite the harshness of the treatment which may push an adult to take their own life, shunning is equally imposed on children, with the results that Maggie described.

Although only some of those shunned consider adopting drastic solutions to soothe the emotional sufferance, the effects of shunning are nonetheless long lasting. For example, being shunned by his two Jehovah's Witness children has had an enduring effect on Robert, who had disassociated 20 years ago. He explains:

[Shaky voice, he then starts to cry] Some parts of this are upsetting to me even now (Group A, lines 548-549).

Emma also says:

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 (Group A, lines 430-432).

Despite the time that has lapsed since the shunning announcement, for some participants the emotional pain is still intense. This is possibly because of the difficulty in making sense of the shunning occurrence and to processing their emotions.

6.1.3 Relationship with God

Another sub-theme which the data highlight is the impact that shunning has on the relationship with God. The harsh treatment the individual receives as the consequence of shunning, and the realisation that the foundation of their beliefs is deceptive and manipulative, may compromise their relationship with God. For example, Charles says:

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 (Group A, lines 958-960; 968-969).

Although some individuals do not reject God completely, after the experience of leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses, their relationship with the 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, Group A, lines 491-494).

Maggie describes the way her beliefs about God changed after being shunned. She says:

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 Witness Bible]. And I started reading it. After reading Ray Franz' [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 (Group A, lines 226-233).

As a Jehovah's Witness, God is believed to play a fundamental role in one's own life. The relationship with God is taught to be as deep and as real as the one a child can have with a loving father, and all the individual's efforts are channelled to build, improve, and maintain a meaningful relationship with the deity. However, religious

shunning challenges the concept of being a loving discipline from God. Jordan, a former Elder, evidences the existing dissonance the individual perceives between the shunning practice and the concept of love. He says:

I couldn't connect how God is supposed to be Love, we're supposed to be such a loving organisation, we're supposed to be caretakers of that love... and to do something that's so against that. It's just, I couldn't justify [it], I couldn't bring the two together (Group B, lines 298-301).

The individual's inability to reconcile the act of severing friendships and family ties as a way to show love, together with the feeling of being failed by God, may lead the individual's relationship with God to fracture, at times beyond repair.

Shunning as an experience of loss - From the analysis, it emerged that shunning is an experience of loss. Loss that can be physical, emotional, or both. As the narratives of the respondents highlighted, shunning appears to be more than a disciplinary practice. It is a way of life, deeply ingrained in the community's culture. Yet, shunning may carry an ambivalent connotation: shunning as a versatile tool used to protect or to punish. Shunning has different facets and, even if an individual is not officially shunned, shunning may be subtly used as 'a personal choice' to show disdain, to marginalise, to underline that the individual is an inconvenient presence. Furthermore, for the individual the personal choice of the other members may lead to a slow death (social and at times also physical) (Ransom *et al.*, 2021).

I remember Peter*, seated, surrounded by piles of books, looking for answers. And then an empty chair. A loss due to shunning. I share the respondents' feelings of resentment and pain because, although I haven't experienced shunning first-hand, I have experienced the loss due to shunning. The pain of loss that I had

experienced was echoed in what the participants reported to have experienced. Yet, what was most significant, as Gaby evidenced, is the severe impact of shunning, which does not only directly affect those who have been shunned but may also have an indirect effect by depriving the individual of friends or loved ones because being shunned pushed them to end their life.

*Pseudonym

In summary, this section revealed that the effects of being shunned are powerful and destructive. This practice not only compromises the individual's physical well-being but also has negative impacts on the emotional and spiritual well-being of the shunned person. This section highlighted the weakening of one's own health conditions, and the development of adverse emotional responses, such as anger and feelings of hurt, the negative impact on self-esteem, as well as suicidal ideation. Furthermore, when the individual is shunned, they have to face daily challenges such as financial and social hardship, or disrespect within the professional context. The adverse impacts take various manifestations and at times have severe and long-lasting effects.

6.2 The Rebuilding of Self Post-Shunning

Religious shunning appears to be a multi-faceted experience. Whilst the participants report negative physical and emotional impacts of shunning, they also report constructive outcomes as a result of leaving the community. 'The rebuilding of self post-shunning' is the second dominant theme which surfaces from the respondents' accounts. From this main theme, six sub-themes have been identified. For instance, the respondents' accounts evidence the 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.

6.2.1 Spirituality

Unlike other respondents who had lost their connection with God, for some former Jehovah's Witnesses, shunning did not compromise their relationship with God nor shake their faith. For them believing in God and their faith transcended being a member of a religious denomination. For example, Samuel says:

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 (Group A, lines 180-186).

It appears that for some respondents, the faith in God and religious affiliation are mutually exclusive. Being shunned has not affected their relationship with God. Their faith in God is not dependant on the religious denomination they belong to. Rather, religious affiliation is seen as a pathway which may lead to God, and as soon as they realised that the Jehovah's Witness community was not the right place to find God, they left the community, continuing their quest for God. The distinction between personal faith and church attendance is shared by Eric too, who says:

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 (Group A, lines 874-877).

The journey from leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses to joining a new religious denomination seems to be a journey of rediscovery of God, a God who is not vengeful or punishing, but who is loving and compassionate. For instance, Rob says:

Well, I value that I know, I have always known that there is a God. Now I know that He really loves me. He's opened the way of really knowing Him. And knowing Him as a loving God. Another God is just waiting to destroy millions of people, including me if I slip up. No, I worship a God that runs after me with mercy. And I value all the people that I worship with him now at my church, who love God the same way as I do (Group A, lines 666-671).

A further theme which emerges is that joining a religious denomination is now a personal choice compared to their previous experience. For instance, Grace became a baptised Jehovah's Witness, after her parents imposed such a decision on her and her siblings. When she left the community, the search for God led Grace and her husband to embrace the Christian faith. 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 (Group A, lines 879-881).

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 decision to join and become a baptised member of a new religious community is willingly made.

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

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 the existence of God (Group A, lines 480-483).

Although Oliver does not believe in the existence of a supernatural entity, leaving the community has allowed him to nurture his sense of spirituality through meditation and yoga, two activities which are discouraged by the Jehovah's Witnesses. He relates:

But in terms of spirituality, like I, I think I would, 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 (Group A, lines 484-490).

Once the individual leaves the community, they are no longer compelled to simulate other's feelings nor 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.

6.2.2 Autonomy

Although being shunned by their family and friends is often processed as a traumatic and painful experience, the individual also starts to appreciate the various facets of freedom. After many years entrapped in a controlling relationship, the individual enjoys being able to be in charge of their own decisions, and the concept of regained freedom spans across almost all the participants' accounts. The participants are cognisant of their renewed levels of autonomy:

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, Group A, lines 551-552).

Carrie provides a further example. She says:

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" (Group A, lines 690-696).

Charles experienced a similar scenario. On one occasion, he took his children to school, and he noticed one of his Jehovah's Witness former friends carelessly driving towards the school's main gate and then parking the car. Charles approached the person, advising them to drive slower especially in the proximity of a school. He explains the Jehovah's Witness reaction:

And she had the arrogance to tell me, "Would you stop talking to me? You're not allowed to talk to me". And I stopped and I said, "I'm not allowed to talk to you?! I think you'll find that I'm allowed to talk to whoever I want. You're not allowed to talk to who you want. You're not allowed to talk to me", and she just walked off (Group A, lines 1639-1642).

The episodes suggest that the 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 to acknowledge their state of unfreedom. This would contradict with what they believe, namely that *the Truth*, according to the community, makes people free. Therefore, feelings or thoughts that cannot be accepted because they would deeply shake the individual's certainties or beliefs, are dealt with by placing them outside the self, and attributed to another person (Freud, 1936). Thus, as it emerges from the accounts of the respondents, the first step in reclaiming freedom involves a retrospective appraisal of the individual's life when in the community compared to their present life. What was previously perceived subconsciously or ignored has to emerge at a conscious level in order for the individual

to realise that they were not free and that now they are no longer subjected to a system of control and influence. This is highlighted by Noah who, discussing the aspects he values the most at the present time, says:

Personal freedom. 100%. I see I'd have no personal freedom as Jehovah's Witness. I don't think I realised that, and I don't think any of the Jehovah's Witness realises that until they're no longer a part of it (Group A, lines 295-297).

Emma also points out the following:

I felt very liberated. I felt that I could actually finally, at this point I was 30 years old, finally see the absolute rubbish I've been brainwashed with since birth for what it was. This entire self-invented hierarchy, the self-imposed authority of people who had absolutely no right to tell me how to live my life or judge what I did with it (Group A, lines 420-424).

The individual fully grasps the controlling nature of the Jehovah's Witness structure with all its tight boundaries only after leaving the community, and finally is able to comprehend and appreciate freedom. This is clarified by Elliot, who says:

And all that time away from all of that programming... And that's why they want you at the meetings all the time to keep up the programming. Because if you get away from that programming, then you start thinking for yourself more... And so, my, my thinking process was changing (Group B, lines 545-553).

Whilst being a member of the community, the individual undergoes a censorship of their thoughts. The individual's doubts, questions and opinions are considered poisonous, to the point that the individual learns to constrain and condemn self-thinking and critical thought (Foucault, 1995). This leads the individual to accept the leadership's teaching at face value. "There is no motivation towards reflection, criticism and experimentation" (Bauman, 2001, p. 11). Once the individual is shunned, they learn or regain the ability to think critically. For example, Liza says:

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, Group A, lines 719-725).

Erin adds:

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 (Group A, lines 456-459).

A consequence of thoughts censorship is that the individual is silenced, deprived of their voice:

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 (Group A, lines 502-504).

A parallel can be drawn between the experiences of some respondents 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 to coerce and control their victim. For instance, the perpetrator to reassert their power and control can punish the victim for expressing their needs and wishes (Estrellado and Loh, 2019). Thus, often battered women metaphorically lose their voices along with their autonomy as they learn to restrain themselves from vocalising their thoughts or their wants, fearing punishment. When the victim frees themselves from the abusive partner, they regain access to their silenced voices, in the same way as the individual who leaves the Jehovah's Witnesses who is finally able to express themselves unconstrained.

6.2.3 New Opportunities

Another aspect of freedom the individuals experience after leaving the community is that they are now in a position to redefine and redirect their priorities. For example, enrolling in Higher Education is precluded to the majority of the young Jehovah's

Witnesses. This is because Higher Education is officially presented as a distraction to more important activities and goals, as defined by the community leadership. The consequences are described by the participants:

Let's face it. I think the Watchtower built up a generation of window cleaners. Did you hear of any doctors that are Jehovah's Witnesses? ... because they always encouraged you not to do further education... it is in very, very rare cases that there is somebody of a vocational substance, like, a barrister or a doctor (Charles, Group A, lines 1036-1038; 1047-1051).

Many young members, despite craving for knowledge, avoid pursuing an educational pathway. Nonetheless, once the individual is shunned, being free from the many rules imposed on them by a controlling leadership, regains a sense of power over their life and may decide to embark on a degree in Higher Education:

And being able to do nursing now is the most wonderful thing I found, never found more pleasure in caring for other people. And actually, that was something that was really frowned upon was Higher Education (Erin, Group A, lines 462-465).

The freedom a shunned individual may experience is also linked to the concept of being able to enjoy all those activities and festivities which are condemned by the community, such as celebrating Christmas or birthdays, without retribution. This is highlighted by what Liam says:

And we can't get disfellowshipped anymore now for doing that (Group A, line 641).

Although the price of the punishment may be high in terms of losses, religious shunning also represents the emancipation of the individual from the leadership's tight hold. The individual no longer abides by the community's rules and, consequently, there is no retribution.

6.2.4 New Relationships

When the individual loses the membership status, friendships within the community come to an abrupt end. However, the individual gains or regains the freedom of choosing their friends without any imposition or restriction. For example, Eric explains:

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 (Group A, lines 838-843).

The process of making new connections and establishing new relationships is a process of discovery and unexpected outcomes. For example, 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 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 (Group A, lines 187-193).

He then follows:

God, 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 (Group A, lines 198-199; 758-759).

As Tom comments, people outside the community intrigue him. After years spent in an environment characterised by a standardised and narrow mentality and by people with no academic achievements, the new social environment is perceived as being stimulating. The account of Tom underlines 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 be surrounded by. From submissively accepting the pool of limited and dull connections within the community, when the individual is shunned, they become actively engaged in selecting as friends those individuals who present the desired characteristics.

Carrie also says:

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 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 (Group A, lines 697-708).

The individual realises that the *worldly people*, so negatively depicted by the community leadership and for this reason avoided and feared, are actually interesting and positive people. The participants' accounts underline the extent to which shunning, rejection and avoidance are behaviours which mark the whole existence of any Jehovah's Witness. The individual, before experiencing shunning first-hand, was actively engaged in avoiding the *worldly people*. The out-group cannot be physically removed; therefore, the non-members are kept at arm's length. When the individual is shunned, they experience an opening towards the external. The shunned individual starts to appreciate concepts such as individuality and diversity and to reject the stereotyped labels the community adamantly endorses. Samuel, explaining the aspects that he valued when he joined the Christian faith after leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses, 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 (Group A, lines 614-617).

This account is enlightening in terms of the manipulative function that language might have (Akopova, 2013). Language manipulation within a religious context becomes a means through which categorisation and ingroup/outgroup bias are reinforced and expressed (Porter *et al.* 2016). Language shapes the audience's perception about their social identity and group membership. Language "contributes to the perpetration of stereotyping and prejudice" (ibid, p. 100). Categories and labels, such as *worldly people* vs. *Jehovah's Witnesses*, exert a strong and enduring influence on perception and judgement (Feroni and Rothbart, 2013). As Rosenhan (1973) argued, labels are 'sticky' and once an individual or a group has been labelled, it is difficult to remove the tag. Therefore, the de-categorisation process may be challenging especially if the labels are well-rooted in the individual, as for many Jehovah's Witnesses. However, Samuel's quote suggests that a positive attitudinal shift may be elicited by the exposure to a new environment, helping the individual to free their mind from prejudice and to see the beauty of the new community.

6.2.5 Prioritising Family Bonds

As noted in the previous chapter (Chapter 5), within the Jehovah's Witness community, the life of the members is micromanaged in order to keep them preoccupied and highly involved. When the individual is shunned, they are no longer compelled to adhere to the exhausting and time-consuming routine imposed by the community. The individual 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, Group A, lines 436-439).

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, Group A, lines 865-870; 879-880).

For the Jehovah's Witnesses, attending the weekly meetings and engaging in the community's activities are a priority, often at the expense of the family. When the respondents left the community, they could finally enjoy their families fully. For example, their family life benefited since 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 determines a severing of the family ties, nonetheless, at times, it may act as a catalyst for others to leave the community. Carrie says:

My mum and dad grew up seven of their children as Witnesses. Now five of them are Christians (Group A, lines 552-553).

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 the account of Carrie 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 an open conversation with her. This suggests that the reaction to shunning is not always predetermined and that, on occasion, there may be variation to the typical response. This can be evidenced from what Jordan, a former Elder, narrates:

My disfellowshipped son, he wanted to talk to me. And I wasn't really supposed to talk to him... So, I was kind of, at first, I was very standoffish, and I didn't want to hear him. I'm not sure exactly why or what, what prompted it, but I told him that I would hear him out. I owed him that. He can speak and present to me his side of things. I wasn't just going to shun him and say, "I don't care what you do". You found some things out? Share with me. Tell me what you learned. And then, you know, I thought for sure I was gonna say, "Ah! that's a bunch of malarkeys. That's a bunch of baloney" ... [But] it was just eye-opening to see so many falls within so many things that were wrong that I just took for granted before that (Group B, lines 305-320).

Shunning a close person is such a drastic and life-changing decision for both the parties involved, that at times the Jehovah's Witness may realise that this step cannot be taken lightly. However, there are strong, internal and external factors which concur in bolstering the individual's reluctance to interact with a shunned person. The threat of the punishment and the losses, the internalised belief system, and the assumption that shunning will benefit the individual are all factors which influence the members' behaviour. Thus, when a Jehovah's Witness finally decides to listen to a shunned person, this represents by itself a great achievement. This suggests that the individual is experiencing a redefinition of their priorities. It seems that something in the disposition of the individual is changing, since such a decision defies what is deeply rooted and believed. Therefore, although the decision to listen to the shunned person may take time to be processed and actualised, it could be the first step towards a further overture which may have unexpected outcomes. Listening to their shunned relatives can be not only eye-opening but also allow family and friends to prioritise affective bonds over the shunning practice.

6.2.6 Conquering of Existing Fear

One of the common themes which permeates across the data is the conquering of fear which 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 which result from fear are a key way in which the abuse is perpetrated (Wiener, 2017). Although recovery from chronic fear which characterises abusive relationships may be a long challenging process, the individual experiences a sense of inner-strength and pride in creating change (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, Group A, lines 217-223).

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, Group A, lines 332-335).

As the accounts of the participants emphasise, fear characterises the life of the members of the community. More than a positive and uplifting belief system, the Jehovah's Witness ideology appears to subjugate members through concepts such as punishment, threat, guilt, terror, and unattainable expectations. After being shunned, the individual emancipates themselves from the rigid parameters which act in devaluing the members of the community. The individual experiences the effects of a positive reframing of their own life. The individual finally realises that their self-concept and their life does not have to be defined by others' expectations. Rather, the

individual undergoes a positive reappraisal and starts to appreciate themselves and their new life.

The emancipation from fear and from the community's belief system does not benefit only the individual who has been shunned, but also subsequent generations. Maggie then adds:

I have now my two daughters that are free, not without cost, not without price, but they're free and my grandson is free... He will never have that pain and demons and terror put into his sweet little head. And I rejoice. That's my future... What I value is my grandson never having to have what I had. He is free. He's got a whole life. And it's, it's wonderful (Group A, lines 105-109; 347-348).

As Maggie explained, her two daughters and her grandson are free from the grasp of the community because they are no longer part of the Jehovah's Witnesses, and for her, the gained liberty outweighs the loss incurred.

Free from fearing God's punishment, the individual starts to appreciate the present moment, to enjoy life fully, having no regrets, and accepting death as part of their existence.

I love the fact that I no longer live in fear of Armageddon... And I don't know if it's the right word, 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, Group A, lines 723; 736-743).

The concept of freedom is a common theme which connects the various aspects of leaving the community. It is a sense of freedom which infuses a deep feeling of hope and which Samuel describes as follows:

I think it's important to know that there is life after the group (Group A, lines 722-723).

The 'truth' as a personal discovery - When I analysed the participants' interviews and the theme 'The Rebuilding of Self post-Shunning' was defined, the state of 'un'freedom some Jehovah's Witnesses live in became apparent. They live a life of subjection in disguise. I lived a life of subjection in disguise too. The verse of John 8:32, "Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free", has always been my favourite scripture. I seized every opportunity to share it with all the people who studied the Bible with me (when I was a member). However, at times, while reading Jesus' words, they echoed almost painfully, and I had to restrain from bursting out into tears. I never really understood why, or maybe I never had the courage to look into it, deferring the analysis of my feelings and the reasons behind the tears. It was not the right moment. I was not ready to 'see'. Freud (1936) assumed that shocking truths are buried deep, ignored, or projected externally, as the episodes narrated by the participants seem also to suggest. However, the individual may experience a certain degree of uneasiness like my need to hold back tears.

In this respect, the participants' experiences were enlightening. "Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." For the first time, these words acquired a deeper meaning to me. That 'truth' was not my truth, and that life was not freedom for me. This realisation had a strong impact especially considering the dichotomy of objective/subjective related to the concept of 'truth'. According to the community's teaching, there is only one reliable, objective 'truth'.

This has important implications for the members of the community because, as it surfaced from the analysis, the proclamation of the existence of an 'objective truth'

may be used as an effective tool to mould the individual's behaviour (Miller, 1988). The 'Truth' becomes the touchstone to judge and punish and the tool through which hegemony is legitimised. As a member of the community, I once accepted the existence of an objective, absolute 'truth'. However, in conducting this study, I have fully embraced the fact that there is not one 'truth'. Rather, 'truth' is a subjective concept and, therefore, prone to interpretation. The existence of an absolute truth versus truth as a subjective construal appear to be two extremes on a continuum. Perhaps the rejection of an absolute truth in favour of a relative one is also part of a defiant response to a way of life I rejected.

6.3 Summary

This chapter explored the impact that being shunned from the Jehovah's Witness community has on those shunned, and two overriding themes were presented, 'Losses due to shunning' and 'The rebuilding of self post-shunning'.

From the participants' accounts it can be evinced that being shunned by family and friends as a consequence of religious shunning, is experienced as a series of several losses which have severe repercussions on the life of the individual. This chapter first discussed the physical and emotional impact of being shunned. It considers that religious shunning appears to affect the individual's physical health, their ability to provide for their own sustenance and to cause a tangible economic harm. Also, according to the respondents, rejection-related emotions, ambiguous loss,

depression, loneliness, self-esteem issues, and suicidal thoughts are further consequences which underline the deep psychological impact of religious shunning.

The second part of this chapter highlighted that being shunned and leaving the community also produces constructive outcomes. The underlining theme which connects the constructive outcomes the participants commented, is the concept of freedom. When the individual is shunned, and commences their new life outside the community, they undergo a process towards the rebuilding of self though regaining self-ownership, and the freedom to choose according to their own judgment. For example, the respondents described the opportunity to explore their spirituality in a deeper and more genuine way, liberated from an imposed worship system. Moreover, they emphasised the regained autonomy to decide over their choice of friendships, leisure, and education. Shunning also represents an opportunity to prioritise family bonds. Lastly, being shunned emancipated the individual from fear, the fear of being punished by God and the guilt of not being able to live according to the community's unreasonable standards. The participants, by leaving the community, had the chance to regain ownership of their own life.

The next chapter will shed light on the coping mechanisms the participants adopted in order to deal with being shunned from the community. Therefore, both the strategies which impeded the individual to fully break free from their Jehovah's Witness experiences, as well as the strategies which they adopted in order to move forward with their lives, will be explored

CHAPTER 7: PERSONAL CHALLENGE OR PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT: WHAT IS THE OUTCOME FOR SHUNNED INDIVIDUALS?

Thus far, the experiences of those who have been shunned from the Jehovah's Witness community and the impact that this event has had on their lives were discussed. Specifically, Chapter 5, provided an overview on the participants' life in the community since they joined the Jehovah's Witnesses. The chapter clarified the reasons which led the individual to embrace the Jehovah's Witness creed in the first instance, and then described the actions that resulted in the individual to be shunned. Chapter 6 in turn shed light on the impact that being shunned has on the life of the individual. Stemming from the narratives and perspectives of the respondents, religious shunning appears to be a multi-faceted event, which may be experienced as traumatic, impairing the individual's physical and emotional well-being. Being shunned, in some cases, has also caused a fracture in the relationship with the supernatural entity. However, participants also reported positive outcomes in leaving the community, with a common theme of obtaining freedom.

This chapter will address the following: Personal challenge or personal development: What is the outcome for shunned individuals? Therefore, the participants' behaviours and reactions in response to being shunned from the Jehovah's Witness community will be explored. Following the shunning experience and its impact, the individual resorts to different strategies in order to manage and counterbalance their new circumstances. On the one hand, some of the coping mechanisms mentioned evidence levels of personal stagnation as the strategies implemented seem to be determined by the influence the community still exerts on the life of the individual. On

the other hand, other respondents reframed their life by developing new-built coping skills. These new-built coping skills convey a sense of personal progression. Hence, the strategies the respondents employed facilitated closure, helping them to make peace with their past and then to move forward with their lives.

The following Cognitive Map presents the main themes and sub-themes which emerged from the narration of the respondents:

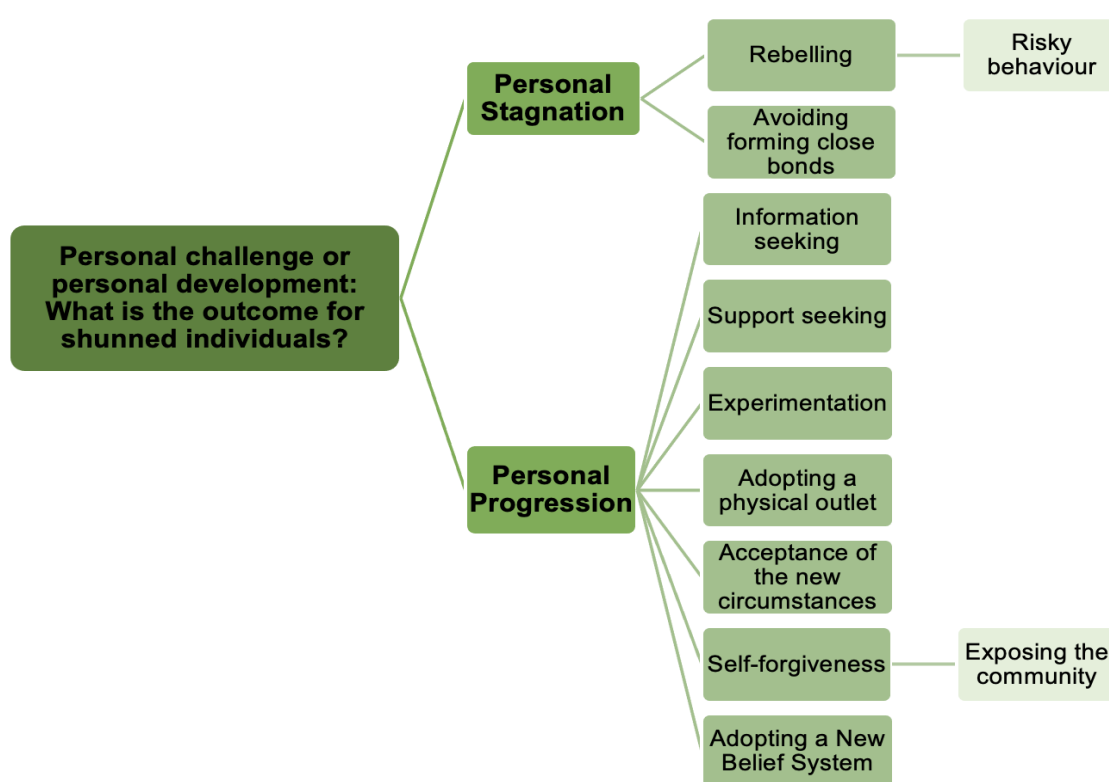


Figure 7.1 Cognitive Map of Theme and Sub-themes for Research Statement 3

7.1. Personal Stagnation

From the narratives of the respondents, it appears that some of them did not feel equipped in coping with the transition out from the Jehovah's Witnesses. Rather, their reactions to the new circumstances seem to be a response conditioned by their past

life. 'Personal stagnation' is the first dominant theme which the analysis evidenced. Although the participants are no longer part of the community, their decisions were still determined to a certain degree by their experiences as Jehovah's Witnesses. Being shunned grants the individual freedom from a controlling and coercive environment, yet the community's belief system still has a hold on them. Thus, a sense of personal stagnation underlines the strategies they adopted. The first part of this chapter will therefore explore these strategies; namely rebelling and avoiding forming close bonds.

7.1.1 Rebelling

In an attempt to defy the community's moral code, some respondents engaged in rebellious behaviours. Although being rebellious suggests the active engagement in an action, conveying the idea of progression, the rebellion of the respondents was encumbered by the influence of the community. This was a behaviour which did not help them break free from their past. Rather, it is a kind of rebellion which manifested as self-abuse and self-discipline mechanisms.

7.1.1.1 Risky behaviour

Some of the participants engaged in risky behaviours after being shunned. Sexual promiscuity, drug misuse and excessive drinking are examples of such behaviours. For instance, Emma, who experienced being shunned twice in her life, explains that both episodes had an initial, similar outcome in terms of her reactions to the event. She says:

I lived, whilst I was abroad during that period, a life that was extremely hedonistic. It would be fair to say that I was like a child let loose in a sweets shop, I wanted to try everything. I wanted to learn about everything. I put myself in some very dangerous situations or very risky situations, and some of the consequences were quite awful (Group A, lines 84-87).

She then describes her behaviour the second time she was shunned, by saying:

And I spent the first year after the announcement going everywhere, doing everything, I took drugs, I had sex with loads of people, I went to concerts. I enjoyed all of the things I had been forbidden before 30 years of age (Group A, lines 424-427).

Tom adopted a similar lifestyle after he was shunned. He says:

I became quite hedonistic for a while... when I met my first wife, I was just about to join a swingers' club (Group A, lines 628-630).

He then adds:

I did gay clubs, which I would never have done as a Witness... So, I don't know what I did differently to cope apart from the promiscuity (Group A, lines 658; 666-667).

From the Jehovah's Witnesses' perspective, it appears that the moral compass of what is deemed right and wrong behaviour of some respondents, changed and with it their approach to life, which they described as being hedonistic. The desire to experiment and the new lifestyle the individual adopts is contrary to their previous lifestyle. The transition out from the tightly bound and prescriptive moral code enforced within the Jehovah's Witness community, resulted in a need to unleash. Emma compared this experience to that of "*a child let loose in a sweetshop*", without any restrictions. Thus, it seems likely that when leaving the Jehovah's' Witness controlling environment, the sense of freedom the individual suddenly experiences played out to the extreme.

Without imposed restraints, insatiable for what freedom has to offer, the individual ends up putting themselves in "*very risky situations*". There is a parallel between the respondents' experiences, and the experience of children who grow up in an authoritarian environment. For instance, children reared by authoritarian and abusive parents often engage in risky behaviour as a way to rebel against the rules imposed on them, to defy the parents' authority, and to have a taste of freedom (Trinkner *et al.*,

2012). The extremism which characterises the individual's life outside the community, appears to be a strategy towards self-affirmation and independency:

My attitude was sort of "screw you", along and again, find new friends, and not be a Jehovah's Witness... And I spiralled a bit out of control, actually. I was partying a lot and had, you know, quite dangerous behaviour, being quite unsafe. And I think that was my way of coping with things (Erin, Group A, lines 291-294).

Erin then adds:

I was going out and being quite promiscuous. All the things that I wasn't allowed to do as a Jehovah's Witness, I went and did to the extreme. I was, yeah, having unprotected sex. I was trying drugs, umm going partying a lot (Group A, lines 332-334).

The accounts suggest that the individual attempts to free themselves from the Jehovah's Witness label, removing themselves from their past life, their initial identity, and the rules they had to follow. The new intemperate lifestyle appears to be a defiant declaration of emancipation. The individual engages in a set of behaviours which is diametrically opposite to the community's standard of conduct. In the case of Emma, Tom and Erin, sexual promiscuity, drugs misuse or joining the swingers and gay clubs, seems to be their way of rebelling against the Jehovah's Witness authority.

The accounts of Noah and Erin provide further depth to understand the possible reasons for engaging in unhealthy behaviours in an attempt to cope with religious shunning. Noah says:

The first year was really hard adjusting. And, yeah, it probably did affect me negatively emotionally and the way I dealt with those emotions was probably the wrong way. For example, drinking too much. It's, yeah, that's, you know, that definitely did not help me emotionally at that time (Group A, lines 255-258).

Erin comments:

The sex with people I thought at the time would buy me love. I think that's in hindsight what I was trying to do. And because I'd felt so unloved before, yeah, that's what I've narrowed it down to (Group A, lines 337-340).

The risky behaviour participants engaged in, could also be interpreted as a strategy to escape the trauma-related pain they endured because of shunning. Children and adolescents who are victims of trauma, may engage in risky behaviour in order to mask, escape or regulate painful emotions (Kianpoor and Bakhshani, 2012). Also, the experience of Erin suggests that sex could be used in an attempt to establish an emotional connection with people. It appears that people shunned by the Jehovah's Witnesses may engage in sexual promiscuity to secure immediate feelings of closeness in an effort to fill the emotional void left by losing their family and friends. The idea of feeling connected to others and reassured is further developed by Tom, who says:

I went through a period of not extreme promiscuity but... I spent a lot of time dating people double my age, because that gave me a feeling of security because they understood things that I could never begin to understand (Group A, lines 629; 631-633).

This quote suggests that dating older people fulfilled the function of a parental figure, providing Tom with the necessary guidance and experience he lacked to live his life outside the community, giving him a sense of soothing.

In some cases, risky behaviours could also be interpreted as a form of self-punishment. Erin, referring to the unhealthy behaviour she engaged in after being shunned, stated:

[I was] not really looking after myself. I think it was probably a form of self-abuse, looking back at it. At the time I thought I was having fun but, actually, I think it was sort of a self-abusive behaviour (Erin, Group A, lines 334-337).

Carrie also says:

I know from my friend when she's come out... in her mind she still believed that if Armageddon would come, she was going to be destroyed. So, she said to me, "If that happens, I'm going to be destroyed. I'm going to be killed. I might run wild because I'm going to die anyway". And so, she said she ended up becoming very immoral, she lost a lot of her intrinsic values because she thought, "Well, what is the matter, I'm dead in God's eyes, who's going to destroy me anyway" (Group A, lines 848-856).

These accounts seem to indicate that a shunned individual may develop disempowering emotions due to the high level of indoctrination they were exposed when they were members. These disempowering feelings ensue a harsh inner critic. The harsh self-criticism mirrors the messages received from the community. Therefore, the individual may feel compelled to continue perpetuating those messages of punishment and retribution. A sense of inevitability and resignation is perceivable from the account of Carrie. The individual then chooses to fully unleash because of the punishment they are convinced they will face. Following a highly moral path is futile because retribution is unavoidable. This suggests that although an individual may physically leave the community, the detachment process from the community's beliefs is not straightforward. The rebellious behaviour some of the participants engaged in would not be the result of a regained mental freedom. This is because it seems that inside the individual still believes the doctrine they have been taught. Despite the opportunities the new life outside the community offers to the individual, the religious beliefs are deeply ingrained for some:

But deeply inside, despite my behaviour, I still believed everything that I had been brainwashed with. And so therefore, the immense sense of guilt that I carried with me was the most, I would say, contributing factor to the psychological breakdown (Emma, Group A, lines 88-92).

As it emerges, the individual is torn between their past self, who is still judged and judges according to the Jehovah's Witness criteria, and their new self, who is trying to surface as an independent and self-reliant person. The individual stagnates, still psychologically tied to the community, unable "to cut themselves free from the interdictions of their past moral and belief frameworks" (Hookway and Habibis, 2013, p. 10). Maggie says:

It's painful to recondition your head because you are very programmed. And you have to constantly break the trigger, break the trigger (Group A, lines 266-267).

This suggests that the individual in order to progress and to achieve mental freedom from the community's influence, has to undergo a reconditioning process by "*constantly breaking the trigger*", as Maggie underlines. However, the process is painful and effortful. This is because:

You don't need them to tell you what to do because it indoctrinates you... That's how it works. You don't need to be sitting on a chair in the Kingdom Hall. It works to control you because you beat yourself... [Now] I'm actually looking in the mirror and say, "I'm okay. I'm alright. I'm not upsetting God and I'm not upsetting the Elders" (Maggie, Group A, lines 337-343).

From the account of Carrie, Erin, Emma and Maggie, the concept of panopticon emerges, becoming a powerful symbol of normative power which extends into the everyday life of the individual. The individual's diminishment and submission are no longer granted by the persistent presence and intervention of the authority, but by the internalisation of such a presence. The authority changes from being an external, physical entity, to being an internalised omniscience which then develops as self-discipline (Foucault, 1995). The individual converts to be one's own judge and then the executor of the punishment. Maggie, in order to reconnect to herself, sits in front of a mirror. The mirror, which may be used as a tool for self-monitoring (Alawad *et al.*, 2015; Ehrenberg, 2010), for Maggie appears to be a source of self-reassurance. Through the image reflected in the mirror, the individual engages in a positive self-talk which aims at being supportive, reminding them that they do no longer owe the community anything.

7.1.2 Avoiding Forming Close Bonds

Avoiding forming close bonds is another strategy some of the participants relied on in an attempt to lessen the emotional pain and distress they experienced, or to prevent a similar experience to happen in the future. For instance, Emma says:

I'm quite careful about who I allow to become close to me and it's very few people. I have a massive, massive fear of rejection and abandonment. And it's very, very clear where that comes from (Group A, lines 439-442).

The account of Emma suggests that an individual shunned from the Jehovah's Witnesses may begin to avoid closeness to minimise the possibility of reexperiencing feelings of abandonment. Shunning has been appraised as being such a traumatic event that the fear of future rejection and abandonment is poignant and enduring. In order to avoid reexperiencing rejection, the individual flinches from forming close bonds.

Considering the way one of the participants, Dylan, coped with being shunned by his family and friends appears to provide further insights. Although he is the only respondent who describes in detail a coping process triggered by feelings of betrayal, and therefore caution is needed in generalising this coping mechanism to others, exploring such a behaviour shed more light on the possible coping strategies adopted in response to religious shunning. Dylan starts by saying:

I mean I just, I had to go through a whole new process of trying to find new friends and make new friends and get involved in this new social group something, which was hard for me but then there's also this certain like wall I have to build up to protect because, I mean, I've been hurt so badly the second time around. I wanted to make sure I didn't get hurt again. So, it was already probably quite high anyway, got topped up even higher to protect myself from getting hurt (Group A, lines 408-413).

After being shunned, Dylan engaged in the process of rebuilding a new social network, process which was challenging. Although he was trying to open up, the fear of getting hurt again hindered the process of creating new social bonds. Dylan then adds:

It was hard. I went from a situation where I had a congregation of people that I knew, somewhat respected, I didn't have many that, I would say, would be close friends in this congregation, but I had a few... And my kids still ignore me. I mean, my son's now 20. And when he walks down the street and we bump...he walks right past me, ignores me, two feet away from me, just blankly completely. It's hard (Group A, lines 341-343; 454-457).

Similar to Emma, Dylan too seems to have experienced a significant sense of betrayal. As a Jehovah's Witness, Dylan had a few trusted friends. Losing them and his children was a painful experience. Feeling betrayed by trusted people and the fear of reexperiencing a similar circumstance in the future, appear to be the underlying reasons for Dylan to fortify his fear of being hurt by others. There is a parallel between the behaviour of Emma and Dylan and that of many survivors of childhood abuse and interpersonal violence. Individuals who have experienced trauma at the hands of trusted relationships and family members are prone to avoid closeness (DePrince and Freyd, 2007). This kind of trauma has been termed betrayal trauma (Freyd, 1994). According to Sivers *et al.* (2002), "the degree to which an event is appraised as a betrayal by trusted people, influences not only the way the event will be processed" (p. 169) by the individual but also the individual's future interactions. As the result of betrayal trauma, the fear of being hurt again may hamper forming new close relationships or relying on a supportive network.

Dylan then explains further:

I mean, I'm not by and large, I'm not the most open person. Some would say that I'm unapproachable in some respects... I mean, delving into the depths of mine is not always what people find [easy]... People didn't know about all the traumas. I mean, they could tell from looking at me that I had

some turmoil, but most people only knew a little snippet of what was going through my mind (Group A, lines 492-497).

This quote suggests that, in an attempt to alleviate the painful emotions, the Jehovah's Witness who has been shunned may turn inward to cope with the trauma. Noah says:

It took me three years to tell anybody at work what happened. They knew I was a Jehovah's Witness, but they didn't know that I'd been disfellowshipped. And it took me three years to tell them that. It's probably because of guilt or not knowing how they would react (Group A, lines 245-248).

The emotional turmoil is concealed and goes unnoticed by an external observer who may perceive the individual's closure as unapproachability instead of a way for self-preservation, as it was for Dylan. Dylan also adds:

It's just like a fear... I can just shut off, shut off what people are saying, I can just concentrate on something I enjoy, sometimes even just staring into space and just try and block out everything that I'm feeling and the world around me or just like a little bubble to protect myself at first (Group A, lines 416-419).

Apart from building a wall to keep himself at a safe distance from people, Dylan also described a little bubble he created where he could find refuge and estrange himself.

As Dylan comments:

For me, yeah, I mean, it stopped me from imploding completely (Group A, line 421).

It appears that Dylan initiated a process whereby emotions are detached from memories and feelings which are connected to his shunning experience. This bubble possibly represents his way to block the world outside and to 'un-feel'. For Dylan the emotional numbness seems to be a state that he actively sought by retreating in his little bubble where he was able to feel nothing or to focus on happy thoughts, in order to buffer the emotional pain. This strategy appears to be a form of denial adopted as a protective barrier to cope with trauma. Feelings are buried deep and hence ignored.

The doubting attempt to reframe one's own life in a meaningful way - During my own personal journey, when I stepped outside the Kingdom Hall after the last meeting I attended, I felt a deep sense of relief. I never looked back. I never felt it was the wrong decision. As my journey continued, I did not engage in risky behaviours as a response to the new regained liberty like some of the participants did. In this respect, the findings represented an unexpected discovery.

However, although I did not engage in risky behaviours, I allowed myself to indulge in actions that the Jehovah's Witness community would consider reprehensible. I think this was to fully experience the sense of freedom that comes from having only yourself to determine what is right and what is wrong. Like the respondents of this research, I have embarked on a journey towards regaining autonomy and independence.

There are moments when I feel that my previous belief system still has a hold on me, and I experience a sense of uncertainty. This is especially palpable when thinking about the loved ones that I have lost. Before, when I was a member, there was a comfort in the belief that the resurrection of people was a certainty, a soon-to-be event. Yet, when leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses, this belief like many others is shuttered, taking away the comfort and allowing one to experience the feeling of loss and perhaps hopelessness. During the analysis process, I reflected on Liam and Rose's words when they described the effect that the message of hope delivered by the Jehovah's Witnesses may have on people who suffered for the injustice or have lost dear loved ones because of death. This message of hope encouraged the belief that we can live forever on an earthly paradise, where injustice and death will no longer exist, and where dead people will return to life again. This hopeful belief is not only appealing because of the sense of consolation that it can provide, but it can be deeply internalised and may become the motivator to stay in or return to the community.

When an individual is shunned, this 'concrete' hope, together with the belief system provided by the community, is deeply shaken and may collapse. What is left is the sudden realisation that the life we are living is the only life we could possibly have.

I see this as having two important opposing implications. On the one hand, life should be lived to the fullest, without regrets, without postponing the enjoyment of living, waiting for a future reward that might not come. In this respect, Tom's words powerfully resonated in me "I've had a good run... if I'd die tomorrow, doesn't vary... I've done most of the things I wanted to do". On the other hand, there is the risk that this sudden realisation may paralyse the individual's advancement. Is it better to believe in what soothes our pain or to open the eyes and realise that what guided our decisions might be a false comfort in disguise? Tom stated that at times ignorance is bliss, especially if after your own beliefs have been destroyed it seems there is nothing that can replace them. Here lies the attempt to find a meaningful framework for yourself. Here lies the possible stagnation. It takes time. As Maggie highlighted, it is about breaking the trigger that reinforces a vicious cycle. This allows the individual to progress.

This section explored some of the coping mechanisms that the participants have adopted in managing their experiences of religious shunning. Some of the respondents, as reaction to the moral constraints imposed upon them, once they left the community felt the need to unleash. One way to do so is by engaging in risky behaviours. Engaging in these activities serves to mask the emotional pain or to fulfil the need to belong. Nonetheless these strategies are influenced by the hold that the community still has on them. Instead of moving through the pain caused by religious shunning, the individual seems to stagnate, paralysed by the fear of future betrayal and abandonment. Everything is suspended. New trusting relationships cannot be built. There is no active action towards regaining control over their lives. The efforts of the individual are channelled to protect themselves against possible future harm, to deny the pain, to ignore trauma-related feelings and to elude closeness in order to prevent reexperiencing betrayal. These coping strategies appear to be the result of an

emotional damage endured over the long term, and a response to the individual's previous life. They are an obvious act of defiance. Nonetheless, in behaving in this way, the individuals are continuing to perpetuate the hold that the Jehovah's Witness teaching had on them, behaviour which conveys a sense of personal stagnation.

7.2 Personal Progression

'Personal progression' is the second overarching theme. Although initially some respondents adopted emotional and behavioural responses which impeded them from completely freeing themselves from the community's hold, by-and-large, participants developed positive, new coping skills. The implementation of these new coping skills delivers a sense of personal progression. The individual cuts free from being under the influence of the community's belief system, and behavioural and moral constraints, and progresses, regaining control over their lives. This is achieved by actively engaging in strategies aimed at positively reframing their circumstances through cognitive reappraisal, by seeking information and support, by undertaking physical activity, or through experimentation, acceptance, and self-forgiveness. Furthermore, exposing the community appears to be another useful strategy in order for the individual to redefine their experiences, helping to shift the focus from themselves to others. As it can be evinced from the data, the individual after being shunned embarks on a journey towards personal emancipation which culminates with a cognitive revolution.

7.2.1 Information Seeking

Information seeking proved to be a valuable coping strategy for many respondents. Some individuals started the researching process before being officially shunned. The process towards seeking answers was mainly triggered by the doctrinal changes and incongruences the individuals were noticing across the years, and by concerns about policies and the community's leadership. In this case, information seeking acted as a catalyst which eventually led the individual to leave the community, and which buffered the exiting process. Other participants commenced seeking information after being officially shunned, and in this case the information gathered provided the individual with external validation, reassuring them about their decision not to reaffiliate.

The starting point of the search for information process is looking at external sources of information which are forbidden by the community. To this purpose, the Internet allows the individual to access information, through apostate websites, which are not available to the rank-and-file Witnesses, such as the secretive book 'Shepherd the flock of God', old 'Watchtower' and 'Awake!' magazines, or confidential letters from the central headquarter addressed to the Circuit Overseers or the bodies of Elders.

Steve, a former Elder, says:

I realised later that if I was not an Elder, I would not have believed it. But on the JWfacts website, and other apostate sites, they will be quoting from letters of the Elders, quoting from the Elders' 'Shepherd the flock' book. And if I was not an Elder, I would have just said, "Oh, I have no idea if those are fake or true", but because I was an Elder, I could actually go and look up every single quote that they made... And when I looked at all of that, that's when I realised that what you've been told your entire life are apostate lies, they're actually true (Group B, lines, 269-287).

Steve was in a privileged position compared to other Jehovah's Witnesses who seek information. He was an Elder. He could check whether the letters addressed to the

bodies of Elders or the quotes from the Elders' manual reported by the apostate websites were accurate and truthful. Although an Elder has access to classified material because of his position, these documents nonetheless reflect and endorse the community's perspective. Thus, often, an external source of information is necessary for the individual to see things in context. Steve says:

It's strange, because when you're born into it, and that's the only information that you know, you don't think anything about it, you don't think that it's weird... You should be proud as a witness that we're following God's rules. And that's why the Australian Royal Commission devastated me, broke me... Watching these Elders and a Governing Body member... seeing that they had to lie about [their policies] to the Government, when there's no reason to lie about it if you're actually proud of it, and you're doing what God tells you, then you should tell the truth (Group B, lines 293-309).

By seeking external sources, the individual is exposed to information which is not filtered or manipulated by the community:

We were tunnel vision with the Witnesses, but we've got a very wide scope now (Jacob, Group A, lines 1101-1102).

The participants described seeking in-depth knowledge about the community's beliefs, history, its development, and the drastic changes in beliefs and policies periodically implemented by the leadership. As the respondents report, the factor which initiated the search for information was the search for the truth:

We just wanted the truth, whatever was called 'truth'. That's what we wanted (Jacob, Group A, lines 509-510).

Jacob then follows by saying:

So, our research from that point on, went into overdrive once we established very clearly for ourselves that what we were now researching was an expose of the organisation... It's like, if you're walking across the field and there's a stone in the field and you turn the stone over, underneath the stone it's all kind of things and worms and slugs and snails... that's what we were doing, we were now pulling the stone all around. And what we were seeing was very unpleasant. We weren't going to prejudge it. We were going to check it out. So, we were going back through history... We were looking at the actual facts (Group A, lines 497-506).

As the respondents' accounts evidence, seeking information aims at checking information without prejudice. However, the search process appears to be challenging, since it places the individual in a position to be in charge, and to take ownership, and not to be dependent on the community's directives. Seeking information is the first step towards breaking free from the community's control system. For instance, Erin says:

The first couple of years... I kind of thought, "I got kicked out. It was my fault. I deserved it. I'm here because of my own decisions. And I knew what the consequences would be. It's my fault, blah, blah, blah" ... And I started researching. I also got back in touch with somebody else who was disfellowshipped about a year before I was, and she had started doing a lot of research. And together, we thought, "Oh, my goodness, I think we've had a lucky escape. I'm kind of glad we're not part of it anymore". We started seeing there was a lot of lies being exposed. And now we are both in a happier place, in the fact that we don't want to be part of that (Group A, lines 301-315).

As Jehovah's Witnesses, members are not used to rely on themselves. Rather, the community directs the members' decisions and choices, hampering their ability to be independent thinkers. From this perspective, the accounts of some participants suggest that information seeking provides the individual with the external validation they need while they are developing independent thinking. The new knowledge acquired reassures the individual about their new position. It validates the individual's determination not to reaffiliate, and instead to progress with their lives having no regrets about what has been left behind. Furthermore, seeking information empowers the individual (Zimmerman, 2000), as they experience a switch from feeling ashamed and guilty, towards taking a stand against the community and to consider the community accountable.

Eric says:

And then I just started to do my own research. And what I did was... I felt that I owed to myself and to the Watchtower Society that I had been born into, I decided that I would check every single fact that I was now being presented with, and I decided that I would do that from the point of view of defending the Jehovah's Witnesses. So rather than looking at everything and thinking, "Yes, that supports my thought!", I decided to play devil's advocate and say, "I need to prove that this is wrong, because if this is wrong, then, then the Watchtower is right after all. And that's the course that I need to follow for my family". So, I spent six months trying to defend the Watchtower's position to myself throughout all my research, but it was totally indefensible (Group A, lines 362-374).

This quote also suggests that seeking and checking information is not done lightly or hastily, especially when an individual is still a Jehovah's Witness. This is possibly because much is at stake, as seeking knowledge can drastically change the life of a member. The individual has devoted a considerable amount of time, energy and resources by being a member of the community, and then, by leaving the community, the risk of losing family and friends is concrete. Thus, trying to defend the community was the starting point for Eric, hoping to protect his life from unnecessary ordeals. He started learning more in order to disprove critiques. Nonetheless, he soon realised that the community's teachings were indefensible. This information seeking is a process which seems to prompt a change in the individual mental disposition by challenging their established beliefs. From denial and resistance, the individual then experiences new awareness which finally leads them to accept and embrace the evidence.

Information seeking helps the individual to become aware, since it provides the means to put things in context and to objectively appraise the community, its policies, and its teachings. From this perspective, knowledge endows the individual with the means to cut the umbilical cord which still binds the individual to the community. Through gaining

knowledge the individual regains control of their lives and is able to progress.

Knowledge is a form of protection against deception:

I've educated myself; I've taken a very long time to do it and I continue to do it... Knowledge, you know the famous saying that knowledge is power, but knowledge is not just power is protection. Knowledge is protection. My brain. I love my brain. I hope that I will retain the mental faculties to continue to feed it until I die (Emma, Group A, lines 561-569).

7.2.2 Support Seeking

Another strategy used by participants to cope with religious shunning is to secure and make contact with other former members. Jacob relates:

After about five to six months of this process, it felt the right time to speak to somebody else who have been in the Witness community... So, it came to a place where we thought, "Well, now I'll see who's out there". And so, I did a few searches on Internet and came up with I think three names and spoke to a couple of people... and they were the first people we actually met who were in the ex-JW community (Group A, lines 674-686).

Oliver and Erin also felt the need to find former members. For example, Oliver says:

I did kind of go on the Internet a lot and connect with other groups of people that had gone through the same thing. You know, people who used to be Jehovah's Witnesses, who were kind of experiencing the same thing... I did find it quite encouraging just to kind of, you know, know that there were other people that had experienced the same because it is quite a rare process to go through and it's not something that a lot of people would understand (Group A, lines 443-451).

Erin joined a community of former Jehovah's Witnesses on a social network. She says:

People who I've been able to talk about it with, are people who were Jehovah's Witnesses and now they are disfellowshipped and that's why I found the forum... recently really, really good and it's the first time I've been able to properly speak about it with people who really understand. And I think that probably what prevented me a little bit from speaking to a therapist was that they didn't, they wouldn't understand because they haven't gone through it (Group A, lines 426-431).

As the accounts of the respondents underline, the main reason those shunned seek one another is because shunning is a shared experience. Shunning is a rare process

which the majority of non-Jehovah's Witnesses would not understand. As the participants reported, even professionals are not adequately prepared to support individuals who have been shunned. This is due to the lack of first-hand experience of being part of a high-control group and lack of insight into the community's dynamics and the shunning process. This is well explained by Jacob, who says:

Over the past 20 years we've been able to help a lot of people coming out the Witnesses or coming to terms with their experiences while they've been Witnesses. And that couldn't have been done effectively If we hadn't the experience of being Witnesses... It's given us an insight into a world that a lot of people can't understand. When people are dealing with people who are coming out the Witnesses, who have never been Witnesses themselves, they just don't get it, why they waited so long or why they want to jump through all the hoops and why they conform their lives to these rules and regulations... But we understand the dynamics of what makes people do it, you know (Group A, lines 1168-1188).

Maggie even decided to teach the Jehovah's Witness doctrine to her therapist over a number of counselling sessions. She narrates:

I decided to take those six sessions and without sounding like arrogant, I thought, "I'm gonna really open this woman's [eyes]". She's a wonderful counsellor, but, you know, no knowledge. So, I took my sessions to fully explain her what was involved, how you feel, how people are feeling. There is no help for people like me (Group A, lines 288-292).

This above quote highlights the lack of information about religious shunning which may result in a therapist's naivety about the phenomenon. During the therapy sessions, Maggie presented the therapist with new knowledge, enlightening her about religious shunning. The therapists' lack of knowledge and understanding is experienced as unsettling, as Emma underlines:

There is nothing because nobody understands it. So, I'm in a Catch-22 situation. The only way that I can make progress is to continue to educate myself. That's the only thing I can do. There is no support. Nobody understands it (Group A, lines 507-509).

The widespread lack of awareness of religious shunning seems to have discouraged participants to seek professional help, leading them to prefer the support which comes

from the community of former members. According to the majority of the respondents, there is the need to raise awareness in order for the health services to understand religious shunning. Also, it is important to acknowledge this form of trauma, as this is essential in order to provide the necessary emotional assistance for people leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses and other high-control groups. Luke explains:

I think the health service, and mental health services, well, should be better informed. We live in a society that is all politically correct, the Jehovah's Witnesses have fitted in well, in the sense of portraying themselves in a certain manner... There's an outward image that's portrayed by the Watchtower and by its people. And therefore, I don't think society, or the health services understand that those who [exit] are so badly damaged and so in need of support (Group A, lines 619-627).

The individual, not being able to find adequate support or to afford the cost of a therapist, “*They wanted 50 pounds an hour. And we couldn't afford 50 pounds an hour*” (Liam and Rose, Group A, lines 739-740), finds comfort in making contact with former members. They all share the same cultural religious background, and they are all experiencing similar struggles. According to the respondents, this community represents a safe place where the individual could find solace from estrangement and isolation, and where they are free to express their feelings, confident that they will be understood. The individual feels encouraged in realising that they are not alone. The new community can contribute to bolster feeling of intimacy and self-acceptance, and to enable the formation of new relationships (McKenna and Bargh, 1999). Moreover, being the individuals of the ex-Jehovah's Witness community at different stages in the exiting process, useful tactics, strategies, and advice are shared to help those who have been recently shunned or who want to leave.

There is another advantage that the community of former members offers to the individual, which is the insider language. The Jehovah's Witness language is

characterised by a specific terminology which becomes a distinctive mark of the verbal interactions between members. Although the individual may find the community's jargon repulsive once they have been shunned because it is tied to a period of their life they have rejected, the insider speech may still be used for easy reference. For instance, Emma during the interview told the researcher the following:

I would like just to note that I'm using the terms of their loaded language for easy reference for both of us, but... I work quite hard never to use them within my day-to-day life (Group A, lines 57-59).

Maggie explains:

The support group was lifesaving... to speak to people who have been through it, to be at ease to use the terminology, to use a familiar [language]... to use it and not be stopped every moment by people go, "What do you mean by going on the field work? What do you mean about that, to be a servant? What is a servant?" To talk in your own language to the people that, you know, would say, "Yeah! Blame me, that happened to me!" and to be able to laugh. That's the strategy. To say, "you know, remember that we couldn't wear that vest top because of the bra strap?" I mean, we, we giggle about that. It's, it's awful, really to be controlled, but we laugh about it and say, "Yeah, might tempt a brother over the edge, bare shoulder, good grief!" (Group A, lines 300; 306-314).

Terms which are familiar to a Jehovah's Witness, such as *field work* or *Ministerial Servant*, are not understood by the layperson. Moreover, a person who has never been a Jehovah's Witness would not appreciate the reason why a woman would joke about wearing a vest top which exposes the bare shoulders, and therefore would "*tempt a brother over the edge*", as Maggie reports. Also, explaining the Jehovah's Witness terminology while trying to share one's own experience, interrupts the flow of the narration and might create discomfort and annoyance. The common language and background enhance the sharing process. There is no need to explain; there is no need to seek clarification. In the familiarity of a common background and insider knowledge, the individual finds a source of comfort. Maggie's account also stresses the role of humour in coping with shunning. Humour can help to reappraise the

individual's circumstances. Joking about a stressful event or telling funny stories about what the individual has experienced enable the exploration of alternative perspectives to the event and allows the individual to reframe an experience on which they do not have full control (Wilkins, 2014). Humour allows the person to take a step back and look at their problem from a different perspective.

Although the data suggest the positive role that the community of former members represents in coping with religious shunning, it is also important to consider that seeking support exclusively from people experiencing similar traumatic circumstances may hinder the personal progression process. Despite the common background and insider knowledge, members of peer-support groups may have little or no expertise on providing suitable support which in turn a trained therapist would deliver. As previous research has informed, some forms of social support may be dysfunctional, increasing levels of psychological distress and anxiety (Palant and Himmel, 2019; Lowery and Stokes, 2005). Trauma-related feelings might be triggered or accentuated instead of being positively reframed, and maladaptive responses perpetuated. Moreover, there is also the risk to recreate to an extent the insularity which characterises the Jehovah's Witness community. Being shunned could represent an opportunity to expose oneself to the outer social group facilitating the acclimatisation to the new socio-cultural milieu (Please note that this aspect will be explored later in this section). Even if, on the one hand, the peer-support group of former members could buffer the impact of transitioning out from a familiar cultural environment to a new one, on the other hand, this community might also delay the adaptation process by contributing to greater social withdrawal and avoidance, as research has suggested (Naslund *et al.*, 2016; Lawlor and Kirakowski, 2014). The shunned individual in

seeking familiar points of reference does not open towards the new social environment which may result in personal stagnation.

People who have been shunned may rely on others not only for emotional support but also in terms of day-to-day knowledge. Tom explains:

I would just watch people for hours to work out how you're meant to behave under the circumstances... And I went for a meeting there last week... And when it came the time to leave, I started walking towards these glass doors and realise I didn't know how to pass. I have no clue how to get out. So, I just went and leaned against a wall pretending to check my phone, watching what other people did. Because I am very rule based... And if I don't have rules, I get confused. And so, I wanted to know what to do and eventually, what happens is, you walk up to the chap behind the desk and say, "Will you let me out please?" But it took me five minutes to do that, as opposed to just walking up to him saying how can I get out. But if I'm away on business in a new town... first night there I will criss-cross a couple of miles walking around looking for place I'm interested in. Once I have a restaurant I want to go to, I will stand outside for five- or 10-minutes, watching people walk in and out, so that I can work out what the rules are, you know, do you stand at the entrance? Do you do this? It's like, it's a bit debilitating at times (Group A, lines 588-607).

Being shunned from the community represents a transition from a familiar cultural environment to a completely new territory. The account of Tom suggests that a high-control environment, where every aspect of the members' life is micromanaged, generates in the individual a certain degree of rule-dependency. Once the person is shunned, the sudden lack of directives appears to impair the individual's ability to deal with apparently trivial issues on their own. In seeking guidance by observing others, Tom starts to feel reassured about the proper action to take. At the same time, there is an initial display of hesitation in explicitly asking for help. As Tom underlines, he tried to figure out on his own the way to leave the hall by watching others instead of asking straightaway to the receptionist for instruction. The reluctance in seeking assistance is possibly because, when in the community, members learn to restrain themselves from sharing their doubts or showing their weaknesses, fearing to be

reproached. This would show the extent that the fear of the consequences in expressing themselves which has characterised the individual's past is deeply rooted, conditioning the individual's present behaviour.

For people shunned from insular communities such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, understanding and learning the social cues and the culture of the broader society may be experienced as a stressful process, a culture shock, characterised by an outsider feeling (Oberg, 1960). In leaving the Jehovah's Witness community, the individual loses clear points of reference which have provided guidance to navigate social interactions, to evaluate any given situation, and to behave accordingly. However, the community's norms are neither applicable nor recognised by the new social environment. Acquainting oneself with a new cultural system requires a process of learning new rules in order for the individual to blend into the novel social setting. Observing other people proved to be a useful strategy for Tom in order to adjust to and navigate the new environment. By observing the way others interact, the way they react, or behave, the individual mimics, learns and then adopts the appropriate social behaviour. This strategy has helped Tom to be "A very good bluffer" (Group A, line 691), allowing him to function socially although experiencing a certain degree of social anxiety. He then explains:

The older you get the more rules you learn, the more you can bluff it. Most people I know, apart my very close friends, find it very difficult to believe I suffer from any kind of social anxiety. Here's the thing I've taken away that is I love sucking the essence out of people who have life experience I don't have (Group A, lines 692-697).

The accounts of the respondents also indicate that time and the constant exposure to the new social environment enable the individual to control the anxiety which being an outsider may trigger. Although at times this learning process may be challenging, it

could also represent a highly stimulating and beneficial experience, allowing the person to accumulate experience by proxy.

As this section highlighted, a common coping mechanism respondents adopted in order to manage their new circumstances, is seeking support, either from other former members or from non-Jehovah's Witnesses. Whilst the support from the community of former members appears to be advantageous in terms of sharing the same experience, the exposure to the new social environment seems to be stimulating, allowing the individual to become more effective in adopting the new social rules. Also, the new community provides the necessary guidance and expertise to navigate life outside the Jehovah's Witnesses.

7.2.3 Experimentation

A strategy participants reported to adopt, is accepting the challenge of experimenting with new situations despite the initial awkwardness and enjoy the experience. For example, Jehovah's Witnesses condemn festivities that they consider in disagreement with the biblical teachings. Birthdays, Christmas, and Easter are some examples. Nonetheless, after leaving the community, the individual is free from the rules and norms of the community, and the celebrations which once were forbidden can now be observed.

For example, celebrating Christmas and Birthdays for the first time was an exciting experience for some of the respondents and their families:

I remember the first time we celebrated Christmas and we bought a tree... And then, you know, [my husband] was, "if we have to get to celebrate Christmas we might as well go full hog. Let's put lights up outside. Let's put

them". We had lights everywhere. And reindeers and, "Oh well, they're gonna see anyway, let's just light up the street". That was very strange at first. And I remember actually, the very first time it was for my first birthday, my friend... invited some people around one night. And I didn't know nothing about it. And she surprised me with this birthday cake and candles, and they sang 'Happy Birthday'. And I just froze. I almost started, I cried actually because... I've never had a birthday cake. That's a little really strange, you know, first birthday experience (Carrie, Group A, lines 741-754).

Nonetheless, for those shunned, enjoying the new experiences is not a straightforward process. Liam explains:

Because as a Jehovah's Witness, you were taught Christmas was wrong... So, for me, it was really hard. It was a lifetime of not celebrating. And then Rose said she would like to celebrate it. And I was thinking, "Oh, no, I don't want to really do that". But then I reasoned on things. I reasoned on some Bible passages. And I thought, "I'm being unreasonable". So, I'll have a way. And it was nice. It was just, just the two of us (Liam, Group A, lines 591-598).

In the same way as information seeking prompts the development of critical thinking and self-reliance, the exposure to new experiences positively challenges the individual's established worldview, leading them to build and consolidate self-directed thinking skills. Liam's initial reaction to the idea of celebrating Christmas was negative, a reaction still primed by the community's belief system. However, he took the time to reconsider the validity of these decisions. The process Liam undertook in evaluating whether to celebrate Christmas or not necessitated to take a step back and adopt a perspective not filtered by the community's teachings. Free from the mental constraints to have blind faith, Liam came to a decision that his reaction was "unreasonable". The ability of thinking critically in many Jehovah's Witnesses appears to be underdeveloped. Independent and critical thinking are skills which need to be learnt and fostered once the individual leaves the community, as Marc, a former Elder, explains:

I started reading books on critical thinking. So, I started learning about critical thinking, which is something I never learned... And I always thought

of myself as a good thinker, like I was very good at school, I was very intelligent. But that doesn't mean you're a critical thinker, you know, or you understand how the mind works (Group B, lines 370-379)

The individual often resorts to seek guidance to navigate new situations. Rose and Liam for their first Christmas, bought a pine tree. Basic notions such as the way to decorate a Christmas tree are unfamiliar to the recently shunned individual. Rose explains:

We celebrated Christmas for the first time... This Christmas tree that we bought... I had to get the pastor's wife to come and help me sort it out. Yes, yeah, she helped me decorating it (Group A, lines 576-581).

The quote suggests that the exposure to new stimuli and accepting the challenge of experimenting make the individual resolute and resourceful. Although Rose and Liam did not know how to decorate their Christmas tree, this did not impede the couple to have an adorned tree, and they asked an experienced person for help.

Experimentation also encompasses joining a new religious environment. Being used to a rigid set of rules about behaviour, clothing and hierarchy, the individual may choose to attend a less rigid religious setting. However, joining a different religious denomination may bring about its own set of complications:

The church we've been going to is more positive, more helpful, not dogmatic. But even going there was hard because, you know, we would have to go in all up to the Kingdom Hall, we would have to go in, I would have to go into suits. Rose would have to be dressed really well. And then we went to this other church, and they just dress like this, you know? And I'm thinking, "Oh, no", you know, and during the songs, they would be waving their arms, some people and, and women would be giving praise as well. And with Jehovah's Witnesses, women do not say prayers in the Kingdom Hall. So, there was a lot of things for us to get used to. And even now, that's a bit hard to take in. And, you know, that they would pray for the politicians in this church when Jehovah's Witnesses, they never vote. They don't get involved with politics. So, it's really hard (Liam, Group A, lines 545-558).

The Jehovah's Witness norms include detailed descriptions of the appropriate dress code and grooming for men and women. Also, the involvement in political affairs is condemned, and women are not allowed to teach or praise in public. For these reasons, joining a new religious denomination could be a puzzling experience. The lack of rules which regulate every aspect of the individual's religious and social life appears to be stress-inducing and uncomfortable, as some of the participants admitted. Nonetheless, the individual is determined not to allow their past to influence their present and they learn to enjoy the positive aspects of their new community and to adapt to the new circumstances. The uneasiness of exposing oneself to new choices seems to have a beneficial, transformative function, which fosters personal development, and increases resilience.

7.2.4 Adopting a Physical Outlet

Taking up exercise and practicing mindfulness as part of their lifestyle has been a strategy some participants reported as a way to cope with religious shunning. For example, Oliver took up physical exercise and meditation in order to enhance his health and mental wellbeing. He says:

Because I would say that I'm quite focused on health and mental well-being in terms of new personal life. So, I adopted strategies to try and overcome the negative feelings I was having so I did a lot of physical exercise because that's how I prefer to be, to have a really good way of extending your mental and physical exercise and I still do. I also did a lot of meditation and I still do. And I think that that is something that helps quite a lot (Group A, lines 437-442).

As Oliver explained, engaging in physical activity and in practicing meditation helped him to cope with the negative feelings and the stressful circumstance of being shunned by his family. Mindfulness, which can be developed through the deliberate and persistent practice of yoga and meditation, would help the individual to direct their

attention to the present moment. Through mindfulness, the individual gradually increases their awareness of the changes in bodily sensations, thoughts, and feelings, without avoiding or judging them, but embracing and accepting them (Baer *et al.*, 2006). This would help to recognise triggers of unpleasant feelings and reactions, and to act on them according to one's own values and aims. As Oliver experienced, this process would produce positive outcomes in managing stress.

Noah and Eric took up sport as well. Noah says:

I took on playing sport, I begun playing squash, and I fell in love with that, you know, it helped me keeping fit, that really helped (Group A, lines 267-268).

As research has proposed, being physically active improves the way the body handles stress by modifying the hormonal responses which affect mood (Esch and Stefano, 2010; Greenwood and Fleshner, 2011). Also, engaging in physical activity would reduce the anxiety response to stress because exercise would afford individuals a time out from the stressor (Breus and O'Connor, 1998). Similar to Oliver, the outcomes of engaging in physical activity were positive for Noah as well.

Eric adds a further element which helped him, together with being physically active, to cope with the stressful experience of having his social structure removed. He says:

The complete removal of all social structure was also stressful. However, ... I'm a very, often optimistic, positive kind of a person... The first thing that I actually went and did was gone find somebody else to play football with. Because I played football twice a week, and I played squash twice a week. And suddenly, there was nobody to play with... And I remember saying, "I need to find somebody to play football with" (Group A, 748-749; 751-758).

Eric's brother-in-law, who is not a Jehovah's Witness, introduced him to the group of people he played football with. Eric follows saying:

And that immediately gave me some social structure straightaway. It was 22 guys playing football and going for a beer afterwards... So, I wasn't just

stuck in the house with nowhere to go and [not knowing] what to do (Group A, 760-764).

This quote underlines the beneficial effects of being proactive and optimistic. Optimism and proactivity lead the individual to strive towards creating a new social network despite the difficulties. When shunned, the individual feels as an outsider in the new social environment because of their cultural background and experience. Thus, the individual has to find something in common with people to lay the foundation in order to form new relationships. For Eric, sport became the tool to achieve this. Friendships were built on the basis of a common passion. Eric's account suggests that a goal-oriented attitude and the ability to focus on the bright side help to buffer the negative impact of a stressful situation by using the available resources, in this case, the passion for sport, to one's own advantage.

7.2.5 Acceptance of the New Circumstances

Acceptance of the new circumstances has been an important step in the process of trying to positively reframe the participants' new life, allowing them to make peace with their own past and to move on with their lives.

Samuel for example explains:

And I made overtures to kind to talk to my brothers and sister, but they wouldn't, they didn't want to. They didn't want to come to the party in terms of having a conversation. So, I guess I felt I've done, I wanted to do everything that I could do to heal that riff. And after that, there's nothing else I could do (Group A, lines 596-598).

Some participants engaged in several attempts to communicate with their Jehovah's Witness family, but these attempts failed. As it was for Samuel, often family refused to let the shunned participant explain the reasons which led them to leave the community. The awareness of having done everything to reach out to his siblings provided Samuel

with some closure, and he was then able to move on with his life. Noah develops further this aspect by saying:

I used to blame myself for that, thinking me being selfish and not wanting to be a part of their life, but I now realise it's their decision not wanting to speak to me. And I made that very clear in the text messages that I've sent to all of my family that I'm here any moment in time, you know, whenever they want to speak to me, I am here. Now I feel not guilty in that respect anymore. Although I can't share with them, I'm ready and willing to speak to them. So, it's all up to them (Group A, lines 236-241).

Acceptance of the new circumstances is especially relevant in the face of events which cannot be changed or controlled. Acceptance revolves around acknowledging a negative, difficult situation and reframing it in a constructive way. Noah's account suggests that the individual finally acknowledges that changing the circumstances requires the will of both the parties involved. When the shunned person accepts that it is not up to them to cease shunning, this results in a change of the emotional impact that being estranged by one's own family has on the individual. After the shunned person has played their part in trying to reconcile with their family, and nonetheless, changing the situation is not possible because of the family's immovability in sticking to the shunning policy, the individual experiences acceptance. Acceptance allows the individual to free themselves from negative feelings such as guilt, and they stop blaming themselves for not being part of the life of their family.

Liza further explains:

I think I've just come to that. I think that you, you get to a point of... peace (Group A, lines 705-706).

She then follows by saying:

The strategy of not being able to change, I can't change anything that happened. I can't change that I was raised a Jehovah's Witness. I can't change what I said two minutes ago. It is done. And that, you know, that helps as well. I think it's just realising you can't (Group A, lines 743-748).

The ability to accept that it is not in the power of the individual to change the past, leads to experiencing a peaceful emotional state. By accepting the new circumstances, the individual also acknowledges that they cannot force a change in their Jehovah's Witness family and friends, as the accounts of Samuel and Noah emphasise. Rob came to the same conclusion. Ha says:

So, no, I never expected to have a moment where quiet sit down with them. And you know, use logic and scriptures to try to pry them out of the Jehovah's Witnesses. That will never happen. All I know is that if it happens it comes from their side because they want it, or they need it. Or they have come to a point in their life where they feel differently about things and feel differently about me... Meanwhile... people would say, "Well, you know, Rob, maybe the Lord, you know, has called you out of all that mess and helps you to find a way to know him, so that you'll be ready for them when they want to come out". So that's how I take it... Despite the tears that you're hearing, I'm still very happy with my life right now (Group A, lines 558-575).

For Rob, the acceptance of the current situation is also fostered by hope, the hope which comes from his faith and the belief that there is a reason for what has happened, which is part of a bigger plan. The faith-led hope enables the individual to focus their efforts towards happiness and contentment, despite the pain caused by being shunned by their family.

7.2.6 Self-Forgiveness

Other than accepting the new circumstances, another important coping mechanism in order for the individual to reappraise their experience and progress having no regrets, is self-forgiveness when confronted with the personal role in the proselytising process. Proselytism is an essential component of a Jehovah's Witness' life. It is an activity which is constantly encouraged and monitored by the leadership. Jacob comments:

I think Ray Franz said really well in his book... Crisis of Conscience. He said that a lot of the people are really victims, meaning victims, you know. We've been victims of something, but then inadvertently we've victimised

other people by just carrying on the process, you know, but you've got to forgive yourself for that (Group A, lines 1298-1302).

In some respect, members of the community could be seen as being both victims and perpetrators. According to Jacob, to some extent, members have victimised others just “*by carrying on the process*”. Becoming aware of one’s own role in converting people may have serious repercussions which may heighten a sense of guilt. Therefore, for some former members, self-forgiveness seems to be an important step towards an emotional recovery. Maggie says:

As it happens, they look for weakness, they look for vulnerability... Always the same. Always that vulnerability. You don't want strong [people], they want weak [ones]. We were told to look for people crying out, you know, and in pain (Group A, lines 126-134).

The individual’s pain and sufferance are used as leverage by the community to make alluring the door-to-door message of hope and eternal blessing in order to motivate people to join. Toby, a former Elder, explains:

Groups such as that... are more successful in recruiting people that are going through some sort of difficulty (Group B, lines 372-374).

Elliot further expands the concept by saying:

There are emotional wounds that come from having been part of that process. I think for the average Witness that leaves, there's a certain amount of anger and a certain amount of emotion around “How could I have been fooled like that? How could I walk into what I now realise is so obviously false and ridiculous?” For former Elders there's another whole dimension to that because not only we were fooled by it. We were complicit in fooling other people. We were complicit in teaching all of that which we now detest (Group B, lines 793-798).

As Elliot highlights, people who leave may suffer emotional wounds after realising that they have been used and manipulated. For the former Elders, the concept of being “*fooled*” has a more nuanced meaning. For example, Nate describes:

And many [Elders] have the right, you know, a good heart. They want to help people. And there's no doubt about that. And I felt I was the same way. But looking back on it now, quite frankly, I'm embarrassed because it was a bunch of nonsense... what I was teaching. As I said before, I didn't have

the credentials to counsel people, to help people with the type of issues that were coming across. And I am embarrassed that I sat in judgement of people and disfellowshipped them and I wish I could have that all back because I was a part of all the problem (Group B, lines 190-197).

Elders not only take part in proselytising, but they are also those who take the lead within the local churches, teaching and endorsing the leadership's norms and beliefs. They provide guidance and advice to other members. Besides, the Elders are those in charge of the judicial process which aims at determining the culpability of a member and eventually their shunning. Although there are Elders guided by a caring attitude and by the sincere belief that they are doing good, their actions result nonetheless in being harmful. They are neither professionally trained to counsel people nor have the moral right to shun members. Looking back at the role they played in the life of the other members, some former Elders feel embarrassed, guilty, and ashamed, as Nate admitted. Elias agrees by saying:

You know, now looking back, it's, it's embarrassing for me. It really is because most of the times, [disfellowshipped] people have just been people. That, that's all. That's all. It's really the whole thing it's difficult now that I look back... But then again... we were born in, I mean, I'm fourth generation. So, it's not like, you know, we knew any better (Group B, lines 52-56).

He then adds:

And just because you may disagree on whether or not you want to practice a religion, you know, we had no right to sever family ties, friend ties so I view it as a human rights violation (Group B, 202-204).

The risk of leaving in the past, carrying feelings of resentment and guilt is detrimental, both for the Elders and for the rank-and-file Witnesses. Samuel says:

The real danger in living in that world forever is that constantly your life... is defined by what happened 10 or 15 or 20 or 40 years ago, that you were a Jehovah's Witness, when it really isn't. And if you, the more you dwell on that and the bitterness grows about people or the organisation or whatever, it just destroys your life. So, for me it would be, dwell there for a little while. Think about the lessons, have a bit of compassion on the people because they, they're doing what they think is right, and then at some point, draw a line and say, "move, move forward" (Group A, lines 732-739).

Drawing a line and moving forward, as Samuel suggests, is the end result of self-forgiveness. Marc adds further depth by saying:

When I left, I started thinking about, I actually looked at all those people that I had disfellowshipped, so there weren't many, but I actually tracked them down through Facebook or whatever. I found them. Some of them, it was quite difficult. And I went and apologised to them. And I went and found out, you know, what had happened to their life. And, you know, some of them were actually good and they said, "Look, Marc don't worry about it. You actually did me a favour because I moved on with my life, you know", but the thing is, a lot of nice people did lose their family and my decision caused incredible grief, and I never gave it a second thought at the time. It just, it still really, I still feel this deep sense of shame, you know, that I hurt people like that because I was trying to do good. I thought I was doing good, but I was hurting people and not even being aware of that (Group B, lines 316-326).

Marc's quote illustrates the path towards self-forgiveness some former members undertake. Firstly, the person acknowledges their actions and, secondly, engages in actions oriented to make amends and repair. As Wenzel *et al.* (2012) argued, "When offenders are willing to take action, make amends, and offer reparations, they seem to accept their responsibility and act on it, with the possible effect of coming to terms with their guilt" (p. 618). When self-forgiveness is achieved, the individual is able to overcome guilt and shame, to experience inner peace, and to progress with their life.

7.2.6.1 Exposing the community

According to the accounts of the respondents, exposing the community appears to be a way to make amends. Furthermore, it is also a way to protect others from becoming entangled with the community by enhancing personal development. For example, Susan and her husband engaged in making amendment by visiting the people they contacted while proselytising. Susan says:

My husband went and visited all the people... and he told them he was sorry to go in there and teach them a bunch of blah blah blah. And told them

about the child abuse. And so, we, we did that together, we did that together and separately as well. But whenever I ran into someone in town, I told them... And this was another nail in the coffin because these people, when they met other Jehovah's Witnesses, they will say "Susan told me about the child abuse" (Group A, lines 278-285).

Susan also says:

I've been active in town, putting posters up, about the child abuse, and writing things on Facebook (Group A, lines 250-251).

As the account of Susan seems to suggest, raising awareness about the problems within the community may be seen as part of a process towards self-forgiveness and reconciliation with one's own past. The individual not only feels the need to apologise about what they taught, but also to actively engage in actions aimed at exposing the community. Tom says:

I never had a problem telling people what had happened... In fact, I frequently take the opportunity to negatively anti-witnessing and whether that means using my own experience, or whether it means talking about child abuse or whatever. I am very happy to open people's eyes to the cult, that is Jehovah's Witnesses (Group A, lines 497-502).

The individual uses their experience to alert people. There is a reappraisal of the experience. It appears that the need to speak up is motivated by a desire to protect others. Maggie says:

I'm quite open in my activism... I want to, you know, protect others. I want to make people aware of what it really does to people and protect them (Group A, lines 302-305).

The efforts the individual makes in order to raise awareness about the Jehovah's Witnesses is not solely directed for the benefit of non-members. Some of the participants report to use their experience in order to awake current members and help them to leave. Grace explains:

We were absolutely useless at getting people into the organisation. But we've had a lot more success getting them out (Group A, lines 1246-1248).

To this purpose, Jacob and Grace attended a counselling course. Jacob says:

We actually did do a very short, truncated counselling course ourselves... it was like an introduction, and it was, I found it extremely helpful, because it enables you to understand the mechanisms of, as a counsellor... what your parameters are, what you're not trying to do, because you don't want to try and coerce them into something else. You're only trying to remove obstacles so that they can see their own life, clearly, and come to their own conclusions. And people have the right to come to their own conclusion (Group A, lines 1220-1227).

As it appears, in helping others, Jacob and Grace do not want to hinder independent thinking. Rather, they try to enable the individual's personal development. Liza has adopted a similar approach and is encouraging her children to become critical thinkers. She says:

I focus on my children and helping them to become... critical thinkers, it is helping, is helping as well. Yeah. And because of the dad, they live half of their life as Witnesses and half of their life with me... I've actually got to be really strong for them, like my, my best weapon against them being Witnesses now is to show them that actually what they were told is rubbish, that you can be happy not being a Witness. You don't have to be a Witness to be a good person. Either have to be a Witness, to have good friends... And so that really helps me knowing that I've got to be an example for them more than anything (Group A, lines 749-757).

The theme which emerges herein is that the freeing of others and especially one's own children from the grasp of the community, is a strong motivator for the individual to be resolute. By engaging their children in conversations which encourages critical thinking, the shunned parent has the chance to contrast the community's unceasing pressure and teach them to choose the life they want to live, whilst simultaneously strengthening the individual's conviction for separation.

7.2.7 Adopting a New Belief System

Leaving the Jehovah's Witness community represents a point of departure for the individual to potentially explore and adopt a new belief system. For some respondents

this meant reconnecting with their personal values, concept of God, or spirituality, and to express it without restraints and fear. For example, Gaby explains:

I did feel a link with nature because the fact, there's things you can see. It's like when they say, "Talk to God" and you can't see him, I find that quite difficult. But, you know, you can see things like the moon and the sun and the planet and everything. And you can connect with that more. So yeah, I sort, I've got quite an affinity with sort of nature, nature-based-things after that. I also did research into life after death, because Jehovah's Witnesses talked that there was no life after death. So, and I had a few experiences where I felt there was something else, so I went to find out what that was. So, I, just around the corner of the Jehovah's Witness church I used to go, there was a spiritualist church... So, when I decided to research the spiritualist stuff that was the church I went to, and the people in there were really nice. It was a nice little church (Group A, lines 293-307).

For those participants who were born into the community, the belief system was imposed and not the result of a thorough personal investigation. As highlighted in the previous chapter, for the 'born into' members, the choice of becoming Jehovah's Witnesses was a bounded choice, determined by the impossibility to be exposed to and evaluate other belief systems. Some participants reported a feeling of uneasiness in worshipping the way it was expected, as the account of Gaby suggests and as Noah reiterates by saying:

It was never really there, it was a token gesture, really. Ever since, even, even probably when I got baptised it was. They say "pray", you know, "pray", you know, "pray", and I did but I never felt, I never truly felt anything, but I just went along with it. Sometimes when you, you do something, or you're told to do something, and you don't feel as if anything's happening as a result, then again, you feel guilty because you know, "Am I not faithful enough? Am I just not praying hard enough?", and it's basically how I felt, really. I never, I never really believed it. If I, if I'm looking back now, you know, I, I can say that deep down it never really made much sense to me (Group A, lines 98-106).

Gaby's affinity with nature, her interest in life after death, and being free from previous religious constraints, led her to embrace spiritualism as a new belief paradigm. Noah, on the other hand, was pulled towards Buddhism. He describes:

I never even thought back about God after I got disfellowshipped but in the years since, more spirituality has crept into my life I'd say, possibly. Perhaps

Buddhist teachings, that sort of thing where it's more, [there is] less, less reliance on a God, less worshipping a God, and more being a good person (Group A, lines 273-276).

There is a shift in focus towards a belief system which reflects the individual's moral values, ideology, and worldview and not those imposed by an external authority. The individual reframes their perspective and realises that being spiritual or being a good person is not necessarily linked to believing in God, or in having a relationship with a supernatural entity. Rather, being a “good person” becomes the individual's responsibility, and it is no longer determined by a religious label.

For some of the participants, the experience of leaving the community did not compromise their faith in the Bible nor in the existence of God. Thus, once they transitioned away from the Jehovah's Witnesses, they commenced a journey towards rediscovering the biblical teachings and God. Luke narrates:

I was beginning to look again at the Bible and wanted to try to make sense of the Bible, which I always have deep respect for and believed in ... And I began the journey to a new faith, which is the Christian faith, Orthodox Christianity (Group A, lines 298-326).

For Eric, the Alpha Course represented the starting point of his journey in adopting a new belief system. He says:

[My friend] said, “I think you should find an Alpha Course at a local church”. And so, within a couple of days, I had spoken to somebody at, at what turned out to be our local church, literally half a mile away. And it turned out to be a really, really good church with a really, really good vicar and his wife, who were very open and receptive to the, to the whole situation. And we started going, ... to this course that they will run in and immediately it turned, it exposed both of us to the Christians and, and it turned out to be a really positive thing. I was like, I was like a kid in a sweet shop. Because through all of this, through all of my doubts for 1995 my personal faith never, never wavered. It was just answers that I was lacking (Group A, lines 776-785).

Eric further comments:

And suddenly I was exposed to a different environment... where faith was very much a personal thing rather than a corporate thing... Suddenly you come into a wide faith-based environment. And you realise that there is lots of freedom, lots of room for discussion, debate, thoughts and, crucially for me, there is room for differences of opinion. And I just found that so healthy, I found it healthy because you could sit next to somebody who's clearly intelligent and could clearly explain and reason on their position, and I could personally think "I completely understand where you're coming from. But I actually think slightly differently. But I respect your position". And so, we can stay united as Christians without having to be forced to believe exactly the same things. And I found that, I still do find that, to this day, so stimulating and healthy (Group A, lines 786-801).

Eric's account provides some insight into the way the individual may decide to approach and evaluate a new belief system. According to Eric, the new community provided a positive, receptive, and stimulating environment. As Eric stated, it was an environment which endorsed close ties while fostering individuality and personal opinions. It appears that both an emotional and a rational component merge in determining the individual's preference of joining a specific religious denomination rather than a different one. For example, the feedback and advice received from a trusted friend influenced Eric's decision, leading him to attend an Alpha Course. Moreover, the warm and welcoming disposition of the vicar and his wife, and of the religious community had a positive effect on Eric as well. This suggests that the social environment plays an important role in directing the individual, by triggering an emotional response.

Charles, too, experienced the strong drive that the emotional component may play in guiding the individual's choice. He describes his feelings when he joined the new church as follows:

I can only be described as been encapsulated in this love bubble. And this feeling of love that I just couldn't, where is this coming from, you know, why am I feeling like this... And the contrast was that, with the Witnesses, it was

almost like oppressive, depressive, suppressive. Whereas, what I was finding, it was almost like freedom. You know, I could find that even though I was smoking cannabis, nobody judged me. In fact, they didn't look at me as a smoker of cannabis, they looked at me as Charles. And they loved me (Group A, lines 1058-11068).

It appears that while the caring, friendly, and welcoming attitude of the church's congregants have drawn participants in, an environment which, according to Charles, is "*oppressive, depressive, suppressive*" resulted in reinforcing the participants' feeling of rejection of the previous religious context.

Other than the emotional factor, the participants' experiences suggest that an intellectual component also contributes to the individual's choice of adopting a new religion. Therefore, the practical value of the teachings, the congregational ethos and theology seem to determine the religious affiliation. When the individual starts to attend a new religious community, they evaluate what the church offers and then decide whether the offer will satisfy their needs (Sherkat and Wilson, 1995). For instance, the Christian environment and its theology seem to have fulfilled the emotional and intellectual needs of Eric, guiding his choice to join the Christian faith.

It is also important to consider that the individual might seek to adopt a new belief system in order to fill the void left by the previous one, decision which would evidence how deeply ingrained the prior conviction is in the individual. Although the participants' interviews seem to suggest a certain level of agency, a strive towards redefining religious affiliation at their own terms (see Chapter 6, sub-themes 'Spirituality' and 'Renewed Family Bonds'), the urge to join a new religion could be also seen as the individual's struggle in freeing themselves from a preconstructed way to understand and fulfil spirituality.

The new life and blooming of the survivor self - Freedom is one of the most valuable condition an individual could experience. This is what I could evince from the experiences of the participants. However, leaving the community does not grant immediate freedom. The pathway towards regaining agency and autonomy is a process that requires introspection and retrospection. The journey that I went through was not a linear one, which mirrored the participants' experiences. This was a significant finding for me in terms of the upheavals that an individual endures post shunning in order to rebuild their sense of self. Perhaps this is because I partly view the self as being meaningfully interrelated with the rest of the world (Thompson, 2005) and, for a Jehovah's Witness, the community often represents that world. In accordance with this perspective, once shunned, an individual is faced with the task and process of accepting the breaking up and loss of such relationship. For some of the former members, this process may feel like aimlessly walking in the desert looking to building new relationships, as "...for a person's self to be fully functioning and fully utilised then it must be in relationship with another..." (Smith, 2018, p. 9). Indeed, my journey has been a journey of healing and rebuilding my survivor self. It has been a journey towards looking for meaningful relationships that could help my sense of self to bloom. Although I felt scared, because for a person who leaves a gated community the world may look scary, I realised in the same way the participants did, that the *worldly people* are actually interesting, positive and nurturing people.

Personal progression is the key theme which surfaces from the individuals' accounts, and that this section explored. The respondents, after being shunned, were able to

develop new-built coping skills which allowed them to move forward with their lives. The individual does not look back or turn inward to cope, strategies which interrupt progress, creating a condition of personal stagnation. Rather participants projected themselves onward, directing their efforts and actions in order to draw a line with their past and break free from the community's hold which resulted in personal progression.

7.3 Summary

The concept of personal stagnation as opposed to the concept of personal progression emerged from the accounts of the participants, showing a substantial difference in the coping styles. The respondents' accounts suggest that some of them initially implemented coping strategies which appear to be still conditioned by the influence of the community. Nonetheless, overall, the coping style the participants adopted helped them to manage their experiences of being shunned, through the development of new-built coping skills which enabled them to break free from the hold of the community, and to progress. For example, information and support seeking have helped them to positively reappraise their circumstances and to find a new meaningful social network. Also, the community of former members has provided a safe and welcoming hub where they have been able to share their experiences in a non-judgemental environment. Moreover, acceptance of the new circumstances and self-forgiveness appear to be fundamental milestones in order for the individual to make peace with their past, to achieve inner peace, and to move on with their life having no regrets. On the one hand, acceptance of the new circumstances first allows the individual to acknowledge that is not entirely their responsibility to improve the situation, but efforts should be made by both the parties involved. Second, by accepting that they have done everything possible in trying to build bridges between them and their families,

the individual frees themselves from guilt and blame. On the other hand, self-forgiveness helps the individual to resolve guilt resulted by having had a role in the proselytism process. By engaging in actions intended to expose the community, the individual aims at making amends which seems to be for some former members a step in the self-forgiveness process.

This chapter also highlighted the gap in the way counsellors and psychotherapists understand the client's experience of being shunned due to their limited knowledge of the phenomenon and the specific cultural environment which characterises the Jehovah's Witnesses. This naivety leads in turn to a gap in the provision of a suitable method of support or treatment when professionals deal with people shunned from the community. This research provides the starting point to familiarise with the Jehovah's Witness culture, the social dynamics which develop within the community, and the way religious shunning is used as a tool to coerce and manipulate the members. Moreover, this research illuminates the impact that being shunned has on the individual's life, as well as the strategies implemented to cope with such an event. Developing an understanding of these aspects of the shunning experience may facilitate therapists in planning and delivering suitable interventions for people who have been shunned.

The next and last chapter will draw together the main findings discussed so far in order to present a comprehensive picture of the experiences of religious shunning. The chapter will also discuss the unique contribution of this research in terms of knowledge advancement. Lastly, suggested recommendations and future directions will be proposed.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

8.1 Introduction

This research sought to provide a deep understanding of religious shunning through the lived experiences of people who have been shunned from the gated community of the Jehovah's Witnesses. In order to explore this multi-faceted phenomenon, three research questions were identified. The first research question focused on the individual's experiences of being shunned from the Jehovah's Witnesses. This research delivered a thorough depiction of the individual's complex journey from being a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses, to leaving the community. The second research question shed light on the possible impacts that religious shunning may have on the life of the individual. It explored whether and to what extent religious shunning has an impact on the individuals' lives through the exploration of the two overarching themes, 'Losses due to shunning' and 'The rebuilding of self post-shunning'. The third research question focused on the coping strategies the shunned individual adopts to deal with such an event. This research has enhanced understanding about the coping mechanisms the shunned individuals adopt to normalise their new circumstances. The data highlight that the two underlining concepts which characterise the way the individual copes with religious shunning are 'Personal stagnation' opposed to 'Personal progression.'

In line with the explorative nature of this research, adopting a qualitative approach to address the subject has provided a unique insight into the instances of religious shunning. This was attained by enabling the participants' personal perspective and

understanding of the event, its meaning, and the emotional, physical, and spiritual consequences they endured. Exploring qualitatively the topic has allowed the creation of original knowledge through an in-depth reflection of the respondents' own reality, a result which would have been hampered by adopting quantitative techniques.

This chapter will be divided into four sections. The first section will summarise the main findings of this research. The second section will discuss the original contribution this research represents in terms of knowledge advancement as well as practical impact. The third section will consider the limitations of this study. The final section of this chapter will propose possible future directions.

8.2 Summary of the Research Findings

Chapter 5, which considered the lifecycle of religious affiliation, presented the experiences of the participants as a complex journey from being members of the Jehovah's Witnesses to being shunned from the community. There were two salient themes that emerged from the analysis. The first theme captured the way intrinsic and extrinsic forces concur in influencing the individuals' general decisions across their experiences as members of the community. For example, the findings highlighted that for those who grew up in the community, part of their decisions were primed by having been raised in a family of Jehovah's Witnesses, a limited life experience, the lack of external points of reference, the community's expectations, and by internalising the community's culture and belief system. For those who joined the community later in life, personal needs and proclivities together with the community's structure and teachings seem to have had an influential role in directing the individual's choices. The second theme emphasised the coercive environment the gated religious community

has created by endorsing a culture based on fear, guilt, and shame. Shunning is seen by participants as a powerful symbol of a controlling system which aims at coercing members through threat, humiliation, emotional blackmail, and social death.

Chapter 6 explored the loss and disillusionment of being shunned and its impacts. The first part of this chapter revealed that being shunned from the Jehovah's Witness community is an experience of loss which has serious impacts, both physical and emotional, on the lives of the respondents. For instance, participants described a worsening of their health conditions, the development of adverse emotional responses, such as anger and feelings of hurt, the negative impact on self-esteem, as well as suicidal ideation and suicide. Moreover, some of the respondents reported to have faced financial and social hardship as a consequence of being shunned. The experience of ambiguous loss and grieving the living emerged from the participants' accounts, highlighting the emotional struggle participants endured due to the loss of close ones. Lastly, although the sub-theme 'Disrespect of professional context' emerges only from one of the participants' accounts, as he is the only respondent who serves in a public capacity, the events narrated revealed the extent religious shunning may subject the individual to victimisation.

The second part of the chapter showed that leaving the community may also produce constructive outcomes, as the individual commences a process towards rebuilding a sense of self following shunning. The latter data emphasised that the common thread which connects such constructive outcomes is the concept of regaining or developing autonomy, self-ownership, and freedom to act according to one's own judgement. Therefore, once an individual is shunned several opportunities open and become

available, such as the possibility to explore and express one's own spirituality in a more genuine way or to regain the independence to make choices of friendships, hobbies, and education. Shunning also represents for the individual an opportunity to prioritise family bonds. Lastly, a significant theme which emerged is the emancipation from fear the individual experiences. Free from fear, guilt, and shame, the individual faces the realisation they can regain control over their life.

In evaluating personal challenge or personal development: What is the outcome for shunned individuals?, Chapter 7 explored the way respondents coped with being shunned. The opposed overarching themes, 'Personal Stagnation' and 'Personal Progression', represent the two underlying concepts which characterises the way the individual attempt to manage the shunning experience. Therefore, on the one hand, some of the coping strategies the participants adopted denote levels of personal stagnation as these strategies seem to be conditioned by the community's belief system and values which continue to influence their lives. For instance, rebelling and avoiding forming close bonds are strategies which denote the extent the individual remains influenced and mentally tied to the community's teachings and culture. On the other hand, other respondents reframed their life and developed new-built coping skills which convey a sense of personal progression. Respondents, for example, described the way information seeking acted as a catalyst to eventually leave the community or provided the individual with external validation. Seeking support either from other former members or from non-Jehovah's Witnesses was another strategy the individual adopted which allowed them firstly, to buffer the sudden social void created by being shunned, and secondly, to accumulate experience by observing others. Accepting the challenge of experimenting with new situations, and adopting a

physical outlet are other coping mechanisms which resulted in helping the individual to manage the impact of religious shunning on their lives. Lastly, acceptance, self-forgiveness, and adopting a new belief system which genuinely reflects the individual's moral values, ideology, and worldview appear to be important milestones towards a redefinition of the new personal circumstances. All these coping mechanisms facilitated closure, helping the individual to make peace with their past and to progress with their life.

Therefore, overall, the main findings of this research are firstly, religious shunning is a multifaceted experience which evidences the power dynamics which characterise the Jehovah's Witness community. Social dynamics and the coercive construct of power established by the Jehovah's Witness leadership integrate, creating a unique and powerful system of influence within the community. Secondly, although religious shunning is appraised as being an emotionally traumatic event which may seriously impair the individual's life, there are also positive outcomes which emanate from leaving the community. Lastly, the coping mechanisms the respondents adopted to manage their new circumstances are twofold. On the one hand, they highlight levels of personal stagnation. The individual leaves the community physically but not mentally. On the other hand, other coping strategies adopted focus on personal progression with the individual breaking free from the hold of the community and facilitating life progression.

8.3 Contribution of this Thesis

The research in this thesis makes original contributions both in terms of knowledge advancement, and practical impact. The following sections discuss these elements.

8.3.1 Contribution to Knowledge

This research is unique in that it makes significant contribution to the advancement of knowledge about religious shunning. It does this through enhancing knowledge about the socio-cultural context where religious shunning develops, the sample size, through the decision to include the Elders as research participants for Group B, and by proposing an integrated model of social dynamics and coercive construct of power. All these constituent facets of the thesis represent important elements that move towards providing a better understanding of religious shunning as a distinct phenomenon, and thus contribute to filling a gap in the existing academic literature.

8.3.1.1 Enhancing knowledge about the cultural context where religious shunning develops

Enhancing knowledge about the socio-cultural context where religious shunning develops was a paramount aim of this research in order to promote a better understanding of this practice. As it appears, there is a general lack of awareness of religious shunning and, in using the Jehovah's Witnesses as an example, there are several possible reasons that can explain this. Firstly, the Jehovah's Witness community is considered an insular community which perhaps contributes to non-members' superficial knowledge of the community's culture, life, and creed. Thus, shunning as a systematic disciplinary measure applied in a religious context, is a phenomenon which is often overlooked by wider society.

Secondly, the cloak of respectability behind which the Jehovah's Witnesses operate, contributes to the inaccurate perception that the external society holds about the community. As shown by the findings in this thesis, the community has been able to construct and project an outward image of themselves which does not correspond to what happens within. Therefore, it becomes difficult for non-members to conciliate the positive portrayal they may hold about the Jehovah's Witnesses with the idea of people leaving the community, voluntarily or through shunning being deeply damaged and in need of support.

Thirdly, as the interviews with the participants suggested, there is a certain level of reluctance from the shunned person in sharing their experiences of shunning with others, and especially with therapists. This is due to the perceived lack of understanding from the health professionals of the dynamics which characterise the Jehovah's Witnesses, and the deep impact that shunning has. The individual seeks instead the support of peer-support groups of former members confident that their experience will be understood. Such reluctance of seeking professional help promotes a vicious cycle where the traumatic nature of this event is not addressed because the shunning experience is not shared, and the possibility to fully understand the disciplinary practice adopted in some gated communities and cultic groups is hindered.

The rich data gathered allowed an in-depth exploration of the individuals' experiences of religious shunning. However, in order to appreciate religious shunning as a distinct phenomenon, understanding the socio-cultural milieu in which it develops was also crucial. This study progresses current literature not only by providing the ground to

evaluate the impacts that religious shunning has on the individual's life, and the coping mechanisms adopted, but also enhancing an understanding of the culture, social dynamics and power constructs which characterise the Jehovah's Witnesses modus operandum wherein religious shunning is purposively adopted to foster compliance.

8.3.1.2 The sample size

As previously highlighted, this research adopted a qualitative approach. Therefore, a deep understanding of the topic through the lived experience of the participants was of paramount consideration. This is the largest qualitative study on the Jehovah's Witness community known to the researcher with a participant size of thirty-three, twenty-one former Jehovah's Witnesses and twelve PIMO and former Elders. For instance, recent qualitative research conducted to explore the experiences of individuals transitioning out from the Jehovah's Witnesses, such as Hookway and Habibis (2013), or Ransom *et al.* (2021), is based on the interviews of seven, and six individuals respectively. The size of the study further contributes to the uniqueness of this research and to the thorough depiction of the religious shunning experience.

8.3.1.3 Group B: the Elders

The inclusion of a research group of PIMO and former Elders further represents the unique contribution of this research to the advancement of knowledge. Qualitative studies which explore the perpetration of different types of abusive behaviours by examining the agents' narratives are scarce (Calcina *et al.*, 2021). As far as the researcher is aware, this is the first study addressing the topic of religious shunning which obtained data from this group of respondents. The inclusion of the Elders as a

research group aimed to encompass the wider context of the phenomenon, presenting both perspectives of those who have been shunned and those in the position to shun a member, which provided further depth to the findings.

As highlighted in chapter 7 (Sub-section 7.2.6 Self-Forgiveness), the Elders, knowingly or not, ultimately have an important role in perpetrating a system of coercion and control. The Elders not only take part in proselytising, but they also teach and endorse the leadership's norms and beliefs within the community. They have the power to decide whether shunning a member is deemed necessary. Although there are loving Elders who truly believe that they are acting in the best interest of the community's members, their actions result nonetheless in being harmful. The Elders' testimonies not only provided an insight into religious shunning from their viewpoint, and the policies, directives and information which are precluded to the rank-and-file member but also shed light on the Elders' personal journey from endorsing the group's ethos and being part of the shunning process, to questioning their role within the community.

The Elders' accounts illuminated the turning point which led them to redefine their core values and therefore distance themselves from the leadership's teachings and belief system (Breakwell, 1986, 2001). They discussed the strategies they implemented, or are planning to implement, to step down from being Elders. Moreover, their accounts highlighted the struggles some of them have experienced in trying to come to terms with their past position of authority and the role they played in many members' lives. Furthermore, the inner turmoil caused by living a PIMO life or by being a *fader* when their spouses and children remain devout Jehovah's Witnesses have been shared.

As the analysis of the Elders' accounts highlighted, there are additional challenges this group faces in leaving the community compared to those of a rank-and-file Jehovah's Witness. As discussed in chapter 5 (sub-section 5.2.3 The Facets of Religious Shunning), becoming a *fader* is a possible strategy some members implement to distance themselves from the community and to live their life while avoiding being officially shunned. Nonetheless, for an Elder the decision to fade requires time and meticulous planning. This is because the Elders, due to their role within the community, are in the limelight. It is essential to resign before fading is initiated. However, in order to resign, reasonable motivations have to be provided, and the matter is investigated by the body of Elders. This may pose an additional emotional burden for those Elders who wish to leave the community.

Furthermore, the accounts of the PIMO and former Elders brought to light the deep impact that being *physically in but mentally out* may have on an Elder. As already said, resigning and leaving, is a process. In that period a PIMO Elder lives a double life. However, the level of involvement in the community's activities required from a PIMO Elder significantly differs from that of a PIMO rank-and-file member. A PIMO Elder has responsibilities such as publicly supporting the teachings and a system they have internally rejected, as well as being part of a judicial arrangement they no longer endorse. As the testimonies of the PIMO Elders indicated, the PIMO life is mentally and emotionally draining, which may lead them to endure periods of depression and anxiety.

Lastly, the accounts of the participants of Group B, emphasised the role that power in interactions plays in influencing the social dynamics which develop within the Jehovah's Witness community. As the PIMO and former Elders' accounts evidenced, there is a micro- and a macro-level of influence which operate within the Jehovah's Witness' hierarchical structure. At a micro-level, each congregation of the Jehovah's Witnesses should be considered as a social group which develops distinctive dynamics within the wider religious community. For instance, the Elders and members' personal characteristics, the way the body of Elders leads their congregation, and the way they exert their authority over the other members shape a unique pattern of social dynamics.

At the same time, the shared characteristics and goals promoted by religious affiliation, increase group cohesion, and reinforce the distinctiveness between in-group and out-group. Also, it appears that group affiliation may satisfy the individual's intrinsic needs for belonging, self-esteem, subjective meaning, and continuity (Lido et al., 2020). This is congruent with SIT (Tajfel and Turner, 1986) and IPT (Breakwell, 1986, 2001). Through a process of self-categorisation and fulfilment of intrinsic needs, the individual identifies themselves with the group they belong to (compliant members), which results in a collective sense of unity. This process of classification of the self in relation to others also strengthens the concept of in-group versus out-group. IPT posits that when a group's affiliation ceases to fulfil the intrinsic needs of an individual, or when the individual's core values are challenged or change, this affects the individual's behaviour, attitudes, and group's membership. In this respect, non-compliant members can be seen as individuals whose core values have changed and being a member of the Jehovah's Witness community does no longer fulfil their intrinsic needs.

This determines a redefinition of the identity structure and identity salience which may become apparent with the individual's non-compliant behaviour. This has several implications in terms of group dynamics and categorisation processes. The non-compliant members position themselves outside of the boundaries set by the community. At the same time, the community positions the non-compliant members as individuals belonging to the out-group. In this respect, shunning appears to accomplish a twofold function. First, it is used as a tool to publicly reaffirm the differentiation between the in-group from the out-group (Stets and Burke, 2000). Second, shunning could also be understood in terms of strategy the members endorse and implement to protect their salient identity from the threat that the non-compliant individual is posing to the core values and needs fulfilled by group affiliation.

The social dynamics which develop within the Jehovah's Witness community are illustrated in the diagram below (Figure 8.1), which evidences the elements that contribute to the identification of the congregation as a unique social group. Also, the diagram provides a visual representation of the tension between in-group versus outgroup, where compliant members and PIMO members, part of the in-group, are opposed to non-compliant members, who are identified as belonging to the out-group.

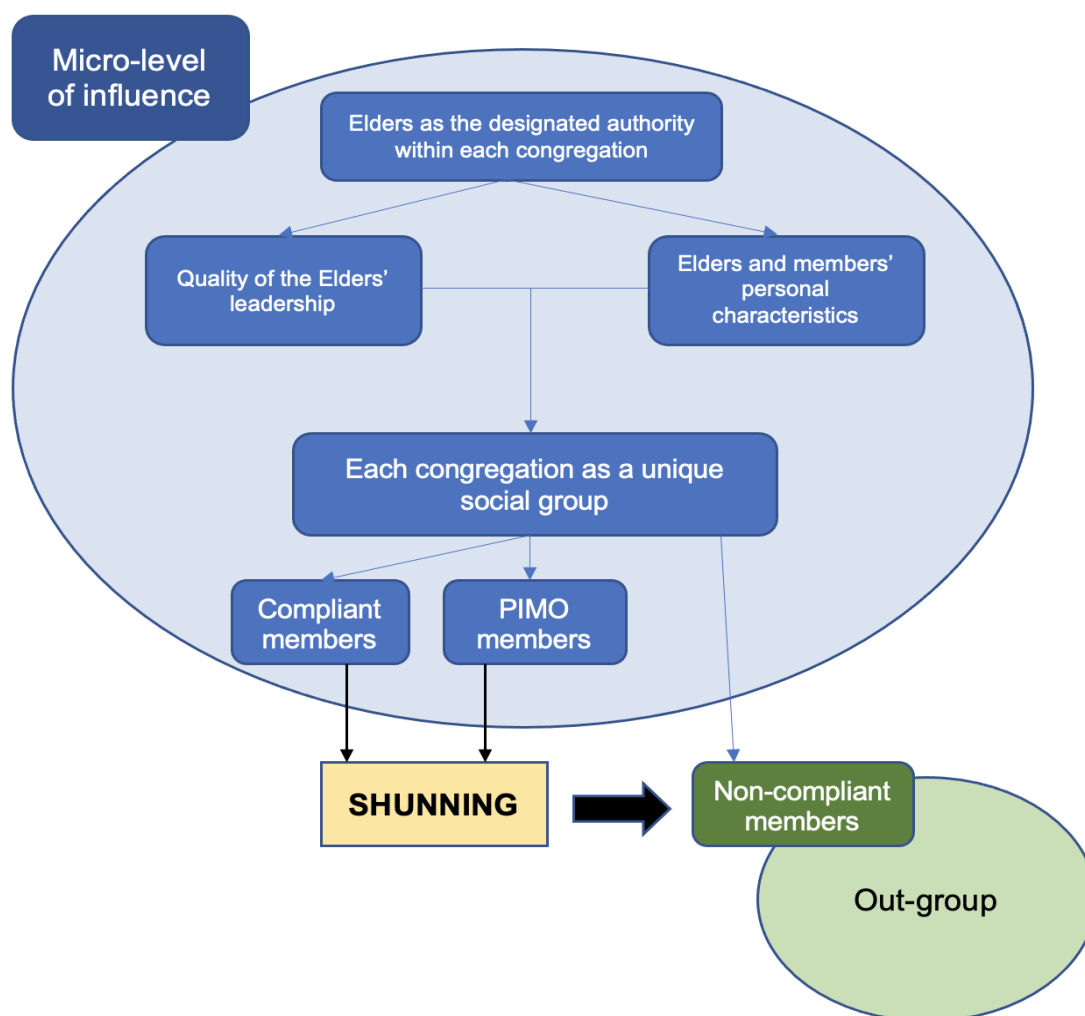


Figure 8.1 Micro-level of social influence within the Jehovah's Witness community

Hence, the micro-level of influence within the Jehovah's Witness community is socially constructed. However, at a macro-level, a second level of influence comes into play which is determined by the wider construct of power and systemic dominance created by the Jehovah's Witness leadership at the apex of the hierarchy (French & Raven, 1959). Shunning, which is used to mark the distinction between in-group versus out-group and to protect the in-group's integrity, is also a tactic legitimised by the coercive power construct and legitimising myths adopted by the Jehovah's Witness leadership (Hofmann *et al.*, 2017). The religious narrative (legitimising myths) which the Jehovah's Witness beliefs and teaching are built upon justifies the dominance of one

group over another as being the will of God, perpetuates inequality between men and women (patriarchal hierarchy), and legitimises the use of coercive tactics to sustain and maintain the status quo (Pratto *et al.*, 1994). The following diagram (Figure 8.1) proposes therefore an integrated model to represent the way the social dynamics and the coercive power construct integrate, creating a powerful system of influence.

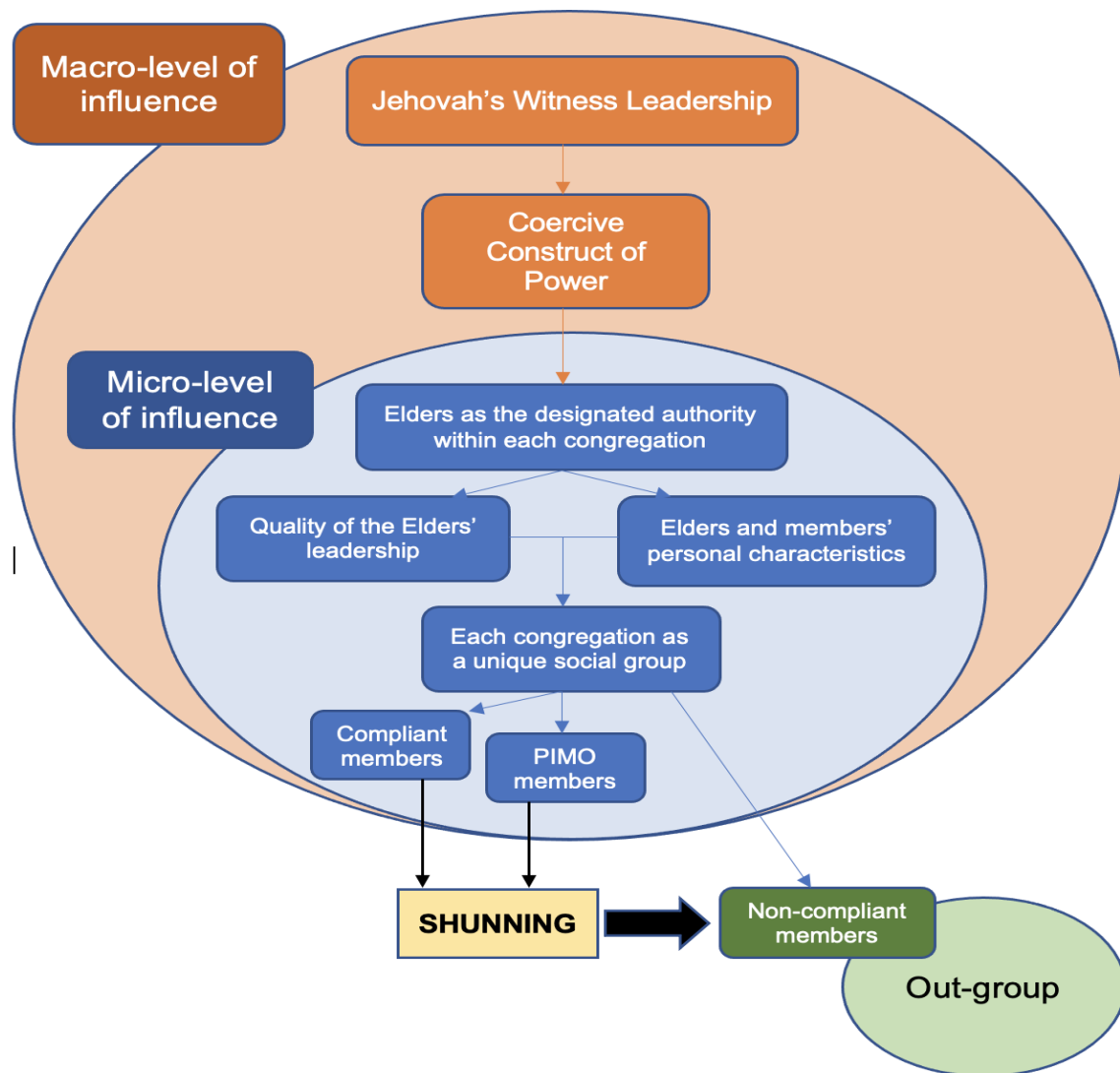


Figure 8.2 Integrated Model of Social Dynamics and Coercive Power Construct

Thus, if, on the one hand, the Elders can be considered as agents of a controlling system with the power to influence the social dynamics within each smaller community

(the congregation), they are, in turn, part of and subordinated to a wider system of influence which relies on the coercive construct of power and a systemic hierarchy of dominance through which control is established and exerted over the members of the community (French and Raven, 1959; Pratto *et al.*, 1994). The concept of coercion and control associated to the Jehovah's Witness environment which the data analysis emphasised, is not entirely new. It was previously raised in the context of discussing the community's blood policy, approach to psychotherapy, and mental health (Faulkner, 2009; Friedson, 2015; Muramoto, 2000). However, the social and power dynamics, and the tactics implemented by the leadership to exert influence were not thoroughly developed and examined. This evidences that, while social dynamics are context-sensitive, the presence of a leadership, and the way the authority is structured and dominance and inequality are legitimised also play a crucial role in influencing the actions and choices of all members, including the Elders. Therefore, this research represents a further contribution to the existing literature by providing a clear understanding of the way the group's leadership operates, and the way power and the legitimising myths shape social dynamics within the Jehovah's Witness community.

8.3.2 Practical Impact

The unique contribution of this research extends beyond the progression of academic knowledge to include knowledge which has practical impact, representing an important resource to inform future practice. Specifically, this study offers contextual information in order to, firstly, develop an understanding of the respondents' experiences of shunning, enhancing knowledge about the community's culture and dynamics. Secondly, to recognise that religious shunning does impact the individual's

life and thirdly, to identify the coping mechanisms the shunned individual may adopt in adjusting to their new circumstances.

This last aspect, which the third research question explored, represents an important step in raising awareness with the aim to improve the delivery of effective interventions for a shunned individual. Although Hookway and Habibis (2013) already highlighted that the former members' life outside the community may be encumbered by "their past moral and belief frameworks" (p. 10), to the researcher's knowledge, the explicit conceptualisation of personal stagnation as opposed to personal progression revealed in this thesis, represents a novel idea which sheds more subtle light on the strategies adopted to cope with religious shunning. This is emphasised in this research when it describes the way the coping strategies implemented may be determined by the extent to which the community, its values and beliefs still have a hold on the individual's life. When the individual becomes conscious of the mental influence that the community still exerts on them despite the physical distancing, only then do the coping strategies adopted appear to facilitate a personal progression, freeing the individual from their past life as Jehovah's Witnesses, and a way to understand themselves and their role in the wider society which are the result of their past religious beliefs. By developing an awareness of these coping strategies and the underlying factors which may facilitate or hinder personal progression, this research may assist healthcare professionals in providing a more effective therapy that aims at helping the shunned client to emancipate themselves from the community's influence.

Moreover, by including PIMO and former Elders as a research group, this research has provided important insights into those aspects of the experiences of the Elders

which would help a therapist to be more effective in supporting a PIMO Elder to either develop a successful strategy to resign and leave or to cope with the emotional burden of living a double life.

Therefore, this research, by promoting familiarisation and enhancing knowledge, focuses the attention of the health environment on religious shunning and its emotional, physical, and spiritual consequences. The end result is twofold. Firstly, it offers the opportunity to open pathways for more informed means of support from practitioners and key stakeholders who already work with those who have been shunned from high-control religious communities, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses. Secondly, the practitioners' knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon may encourage those who are reluctant, to seek professional help. In fact, although peer support has positive effects, some shunned individuals have been deeply affected by the shunning experience, and a tailored therapy programme would be more effective in prompting the recovery process.

8.4 Limitations of the Research

This section will consider the limitations of this research.

8.4.1 Generalisability of the Research Findings

The researcher of this study, with the aim to explore the phenomenon of religious shunning in depth, approached the topic qualitatively. In selecting a qualitative framework, the researcher acknowledges that no claim can be made about the generalisability of the research findings. The findings of the present research are not

to be considered as representative of the worldwide population but of a limited group of respondents. However, although generalisability cannot be made, the research findings can be transferred to other contexts and situations. 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 an abusive relationship, to name some. Therefore, this research provides specialist knowledge which can be applied not only to people who have been shunned from the Jehovah's Witness community but also from other communities which implement religious shunning as a disciplinary measure, such as the Exclusive Brethren or Scientology. This specialist knowledge can also be transferred to other areas of trauma, such as honour-based violence and violent relationships. Therefore, although the lack of generalisability of the qualitative findings represents a limitation of this research, the transferability of them appears to be its strength.

8.4.2 The Study Design

The limitation of the study design originates from the conscious choice made by the researcher to narrow the scope of the present research. This study was designed to only include British respondents for Group A. This implied the deliberate decision to include a specific segment of the Jehovah's Witnesses population who have experienced religious shunning, represented by being British, to the exclusion of all others. Therefore, caution is needed in assuming that the findings may represent the experiences of non-British former-Jehovah's Witnesses, as nationality and cultural background may determine a variance not only in the way different individuals

understand and interpret the same occurrence, but also the way they appraise and react to that occurrence.

Another weakness of the study design is represented by the fact that first- and second-generation respondents are grouped indiscriminately to form Group A, and not split into two distinct sub-groups. Although across the write-up of the findings, it was specifically stated whether the participant was a first- or second-generation member, there is a lack of a clear representation of the similarities and differences which may characterise religious shunning experienced by the first-generation respondents compared to those who are second-generation ones.

8.5 Future Research Directions

Based on the highlighted limitations and the research findings, this final section will offer recommendations and suggest future research directions.

The previous section identified areas of improvement. One of these is the necessity to conduct further research to develop a better insight into the intrinsic and cultural characteristics of the members of the Jehovah's Witness community. It would therefore be recommendable to first, conduct cross-cultural research so as to enlighten whether the respondents' nationality and cultural background may determine a difference in the way religious shunning is experienced.

Second, research aimed at comparing the experiences of first- and second-generation respondents would allow the identification of patterns and dissimilarities of these two groups of participants. This comparison would enhance the understanding

of the different challenges along the individual's journey and the ways the two groups may respond to these. Also, comparing these two groups of respondents would shed more light on the way both groups experience being members of the community, and the effect that an imposed belief system (for second-generation) compared to a voluntary choice to convert (for first-generation) has on the individual. Finally, it would allow a better understanding of the factors which may trigger the decision of leaving of people who grew up in the community compared to those who converted and chose to join it.

Third, the current research brought to light that despite the level of deception, control and coercion members of the Jehovah's Witness community are exposed to, personal needs, social factors, the structure of power, and intrinsic factors, together with the coercive and controlling techniques implemented by the leadership, all concur in directing the individual's path. Thus, led by data, it seems reasonable to evaluate the members' journey and their decisions as a combination and interaction of various factors, intrinsic and extrinsic. Although the extrinsic drives in terms, for example, of tactics implemented by the leadership to exert control and to ensure submission, or the social dynamics which act in moulding the individual's behaviour, have been extensively discussed, the members and leavers' intrinsic characteristics and proclivities have not been explored in depth. Therefore, quantitative research would be recommendable in order to illuminate, for example, the personal traits of converts and leavers, the extent the indoctrination process weighs on the individual's journey as a Jehovah's Witness, or the way the controlling and coercive tactics, the indoctrination process, the personal needs and characteristics intertwine to produce the variety of outcomes discussed in this thesis. It would be equally important to

explore the intrinsic characteristics of those individuals who determine to conduct a double life as PIMO members compared to those who are compliant and non-compliant members.

Lastly, in terms of the extent the indoctrination process weighs on the individual's decisions as a Jehovah's Witness, further research is recommendable in order to explore whether the concept of being brainwashed is applicable to the members of the community. Despite the tight teaching programme and activity schedule members of the Jehovah's Witness community follow, the data suggests a certain degree of agency in the decisions made by the respondents across their journey as members of the community as opposed to a totally passive role of the individual induced by a brainwashing process (Zimbardo, *et. al.*, 1977). This seems to be supported, for example, by the fact that often the respondents reported only behavioural compliance, as the experiences of PIMO Elders and PIMO rank-and-file members indicate (Lifton, 1961). The individual mentally rejects, although not overtly, the community's teachings, and chooses to conduct a double life while projecting an outward image of devout believer. In some cases, the decision to seek reinstatement, too, supports the idea of behavioural compliance as the decision to be reinstated could be merely motivated by the desire to socially reconnect with family and friends more than by mental conditioning (Please refer to chapter 5, sub-section 5.2.4 Reinstatement).

Moreover, the experiences of the respondents who joined the community as adults denotes evidence of a sentient decision to convert to the Jehovah's Witness faith. The acceptance of the Jehovah's Witness message appears to be driven by personal proclivities, needs, and aims, rather than solely through mental conditioning.

Nonetheless, a small group of respondents of Group A (Emma, Tom, Susan, Liam, Dylan, Robert, Vince) during their interviews, used the term 'brainwash' to describe their journey as a member, or the community's indoctrination process. This contrasts with the PIMO and former Elders who never explicitly referred to the term brainwashing or being brainwashed in their narratives. It seems that there is a difference in the perception the participants of Group A have about the experience as members, compared to that of participants of Group B. This difference between groups, and the perception that the individual's experience is the result of being brainwashed requires further research.

The contribution of this research can lead to new lines of inquiry. Future work would focus on the need of informing and engaging the police force, educational stakeholders, legislators and policy makers. This is firstly, to properly address reports of discrimination because of religious shunning, secondly, to enhance child safety in ensuring their best interests are met, and lastly, to guarantee the individual's basic rights during the judicial process.

8.5.1 Police force: Enhancing the understanding of the victimisation process

As one of the participants of Group A highlighted due to their insider knowledge, in recent years, the police have started to receive reports from people complaining about episodes of discrimination linked to religious shunning. Nonetheless, the officers are often not prepared to deal with such incidents because of the lack of insight and understanding of religious shunning, the context where it takes place, and the culture which characterises the Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious denominations in the UK which apply shunning as a disciplinary measure. Therefore, campaigns with the

aim of sensitising the police to the phenomenon of religious shunning, and the incorporation of the research findings within the police regulations, would enable the officers to have some understanding of the nature of the victimisation, the reasons former members are discriminated against, and the way to appropriately address the complaint.

8.5.2 Educational stakeholders, legislators, and policy makers: Enhancing child welfare

Child protection and welfare, and children's rights are imperative aspects which deserve further, in-depth exploration with the aim of influencing legislators and policy makers. As the Final Report of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Abuse (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017) brought to light, the policy the community implements in the processes related to investigating and determining allegations of child sexual abuse is a matter of concern, as it fails to protect victims. Following the Australian investigation, similar inquiries have been conducted in the USA and in the UK. Some changes have been achieved, but more must be done (Wright *et al.*, 2017). Future research should inform the development of comprehensive policies and legislation in the UK to prevent child abuse within the community, protect children, provide adequate services and support for victims of abuse in the Jehovah's Witnesses, and to push for significant change in the community's policy about child sexual abuse. Moreover, further research is needed to improve understanding of issues relating to children's rights with the aim of ensuring that the children of Jehovah's Witnesses have their best interests met, with particular attention to medical treatments and education. In this respect, the data evidence the fact that the community discourages young members from pursuing higher education.

For those educational stakeholders who are not familiar with the Jehovah's Witness culture and beliefs, the underlying motives which lead to the decision of a young Jehovah's Witness not to progress in education may be misinterpreted. It appears therefore important to raise awareness among teachers and school administrators to understand the cultural context in which the young Jehovah's Witnesses are raised in. This will help to provide adequate support to ensure that the young members of the community have the opportunity to thrive academically within the boundaries set by their religious beliefs without being labelled as idle or underachieving.

8.5.3 Legislators and policy makers: Ensuring the individual's basic rights

Also, the attention of legislators and policy makers should be drawn to the judicial process which determines whether a member should be shunned. As the analysis of the data underlined, this is an intrusive process where the basic rights of the individual are overlooked. Legislators and policy makers have a crucial role in making recommendations and promoting significant changes in legislative reform, and in planning legal interventions. This could lead the community to review their management practices, responses to alleged wrongdoing, and judicial process. To this purpose, the article 'Shunning, is it criminal?' (Grendele *et al.*, publication contingent to minor amendments) identifies areas of development within the Serious Crime Act 2015, proposing that there is scope to broadly interpret the Act to include instances of people shunned from the Jehovah's Witness community.

8.6 Final Reflection

I experienced this research as an introspective journey. A journey of discovery as well as personal and professional growth. I started this research with some expectations but also excited and open to the unexpected, willing to learn and understand. For example, the data supported my initial perception that shunning does have an impact on the individual's life and that the leaving process is a journey of challenges and losses. This can also be drawn from the review of the literature which highlighted the way instances of ostracism, estrangement, bullying, separation, or migration entail a journey of loss and disillusionment, a journey that implies a process of reframing the self within the new socio-cultural environment.

The literature review, however, also evidenced the limit of attempting to understand religious shunning exclusively in the light of phenomena or experiences that share with it some common features and outcomes. As this research illuminated, religious shunning is a more complex phenomenon due to its multifaceted nature and underlying factors. In this respect, it was enlightening to see a hierarchical dominance system legitimised by a patriarchal religious narrative, powerfully materialising through the insights provided by the respondents. To this purpose, the Integrated Model of Social Dynamics and Coercive Power Construct that I have developed, presents therefore, a ground-breaking perspective of the underlying processes that integrate and act in influencing the individual's direction.

I define the Integrated Model as 'ground-breaking' because I can see how this model can make the difference between having played a game blindfolded and without knowing the rules, and then becoming aware of the rules of that game and

appreciating their implications on one's own life. The relevance of the Integrated Model also lays on the fact that it is a strategic tool which therapists can use to unfold the individual's experience of shunning. This is because it may assist the health professionals in identifying the different layers of influence that act in moulding the individual's perception of the self, the group, and the others, and to effectively address the effects of these influential forces. It must also be noted that, as the data indicate, the saliency of these forces on the life of members and consequently their impact on the leavers, differ from one individual to another. This is due to differences in personal characteristics and saliency of the needs to be fulfilled at any given time (Lido *et al.*, 2020; Breakwell, 1986, 2001).

This has important implications when considering the leaving process as the subjective and unique make-up of the individual's experience may determine a variance in the impact suffered and the coping strategies implemented. For example, and this was an unforeseen finding for me, I realised that the process towards regaining ownership and autonomy post shunning is a continuum rather than being defined by fixed stages of coping. This highlights the importance of a multimodal and on-going continuous support, tailored on the specific needs of the client who has been shunned from the Jehovah's Witness community. At the same time, according to the data, the journey of leaving is also a journey of rewards and unexpected outcomes. Leaving appears to be a process which culminates in a cognitive revolution with the individual regaining autonomy of thought and moral independence.

8.7 Conclusion

This research has provided extensive insights into the way religious shunning is experienced by people who have been shunned from the community of the Jehovah's Witnesses, the impact of this event on their life, and the coping mechanisms the shunned members adopt to normalise their new circumstances. This thesis accentuates that religious shunning is a phenomenon which deserves further attention, especially to promote a better understanding of this disciplinary measure, the cultural context, and the victimisation process among health professionals, the police force, educational stakeholders, legislators, and policy makers.

Although the right of a religious denomination to determine their membership and internal rules is protected by international law and by many national constitutions, the controlling and coercive nature of religious shunning calls upon for legal and health intervention to support those who have been shunned from the Jehovah's Witness community.

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Appendix 1

Glossary

Apostate: It is a member who defects from the Jehovah's Witnesses' teachings. It is someone who 'turns aside' and who speaks out against the Jehovah's Witnesses' teachings, organisation, or directives.

Armageddon: It is the war of God. During Armageddon, according to the Jehovah's Witnesses, all false religions, governments, commercial systems and all the ungodly people will be destroyed.

Baptism: It is the symbolic ritual performed to become a formal member of the Jehovah's Witness community. The candidate is fully submerged in the water and then lifted up again. The ceremony of baptism is held at every assembly.

Bethel: It is the name for the Jehovah's Witnesses' world headquarters and branch offices. From there, the regional preaching activity of the Jehovah's Witnesses community is directed. At Bethels, different departments take care for the translation, the printing, the book's binding, the stockage of the literature, the video and audio production, and the transport and delivery of the teaching material to the local congregations.

Bethelites: It is the name for the members of the Jehovah's Witnesses who work at Bethels full-time. They are all volunteers. Room and board are provided together with

an allowance to support with their personal expenses. Usually Bethels are small, self-sufficient communities.

Body of Elders: It is the group of elders who supervises each congregation.

Circuit: It is a group of around 20 congregations within a given area. Each circuit is supervised by a circuit overseer.

Circuit Assembly: It is one of the Jehovah's Witnesses' yearly conventions. In a Circuit Assembly, 18 to 20 congregations gather together for a two-days convention. Circuit Assemblies are held twice a year. The number of participants in a circuit assembly could range around 2,000 people

Circuit Overseer: It is a travelling elder who twice a year visits all the congregations of his circuit, spending one week in each congregation. Circuit overseers are full-time ministers and usually they do not have a secular job nor a house. The host congregation provides for them in terms of food, accommodation and monetary contributions.

Congregation: It is the local assembly of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Disassociation or Resignation: It is the act of a member who no longer desires to be one of Jehovah's Witnesses. Members can disassociate or resign either orally or presenting a written statement to the body of elders. Nevertheless, also actions could lead the body of elders to consider the individual as disassociating. Actions that may

indicate disassociation include the following: making known a firm decision to be known no longer as one of Jehovah's Witnesses, joining another religious denomination, willingly accepting blood transfusions, joining the army or a political organisation.

Disfellowshipping: It is the action taken by the elders against an unrepentant wrongdoer. It implies the complete cutting off from the community.

Elder: It is a male member of the Jehovah's Witness community who holds a position of authority, taking the lead in the community.

Fader: It is a Jehovah's Witness who "faded away". The person stopped preaching and attending the community's meetings. The person is not disfellowshipped nor has resigned.

Governing Body: It is the central leadership made up of eight members who controls every single aspect of every activity of the community, from preparing the teaching material to overseeing the use of donated assets. The world headquarters from where the Governing Body operates is in the New York State.

Inactive: It is a member who has not been preaching for six months or longer.

Jehovah: It is the common English rendering of the four Hebrew letters the Jehovah's Witnesses use for the personal name of God.

Judicial Committee: It is a panel of usually three elders formed to deal with cases of wrongdoing. The committee establishes the guilt and the disciplinary intervention required.

Kingdom Hall: It is a building dedicated to worshipping where members of each congregation gather together weekly. No religious images, symbols or icons are displayed and there are no altars.

Lord's Evening Meal, Memorial of Christ's death or Lord's Supper: It is the only event Jehovah's Witnesses celebrate. It commemorates the death of Jesus Christ. This observance is celebrated once a year on the 14th day of the Jewish months of Nisan

Ministerial Servants: It is a male member who is appointed to serve as an assistant to the body of elders in the congregation, caring for routine organisational tasks.

Nisan: It is the name of the first lunar month in the Jewish calendar. It runs from mid-March to mid-April.

Pioneer: It is a baptised publisher who organises their life to focus more on the preaching activity. A member can request to become a regular pioneer or an auxiliary pioneer. A regular pioneer is a full-time publisher. The requirement in terms of hours a regular pioneer needs to spend in the preaching activity is of 70, each month on a regular base. An auxiliary pioneer is a part-time publisher who spends 30 or 50 hours per month, depending on their circumstances. The appointment as an auxiliary

pioneer is temporary. The person decides in which month or for how many months to be an auxiliary pioneer.

Publisher: It is a Jehovah's Witness who takes part in proselytising. Becoming a non-baptised publisher is a requirement to be baptised. All baptised members are also publishers. Each member's preaching activity is monitored by the body of elders.

Regional Assembly: It is a three- or four-day convention which is held once a year and where congregations from a number of circuits gather together. The attendees at a regional convention could be even more than 40,000.

Reinstatement: It is when, after being disfellowshipped, the person inquires and gives evidence of wanting to be part of the community again. In this case, a reinstatement committee will determine whether the individual is ready to be accepted back into the community.

Reproof: It is an action, public or private, taken by the elders towards a member who is developing unwholesome trends. It is intended to correct the erring behaviour or attitude. A reproof is given also when a judicial committee found the wrongdoer repentant, and the person is not disfellowshipped. With a reproof all special assignments and privileges are removed from the person until the individual will give evidence of a regained good spiritual stand.

Satan the Devil: It is a rebellious angel who sinned against God. Moved by feelings of arrogance and jealousy toward God, the angel deceived Adam and Eve. He came

to be known as Satan the Devil, two descriptive names. Satan means adversary, enemy or accuser, and Devil means slanderer.

The Truth: Jehovah's Witnesses are convinced "they have the Truth". Their teachings are the only true doctrine. All other creeds and faiths are from the devil and will be destroyed by God.

The World: It refers to people, political and religious systems which are under the rule of the devil.

Worldly People: They are all those who are not Jehovah's Witnesses. Worldly people are considered as alienated from God and hence under the influence of the devil. They are described by the Jehovah's Witnesses' publications as bad associations, slaves of corruption. Their companionship could potentially contaminate the moral and spiritual standards of members.

Appendix 2

Recruitment Announcement Group A



PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR RESEARCH ON DISFELLOWSHIPING IN THE JEHOVAH'S WITNESS COMMUNITY

Are you:

- A Jehovah's Witness who has been disfellowshipped not less than 7 months before reading this announcement
- At least 18 years old or over
- British
- Based within easy reach to London

If you are interested in sharing your experiences or for more information, please contact Windy at 21415293@student.uwl.ac.uk

This research is being conducted as part of my PhD at the University of West London. Please, feel free to pass this invitation onto other disfellowshipped Jehovah's Witnesses who you feel might be interested in taking part in this research.

Your participation is both voluntary and anonymous.

Appendix 3

Leaflet for Group B



To the Body of Elders of the congregation (name of the congregation)

My name is Windy Grendele. I have been awarded a studentship by the School of Human and Social Sciences at the University of West London, to undertake a PhD on the practice of disfellowshipping adopted in the Jehovah's Witness community. The research has received ethical clearance from the University Ethics Committee.

I would be interested in exploring your perspective, as Elders of the community, on this practice, the reasons which may lead to be disfellowshipped from the group and whether it is possible to be reinstated.

If you are interested in sharing your expertise or for more information, please contact me at 21415293@student.uwl.ac.uk or text me at this number

If you have queries about any aspect of the research or your participation, you could also contact my supervisor, Professor Maddie Ohl, at maddie.ohl@uwl.ac.uk.

Your participation is both voluntary and anonymous

Appendix 4

Information Sheet Group A



Experiencing Disfellowshipping in the Jehovah's Witness community: An Explorative Research on Religious Shunning

Dear Prospective Research Participant:

I, Windy A. Grendele, have been awarded a studentship by the School of Human and Social Sciences at the University of West London, to undertake a PhD on the experiences of being disfellowshipped from the Jehovah's Witness community.

Purpose of the study:

The present study aims to explore the experiences of being disfellowshipped from the Jehovah's Witnesses community and the leaving process. It will also aim at understanding the process and the reasons for disfellowshipping a member.

Nature of Participation:

As a Jehovah's Witness who has been disfellowshipped not less than 7 months before reading the Recruitment Announcement, you are being asked to share your experience of being shunned. As part of this process, you will be asked a number of questions during the interview covering different aspects of the experience to understand disfellowshipping and the leaving process. Nevertheless, if you think this topic may be upsetting you, I would advise you to not take part in the research. The interview will take between 1-1.5 hour, and with your permission it will be audio-taped. I will also ask for your permission to contact you after the interview in the event that any clarification or additional information would be necessary.

The information you will provide during the interview or after, may be used anonymously in future reports, articles or presentations by the researcher.

Participation in the present study is voluntary and you have the right to answer as many questions as you feel comfortable with or to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. The withdrawal will not affect you in any way. You have also the right to request the interview transcript and/or listen to the recordings of your interview.

Anonymity, Confidentiality and Physical Safety:

The research has received ethical clearance from the University Ethics Committee. The account you will provide will be confidential. There are, however, limits to this. For example, if you will say something which suggests that you or another person may be at risk of harm, I will need to follow up on this. In the first instance, I will raise it with my supervisors, and I will take lead from them as to how to manage the specific need. The audio-recorded data, the transcription, and the related documents will be kept private and secure, according to legal obligations, the Research Ethics Code of Practice and the University Protection Policy. Electronic folders containing personal data, the interview recordings, the transcription and the related documents will be password protected. The printed documentation, such as your signed Consent Form, will be kept in a locked filing cabinet separate from the rest of the research material.

In the transcription and final write-up, I will not use your name. This is to protect your identity. Any information or detail disclosed during the interview which could identify you in any way will be excluded from the research.


I will need to discuss the interview material with my supervisors, Professor Maddie Ohl, Dr Maya Flax and Dr Savin Bapir-Tardy, however, your identity will be protected at all times. You are free to contact me asking to access your data any time or to read the results and findings of the research at the conclusion of the PhD. The information you will provide during the interview will be retained for 5 years from the completion of the PhD, which is scheduled to be in May 2022.

Please note: if you have concerns about any aspect of your participation or any other queries, please contact me at 21415293@student.uwl.ac.uk, or raise these with my supervisor, Professor Maddie Ohl, contacting her at maddie.ohl@uwl.ac.uk.

Appendix 5

Bodies of Elders' Replies

Body of Elders 1 Firs Reply

 Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses



15th June 2020

Re: Request for Information about Disfellowshipping.

Dear Windy Grendele,

Thank you for sending us a letter last month in which you requested more information regarding the subject of disfellowshipping amongst Jehovah's Witnesses.

We feel the best source of information can be found on **JW.ORG**, more specifically under the "Frequently Asked Questions About Jehovah's Witnesses" section. There you will find an article entitled "**Do Jehovah's Witnesses Shun Those Who Used to Belong to Their Religion?**"

The above information explains fully our perspective on the matter. We hope you enjoy using our organization's informative website.

Kind Regards,

London Stepney Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses,
Body of Elders.

Body of Elders 2 First Reply

18/06/2020

JW

[REDACTED]

Thu 18/06/2020 11:28

To: Windy Grendele <21415293@student.uwl.ac.uk>

Dear Windy

Thank you for your letter requesting information regarding disfellowshipping.

You can access a very accurate explanation by following the link.

JW.O G

Select a topic

Frequently Asked Questions

Becoming a Witness (need to school down)

How to resign.

Hope this proves helpful with your PhD

Body of Elders in [REDACTED]

Sent from my iPad

Body of Elders 3 First Reply

Tue, Jun 23, 2020 at 3:26 PM

On behalf of [REDACTED] Congregation

Dear Windy, firstly, please accept my apologies for not contacting you sooner. Due to the coronavirus outbreak we have not been meeting at our Kingdom Hall, and have missed your letter, along with a number of others... until now.

You will find plenty of information regarding the scriptural basis for disfellowshipping those who are Baptised Jehovah's Witnesses and reinstatement at JW.org

The website has a comprehensive online library, allowing you to research both topics in some detail and many others too.

In the meantime I hope you remain safe during the current crisis, and trust you find your PhD a rewarding and enlightening experience,

Kind regards,

[REDACTED]

Body of Elders 4 First Reply

Jehovah's Witnesses

[REDACTED]
Thu 09/07/2020 11:11

To: Windy Grendele <21415293@student.uwl.ac.uk>

Good morning Windy,

Thank you for your letter.

This link explains the disfellowshipping arrangement. <https://www.jw.org/en/jehovahs-witnesses/faq/shunning/>

It is possible for a person to be reinstated as one of Jehovah's witnesses.

Please feel free to continue your research by using the website [jw.org](https://www.jw.org)

Best regards [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Congregation

Appendix 6

Body of Elders 1 Second Reply

e: JW

[REDACTED]
Thu 25/06/2020 17:24

To: Windy Grendele <21415293@student.uwl.ac.uk>

Windy

Thank you for you response.

Our elders have reviewed your request . We are not in a position to give a personal view on the subject but to endorse the references provided from our website.

On our website under latest news you can check a recent court case where the judge supported our decision to disfellowship someone.

We wanted to be as helpful as possible.

We wish you well in your PhD

Kind regards

Body of Elders. [REDACTED]

Appendix 7

Consent Form Group A



Experiencing Disfellowshipping in the Jehovah's Witness community: An Explorative Research on Religious Shunning

Please, read and tick the following statements and sign at the bottom to confirm your understanding.

- ☐ I understand that this study is entirely anonymous. My identity will not be recorded or passed on to anyone, and it will be protected in the transcription, analysis, and in the final writing up of the findings.
- ☐ I understand that the information I will provide will be treated in confidence by the researcher unless any risks will become evident.
- ☐ I understand that all data will be collected and processed in accordance with the UK's Data Protection Act 1998 and with the University of West London Ethical Policy.
- ☐ I understand that the information I will provide during the interview or after, may be used anonymously in future reports, articles or presentations by the researcher.
- ☐ I have read and received a copy of this consent form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions and I have received satisfactory answers.
- ☐ I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any point without giving a reason.
- ☐ I confirm that I have read and understood the above and have been given adequate time to consider my participation.

Consent Statement:

I confirm that I am British and that I am at least 18 years old. I freely agree to participate in this research. I also confirm that I have been disfellowshipped more than 7 months ago. I am also aware that I am free to withdraw from the interview at any point.

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

I thank you in advance for giving your consent to take part in a research that will represent a great contribution for change.

Yours sincerely,
Windy A. Grendele

Appendix 8

Consent Form Group B



Experiencing Disfellowshipping in the Jehovah's Witness community: An Explorative Research on Religious Shunning

Please, read and tick the following statements and sign at the bottom to confirm your understanding.

- ☐ I understand that this study is entirely anonymous. My identity will not be recorded or passed on to anyone, and it will be protected in the transcription, analysis, and in the final writing up of the findings.
- ☐ I understand that the information I will provide will be treated in confidence by the researcher unless any risks will become evident.
- ☐ I understand that all data will be collected and processed in accordance with the UK's Data Protection Act 1998 and with the University of West London Ethical Policy.
- ☐ I understand that the information I will provide may be used anonymously in future reports, articles or presentations by the researcher.
- ☐ I have read and received a copy of this consent form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions and I have received satisfactory answers.
- ☐ I understand that I am free to withdraw at any point without giving a reason.
- ☐ I confirm that I have read and understood the above and have been given adequate time to consider my participation.

Consent Statement:

I confirm that I am at least 18 years old and freely agree to participate in this research. I am also aware that I am free to withdraw at any point, with no negative consequences.

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

I thank you in advance for giving your consent to take part in the research.
Yours sincerely, Windy A. Grendele

Appendix 9

Demographic Questionnaire Group A



1. What is your age? *Please tick as appropriate*

18-20		41-50	
21-30		51-60	
31-40		61 +	

2. Nationality

--

3. Gender

Male		Female	
------	--	--------	--

4. Is your gender identity the same as the gender you were originally assigned at birth? *Please tick as appropriate*

Yes		No		Prefer not to say	
-----	--	----	--	-------------------	--

5. Ethnicity, please tick as appropriate

White		Chinese	
Gypsy or Traveller		Other Asian background	
Black or Black British – Caribbean		Mixed – White and Black Caribbean	
Black or Black British – African		Mixed – White and Black African	
Other Black background		Mixed – White and Asian	
Asian or Asian British – Indian		Arab	
Asian or Asian British – Pakistani		Other Mixed background	

Asian or Asian British – Bangladeshi		Other Ethnic Background	
Not Known		Prefer not to say	

6. Disability, *please tick as appropriate*

Are you disabled or do you have any conditions that may require adjustments to your work or working environment?

Yes		No		Prefer not to say	
-----	--	----	--	-------------------	--

7. Nature of disability (*you may choose not to disclose this*):

Specific learning disability (such as dyslexia, dyspraxia or AD(H)D)	
General learning disability (such as Down's syndrome)	
A social/communication impairment such as Asperger's syndrome/other autistic spectrum disorder	
Long-standing illness or health condition (such as cancer, HIV, diabetes, chronic heart disease, or epilepsy)	
Mental health condition (such as depression, schizophrenia or anxiety disorder)	
Physical impairment or mobility issues (such as difficulty using arms or using a wheelchair or crutches)	
Deaf or serious hearing impairment	
Blind or serious visual impairment uncorrected by glasses	
A disability, impairment or medical condition that is not listed above	

8. Sexual Orientation

Bisexual		Gay man	
Gay woman / lesbian		Heterosexual	
Other		Prefer not to say	

9. Marital status

Single		Separated	
Married		Never married	

Widowed		Other (please, specify)	
Divorced		Prefer not to say	

10. Education

What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?

11. Employment Status

Which of the following categories best describes your employment status?

Full-time		Self-employed	
Part-time		Retired	
Not employed		Other (please, specify)	

12. Occupation

Please, specify		Prefer not to say	
-----------------	--	-------------------	--

13. Religion and beliefs

Which of these best describes you?

No religion (including Humanist, Atheist, Agnostic)		Buddhist	
Christian		Hindu	
Jewish		Muslim	
Sikh		Spiritual	
Any other religion or belief (please specify)		Prefer not to say	

14. Jehovah's Witnesses Background

Please specify how you came in contact with the Jehovah's Witness community

Born into	
Raised in	
Converted	
Prefer not to say	

15. Were you baptised as a Jehovah's Witness?

Yes		No	
-----	--	----	--

16. In which year were you baptised? _____

17. Did you leave Jehovah's Witnesses by choice, resigning or disassociating yourself?

Yes		No
-----	--	----

18. In which year have you resign? _____

19. Have you been disfellowshipped?

Yes		No	
-----	--	----	--

20. In which year have you been disfellowshipped? _____

Appendix 10

Demographic Questionnaire Group B



1. What is your age? *Please tick as appropriate*

18-20		41-50	
21-30		51-60	
31-40		61 +	

2. Nationality	
-----------------------	--

3. Gender	Male		Female	
------------------	------	--	--------	--

4. Is your gender identity the same as the gender you were originally assigned at birth? *Please tick as appropriate*

Yes		No		Prefer not to say	
-----	--	----	--	-------------------	--

5. Ethnicity, *please tick as appropriate*

White		Chinese	
Gypsy or Traveller		Other Asian background	
Black or Black British – Caribbean		Mixed – White and Black Caribbean	
Black or Black British – African		Mixed – White and Black African	
Other Black background		Mixed – White and Asian	

Asian or Asian British – Indian		Arab	
Asian or Asian British – Pakistani		Other Mixed background	
Asian or Asian British – Bangladeshi		Other Ethnic Background	
Not Known		Prefer not to say	

6. Disability, *please tick as appropriate*

Are you disabled or do you have any conditions that may require adjustments to your work or working environment?

Yes		No		Prefer not to say	
-----	--	----	--	-------------------	--

7. Nature of disability (*you may choose not to disclose this*):

Specific learning disability (such as dyslexia, dyspraxia or AD(H)D)	
General learning disability (such as Down's syndrome)	
A social/communication impairment such as Asperger's syndrome/other autistic spectrum disorder	
Long-standing illness or health condition (such as cancer, HIV, diabetes, chronic heart disease, or epilepsy)	
Mental health condition (such as depression, schizophrenia or anxiety disorder)	
Physical impairment or mobility issues (such as difficulty using arms or using a wheelchair or crutches)	
Deaf or serious hearing impairment	
Blind or serious visual impairment uncorrected by glasses	
A disability, impairment or medical condition that is not listed above	

8. Sexual Orientation

Bisexual		Gay man	
Gay woman / lesbian		Heterosexual	
Other		Prefer not to say	

9. Marital status

Single		Separated	
Married		Never married	
Widowed		Other (please, specify)	
Divorced		Prefer not to say	

10. Education

What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?

11. Employment Status

Which of the following categories best describes your employment status?

Full-time		Self-employed	
Part-time		Retired	
Not employed		Other (please, specify)	

12. Occupation

Please, specify		Prefer not to say	
-----------------	--	-------------------	--

13. Religion and beliefs

Which of these best describes you?

No religion (including Humanist, Atheist, Agnostic)		Buddhist	
Christian		Hindu	
Jewish		Muslim	
Sikh		Spiritual	

Any other religion or belief (please specify)		Prefer not to say	
---	--	-------------------	--

14. Jehovah's Witnesses Background

Please specify how you came in contact with the Jehovah's Witness community

Born into	
Raised in	
Converted	
Prefer not to say	

15. Were you baptised as a Jehovah's Witness?

Yes		No	
-----	--	----	--

16. In which year were you baptised?

17. Are you an elder or were you an Elder?

Yes		No	
-----	--	----	--

18. In which year have you been appointed as an Elder?

Appendix 11

Interview Questions Group A

1. **Can you tell me please about your experiences of being a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses?**

Prompt: Can you describe what led you becoming a baptised member of the community?

Prompt: Please, describe your life when you were part of the community

Research Question 1: What are the experiences of those shunned?

2. **What was your experience of being disfellowshipped?**

Prompt: Tell me a bit about what happened. Why were you disfellowshipped? Did the elders call you? Did you have a meeting with them? Did this meeting come as a surprise to you? How the meeting developed? How was the meeting? Did they take the decision to disfellowshipping you during that meeting or did they communicate the decision later?

3. **What kind of reactions did you receive from your parents/siblings/members close to you within the community?**

Prompt: How did these reactions made you feel? What did that feeling mean for you?

4. **Did you disclose the fact that you had been disfellowshipped with people outside the community?**

Prompt: What kind of reactions did you receive from people outside the community (friends, co-workers)?

Research Question 2: What is the impact and the effects of being shunned on the individual's well-being?

5. **How did you initially feel when you were informed you were disfellowshipped?**

Prompt: What did that feeling mean for you?

6. **Did being disfellowshipped have an impact on your wellbeing?**

7. **Did being disfellowshipped have an impact on your relationship with God and on your spirituality?**

Prompt: In which ways?

Research Question 3: What strategies are adopted to cope with religious shunning?

8. Do you feel that you have had to adopt certain strategies to cope with religious shunning?

Prompt: Did you find yourself in need of any form of support?

Prompt: this could be emotional, social, financial, etc.

Prompt: What did you find most useful and least useful (in terms of available support or strategy adopted)?

Prompt: Have you since managed to establish a new meaningful social network? How? If not, what do you think the reasons are?

10. How do you feel about it (being disfellowshipped) now?

Prompt: What do you miss most about being part of the community?

Prompt: What do you value most now that you are no longer part of the community?

Prompt: How do you feel if you look behind? What do these feelings mean for you?

11. What kind of support should be available for disfellowshipped people?

12. Is there something you would like to add?

Appendix 12

Interview Questions Group B

1. How would you describe what disfellowshipping is in your perspective?
2. Since when you were appointed as an elder, have you dealt with any judicial case? If yes, how many roughly?
3. For how many of those cases (roughly) disfellowshipping the member was deemed necessary?
4. How do (did) you and the other Elders determine whether the member should be disfellowshipped?
5. In your experience, what were the main reasons for disfellowshipping a member?
6. How did you feel about the process of disfellowshipping?
7. In your experience, do you feel that disfellowshipping was effective in achieving its goal? What was the end goal?
8. In your experience, was there any case in which disfellowshipping didn't have the expected outcome?
 - What could the reason be?
9. How do (did) you expect other family and friends of a disfellowshipped person to behave?
10. What would happen if they behaved differently to your expectations, for example if they kept in touch with the disfellowshipped?
11. Can a disfellowshipped member be reinstated?
 - What are the necessary steps to be reinstated?
 - How do (did) you determine the real intentions a disfellowshipped person may have when you evaluate whether they should be reinstated?
12. Are (were) you aware of any consequences of disfellowshipping for the disfellowshipped person?
 - What do (did) you imagine the effect disfellowshipping has on a disfellowshipped member of the congregation?

FOR PIMO ELDERS

13. You describe yourself as being a PIMO Elder. Why do you consider yourself a PIMO Elder?

14. What had happened for you to be in the state of being a PIMO Elder?
15. What does be a PIMO Elder mean to you?
16. How do you feel being a PIMO Elder? Is there any particular reason for you to keep being a PIMO Elder?

FOR ELDERS WHO RESIGNED

17. Why did you choose to resign from being an Elder?
18. What had happened for you to step down from this role?

Appendix 13

Debrief Form Group A



Experiencing Disfellowshipping in the Jehovah's Witness community: An Explorative Research on Religious Shunning

Dear Participant,

Thank you very much for your cooperation in the research. Please retain the present document for your records. If you wish, at the completion of the research, you could ask to view the results and findings by contacting me.

Your data will be held secure and anonymous. If you wish to withdraw from the study, contact me and your data will be removed from all files. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Please note: if you have concerns about any aspect of your participation or any other queries, please contact me at 21415293@student.uwl.ac.uk, or raise these with my supervisor, Professor Maddie Ohl contacting her at maddie.ohl@uwl.ac.uk.

If you feel you need support after taking part to the interview, you could contact the following support agencies:

- **ExJWSupport**

Website: <http://www.exjwsupport.co.uk/>

- **RETIRN**

Website: <https://drsteveeichel.com/retirn>

Email: LJDMarshall@aol.com

Telephone: +44 (0) 7973 310599

- **Hope Valley Counselling**

Website: <https://www.hopevalleycounselling.com/>

Email: info@hopevalleycounselling.com

Telephone: +44 (0) 1433 639032

- **Samaritans**

Website: <https://www.samaritans.org/>

Email: jo@samaritans.org

Telephone: 116 123

If you prefer, you could talk to your GP, and they may refer you.

Appendix 14

Debrief Form Group B



Experiencing Disfellowshipping in the Jehovah's Witness community: An Explorative Research on Religious Shunning

Dear Participant,

Thank you very much for your cooperation in the research. Please retain the present document for your records. If you wish, at the completion of the research, you could ask to view the results and findings by contacting me.

Your data will be held secure and anonymous. If you wish to withdraw from the study, contact me and your data will be removed from all files. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Please note: if you have concerns about any aspect of your participation or any other queries, please contact me at 21415293@student.uwl.ac.uk, or raise these with my supervisor, Professor Maddie Ohl contacting her at maddie.ohl@uwl.ac.uk.

If you feel you need support after taking part to the interview, you could contact the following support agencies:

- **ICSA**

Website: <https://www.icsahome.com/home>

- **ExJWSupport**

Website: <http://www.exjwsupport.co.uk/>

- **Samaritans**

Website: <https://www.samaritans.org/>

Email: jo@samaritans.org

Telephone: 116 123

If you prefer, you could talk to your GP and they may refer you.

Appendix 15

Situating the Sample

Group A

Emma: She is a middle-aged woman who was born and raised in the Jehovah's Witness community. She experienced religious shunning as a non-baptised teenager as well as later in life, when she disassociated. According to Emma, she was shunned by her family and by the members of the community. She has tried hard to eradicate the loaded language pertaining to the Jehovah's Witness culture from her lexicon. She reported that religious shunning impacted her socially, psychologically and physically. Self-education gave her the knowledge and means to manage the impact of shunning, but also to emancipate herself from the manipulation of any form of theism, which she considers to be an extremely malign influence within society.

Angie: She is in her thirties. Angie was raised in the community from the age of 13, following the conversion of her mother. Angie said that she was disfellowshipped three times because of alcohol misuse. She decided not to come back after the last disfellowshipping. Although she has been shunned by her mother whom she misses, she has found in Alcoholics Anonymous a valid support, not only for her addiction but also to re-create a meaningful social network.

Tom: He is a man in his sixties. His mother's contact with Jehovah's Witnesses began before he was born. During the early years of his life, because his father was not interested in engaging with Jehovah's Witnesses, the family continued celebrating festivities such as Christmas or birthdays. The situation changed when his father decided to become fully committed, with both of his parents becoming baptised

members of the community. The parents' decision to join the new religious community brought about a drastic change in Tom's life. The fear of Armageddon, the increasing pressure to have only Jehovah's Witnesses as friends, and surrendering the dream of following an academic route, are some aspects which affected him as a child, and which still have repercussions to the present day. He was officially shunned when he was 21.

Susan: She is a middle-aged woman who was raised as a Catholic. She converted, joining the Jehovah's Witnesses as an adult. She appeared to have positive recollections of her life as a Jehovah's Witness because, during the period she spent within the community, she was true to herself, or as she said, "I was still me". She became a *fader* because of the child abuse issue within the Jehovah's Witnesses, which was raised by the Australian Royal Commission investigation. As a *fader*, she seized every opportunity to alert people about Jehovah's Witnesses covering up child abuse. According to Susan, her activism was the reason for being disfellowshipped as an apostate. Her sisters and brothers-in-law, as well as her Jehovah's Witness friends shunned her. Her husband, a former Elder, was disfellowshipped with her as an apostate.

Gaby: She is a middle-aged woman who was born into the community after her parents converted to the Jehovah's Witness faith. She became a baptised member of the community when she was 12. She experienced sexual abuse by her older Jehovah's Witness brother when she was a child. As a teenager she then received inappropriate attentions from a married Elder. Gaby said that she was disfellowshipped twice, the first time because of her request, and the second time

because she accepted the support of a non-Jehovah's Witness lady involved in witchcraft. The third time she left the community was because of her initiative, sending a letter of disassociation to the Elders. Her parents, siblings and friends shunned her. She has devoted her life to helping and supporting the victims of the cult.

Liza: She is in her forties, and she was raised in the community from the age of 5, after her parents joined the Jehovah's Witnesses. She describes her family life as Jehovah's Witnesses as a "nice, rich existence, happy". Her network of friendships developed exclusively within the community. She got baptised when she was 13. Liza experienced the impact that shunning has on family ties early on in life when her parents decided to cut the relationship with a disfellowshipped uncle. Then, Liza's brother was caught smoking and although he was not a baptised member, their father disowned him. Later, her sister too was disfellowshipped and, as Liza said, she and her father shunned her. In all the three occasions, Liza felt that shunning their family members was not "fair". After she was disfellowshipped as well, she reconnected with her sister. She no longer has contact with her father.

Samuel: He is a man in his sixties who was born into the Jehovah's Witness community. He decided to get baptised when he was 18, after undertaking an extensive study of Jehovah's Witness literature. Later, when comparing the community's older publications with more recent ones, he began to realise the many doctrinal changes that had taken place and to note the many disparities between the community beliefs and the actual teachings of the Bible. Because his wife was a member as well, and aware of the possible consequences of leaving the community, he kept his doubts to himself and stayed in the community. After 10 years of internal

struggles, he became a *fader* in 1996. He started to attend a local Baptist church taking the necessary measures to avoid being caught. Soon, his wife also left the community with their children. Samuel was officially shunned in 2001 without being invited to attend the judicial hearing.

Oliver: He is a man in his thirties who was born into the Jehovah's Witness community. He has a large extended family who are is part of the same community. He has a positive recollection of his upbringing and the environment he grew up in. He was a ministerial servant and a regular pioneer. He became a *fader* after a thorough study of the Jehovah's Witness publications and of the Bible led him to find discrepancies and contradictions in the community's teachings which the Elders were not able to reconcile. Oliver shared his doubts about the community's teaching with his father, who was an Elder as well. Nonetheless, Oliver's father appealed to blind faith and in following the community's guidance without questioning, something inconceivable to Oliver. He became a *fader*. He was disfellowshipped one year later, when he joined the army. His parents refuse to have contact with him unless he re-enters the community. At the time he was disfellowshipped, some aunts and uncles left the community as well and he could reconnect with them.

Jacob: He is a man in his sixties. His sister introduced him to the Jehovah's Witness beliefs which he found appealing. He devoted time to reading about it and finally he became an official member of the community when he was 15. He defines life as a Jehovah's Witness as quite a levelled, bland existence. He was appointed as a Ministerial Servant and later as an Elder. Looking back, he describes the day he was appointed as an Elder as the saddest day of his life because of the time commitment

and responsibilities involved and the impact of these on his family. He then decided to step back from his position in order to devote more time to his wife and children. He slowly started to realise the incongruences in the Jehovah's Witnesses' teachings. The umpteenth doctrinal change, presented by the community as 'New Light', represented for Jacob the critical point. He began reading material about the community, including banned material. He then commenced in a spiritual journey towards becoming a Christian. After a long battle which involved his legal representative, the media, the Elders of his congregation and the Bethel, he and his wife were falsely accused of trying to form a sect within the community, and officially shunned.

Grace: She is a woman in her sixties who was raised in the community from the age of 10, following the conversion of her parents. She describes the decision of her parents to join the community as a big life change which had a deep impact on her. Almost overnight she was not permitted to meet her schoolmates after the school hours nor to pursue her passion for sport. She felt quite isolated as a Jehovah's Witness child. The decision of becoming an official member of the community was not taken freely. Rather, it was imposed one day when her parents just announced that the whole family was going to be baptised as Jehovah's Witnesses. This happened when she was 11. On many occasions, during her adulthood, she noticed the double standards applied within the community, for example, the conditional love of its members, and the leadership's use of threat to keep the status quo. She struggled for a long period, questioning the doctrinal teachings and drastic changes in beliefs presented by the leadership. After extensive research, she became a *fader*, and she

later joined her husband, becoming a Christian. She was shunned after falsely being accused of forming a sect.

Liam: He is a man in his sixties. His aunt introduced him to the Jehovah's Witness beliefs when he was 14, and he was fascinated by the religious message of hope. He was baptised in 1978, and he was a member of the community for over 40 years. He was appointed as a Ministerial Servant. The false accusations towards his wife, the way the Elders handled the matter and the way him and his wife were treated represented a crucial moment for Liam which later led him and his wife to leave the community. Liam had an inquiring mind and, after becoming a *fader*, he started researching and reading apostate material. He shared his exiting journey with his wife. Four years after fading, because of the harassing behaviour of the Elders, they decided to disassociate. They have been shunned by their daughters, and they are prohibited from seeing their grandchildren.

Rose: She is a woman in her late fifties. A childhood friend, who then became her husband, introduced her to the community's teachings. These teachings sounded appealing to her, and after studying the Bible with a Jehovah's Witness lady, she was baptised in 1981. She was falsely accused of slander by a member of the community. The stressful situation and the unfair behaviour of the Elders in dealing with her case had an impact on her health conditions. She and her husband became faders. They later wrote a disassociation letter and for this reason their daughters refuse to have any contact with them.

Noah: He is a young adult in his thirties, third generation of an extended family of Jehovah's Witnesses. He feels that the principles his parents taught him were positive and the environment they created was filled with love. As a teenager he experienced an internal struggle between conforming to the community's standards and the person he really wanted to be. He led a double life for a while, maintaining the appearance of a good Jehovah's Witness while behaving in disagreement with the community's teachings in secrecy. He attended two Judicial Committees. After the first, he was reproved but not disfellowshipped. After the second he was disfellowshipped. He has no contacts with his family. Some of his Jehovah's Witness friends keep contacts with him in secret.

Erin: She is a young woman in her twenties who was born into a large family of Jehovah's Witnesses. She recognises that she was brought up with good morals which shaped her life. She was baptised when she was 14. As an outgoing, friendly person, she found it difficult not to socialise with schoolmates nor work colleagues. Despite wanting to be part of the community, she struggled to live according to its standards, and she started to conduct an alternative secret life. According to Erin, she was reproved, after confessing, on two different occasions. The third time she went to the Elders to confess her misbehaviour, she was disfellowshipped even though she was repentant. She wanted to be reinstated but she stopped pursuing the reinstatement after her request was declined by the Elders. Her ties with her family have been severed, although she has some contact with her stepfather and her grandfather who, as Elders, are allowed to contact her every now and then.

Luke: He is a man in his forties. He first heard of the Jehovah's Witnesses when his uncle started sharing his beliefs with Luke when he was 13. Years later, after he got married, he and his wife started to study the Bible with the Jehovah's Witnesses. They were baptised, becoming active members of the community with a well-developed friendship network within it. He experienced unjust treatment from the Elders which did nothing but increase his doubts about some doctrinal aspects. He stopped attending the meetings, but he did not share his thoughts with his wife, worried about the possible consequences for him and his family. Later, he found out that his wife shared the same doubts as him. He read 'apostate' material and he started studying the Bible again without the influence of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Assisted by a couple of former members, he began a journey towards becoming a Christian. He formally disassociated by writing a letter addressed to the congregation which the Elders never shared with the community.

Dylan: He is a man in his forties. His mother became a Jehovah's Witness after leaving the Roman Catholic faith. Dylan was 11. His mother and his stepfather got baptised a couple of years later, and he was baptised when he was 14. The decision of his mother to join the community had an impact on Dylan. Because of the separateness encouraged by the Jehovah's Witnesses, he became the target of bullying at school. Dylan also describes his life as a young Jehovah's Witness as challenging because of the dual experience. When he spent time with his biological father, who was a non-member, he was allowed to fully enjoy his childhood, while when with his mother, many things were proscribed according to the community's beliefs. In his adulthood, he was disfellowshipped twice. After the first time, he started the reinstatement process, and he was accepted back into the community. He was

then disfellowshipped a second time and never returned back. He has been shunned by the two oldest of his four children.

Eric: He is a man in his fifties who was born into a large family of Jehovah's Witnesses, the oldest of eight siblings. He was baptised in 1981 and at 16 years of age he left school to become a Regular Pioneer. He was appointed Ministerial Servant when he was 20, and by the age of 21 he was delivering talks at circuit assemblies. Things started to go wrong when he met a non-member girl with whom he had a short relationship. He was summoned by the Elders for a judicial hearing where he confessed everything. The Elders decided not to disfellowship him. He was reproved instead and all his privileges, such as being a Pioneer and Ministerial Servant, were revoked. A doctrinal change represented a critical point in his life as a Jehovah's Witness. He talked about his doubts with a friend who, sometime later, shared with Eric the results of his own reading on the matter. The material received was enlightening. He cautiously shared his thoughts about the distorted teachings of Jehovah's Witness with his wife, and later with his father, who was an Elder. This led them and his mother to leave the community, becoming faders. The Elders, after pursuing him, considered him as disassociating by his own actions.

Robert: He is a man in his sixties. He was brought up in the Church of England faith. Nonetheless, when he was eight, his parents converted, becoming members of the Jehovah's Witness community. After being baptised, he started pioneering and got married. As time passed, he became more and more unconvinced about the Jehovah's Witness doctrine, the continuous change of major beliefs, and the abuses of power. He eventually became a fader. This caused friction at home, especially as

his wife and two of their three children were devout Jehovah's Witnesses. He started to secretly attend a Christian church which he is now an active member of. He disassociated. His wife wanted to divorce him, and since he left the community his two Jehovah's Witness children refuse to have any contact with him.

Maggie: She is a woman in her sixties who, together with her three siblings, was raised in the Jehovah's Witness teachings by their single mother. She officially became a member of the community when she was baptised at 15. She was abused by a member of the community, but the man was not disfellowshipped because of the Jehovah's Witnesses' rule of the "two witnesses". She was disfellowshipped when she was 21 despite her plea for mercy. She endured the reinstatement process and finally she was accepted back into the community. She soon became a *fader* but, after moving town, she re-joined the community. She married a man who turned out to be very abusive. She was unfairly disfellowshipped because, when she got married, her future husband kept secret the fact that he was a disfellowshipped member. She underwent the reinstatement process a second time. She is now a *fader*. Although at the present time she is not a disfellowshipped member, her siblings have shunned her.

Charles: He is a man in his fifties. His mother's contacts with the Jehovah's Witnesses started early, since Charles' aunt was a member of the community. Nonetheless, any involvement with that or other religions suddenly stopped because of his father's animosity towards religion coupled with his violent behavior. Years later, when Charles was 23, he started reading the Bible on his own and sharing what he was learning with some of his friends. One of them put him in contact with a female Jehovah's Witness.

They started having regular conversations about the Bible, and the more time they spent talking the more they became romantically involved. According to Charles, some aspects of the Jehovah's Witness teachings were interesting but overall, he found that most of the community's beliefs did not match with the Bible message. However, despite his doctrinal doubts, he became a baptised member of the community as this was the only way to marry the person he was romantically involved with. His doubts, however, never left him, to the point that he started researching on the Internet and contacting former members of the community. He stopped attending the meetings and taking an active part in the community's activities. The Elders disfellowshipped him because one of them saw him going to a non-Jehovah's Witness church.

Carrie: She is a woman in her fifties who was born into a large family of Jehovah's Witnesses. Her upbringing as a Jehovah's Witness child was strict, in terms of community's scheduled activities but also in terms of people she was allowed to interact with. Years later, after she got married, her husband became a fader. A couple of former members gave him a book, written by an ex-member of the Governing Body who had been disfellowshipped. One day, she found the book and she read it. That moment represented the beginning of a journey towards leaving the community and joining the Christian faith. Most of her siblings left the community as well. She was disfellowshipped because she was caught attending a Christian church service.

Appendix 16

Situating the Sample

Group B

Aaron: He is a PIMO Elder who has not shared any personal information because of his delicate position. As he explains, he cannot stop being an Elder without this causing his wife and family an intense emotional pain. He is planning to resign from being an Elder soon, but he must first prepare his wife for the emotional impact. He feels trapped. He hates being an Elder and being forced to support a cult based on hypocrisy, fear and hate. Aaron said that this is causing him great anguish and profound distress.

Horace: He is a PIMO Elder in his thirties who serves as an Elder for 6 years. He agreed in scheduling an audio interview. As he explained later, this was to protect further his identity. He has always felt that the protection of children from abuses was a matter of primordial importance. Nonetheless, as an Elder, he has witnessed the inadequateness of the child abuse policy implemented within the community, and the way the system encourages the omertà. This has determined, together with some doctrinal disagreements, a turning point in the life of Horace. Due to the impossibility of stepping down from his position and leaving the community straightaway, he is living what he defines “a double life”, being a PIMO Elder. This is causing him inner turmoil and periods of depression. He sought for professional help, and, with his therapist, he is working on a plan to ‘safely’ transition out, becoming a *fader*. Meanwhile, he is using his position as an Elder to support the members of his congregation. He is also helping the young members of the community, for example encouraging them to pursue their education.

Elias: He is a man in his fifties who disassociated himself after serving as an Elder for twenty-nine years. He had contacts with members of the Governing Body and other people with relevant positions within the community, witnessing a high level of hypocrisy. He described an environment of egotistical, misogynistic, self-centred, narcissistic individuals. He struggled to deal with such hypocrisy, and he mentally tuned out 10 years before leaving the community officially. Although his wife is still an active Jehovah's Witness, she has not shunned him, and they are still happily married.

Zack: He is a *fader* who was an Elder for five years and a pioneer. He did not provide any demographic details about himself. He decided to step down from his role because, as he explained, he did not like the politics of the Elders. Also, he thinks that the Jehovah's Witness religious denomination is a cult which is not guided by God in any way. His wife and children are active members of the community. This puts him in a predicament, and this is the reason he chose to *fade* instead of disassociating. He is aware of the fact that his activism, despite all the precautions, could lead to being disfellowshipped for apostasy if caught.

Toby: Raised in the community since when he was 3, he is now a *fader*. He was an Elder for eight years, and a pioneer. As an Elder, he held different roles of responsibility, being the secretary of the Body of Elders of his congregation first, and later the coordinator. He took the training class for the Elders at the main branch of the Jehovah's Witnesses in New York. During that training week, he started to appreciate the level of control to which members of the community are exposed. During the period he was an Elder, he took part on several judicial processes. Although

initially he thought that the judicial process was a loving provision, he always felt uncomfortable in judging other fellow members, recognising the harm that being shunned could cause to the individual. Soon after getting married, he went through a relationship breakdown. He started to do research with the aim of strengthening his faith in order to try to repair his marriage. Instead, the research process led him to realise the many incongruencies of the community's teachings and doctrines. He resigned from being an Elder and faded.

Marc: He was a regular pioneer for 17 years, and an Elder for 20. He was part of the writing team at the Bethel in his country, contributing to write some of the Jehovah's Witness magazines' articles. Being an avid reader and a curious person, he became interested in critical thinking and the way biases affect the individual's ability to discern. He soon noticed the way the leadership was becoming more and more dogmatic in their teachings, without providing biblical support for the new doctrines. He shared with his fellow Elders his doubts about the legitimacy of the doctrinal changes and about the Governing Body's lies in front of the Australian Royal Commission investigating into child's abuse. Soon after, Marc was shunned for apostasy because voicing his disagreement and doubts. His wife is still a member of the community. Despite the Elders' attempts to take her away from Marc, she did not seek a divorce, and with the help of a therapist they are still married.

Gilbert: He was an Elder for eleven years. He was shunned as an apostate and disowned by his daughter. Whilst he was an Elder, he oversaw all the judicial committees as the chairman of the judicial panel. In his privileged position, he soon recognised the life-altering nature of the disciplinary measure implemented by the

community. This led him towards leniency. He gradually realised that the community's beliefs did not align with the Bible's teaching. He started digging, reading and researching about the community's child abuse policies and theological doctrines. He resigned as an Elder, and he was planning to fade quietly. Nonetheless, the Body of Elders of his congregation contacted him with a charge of apostasy. They gave him the choice either to attend the judicial committee or to disassociate himself. He preferred to disassociate, knowing that the end result of the judicial committee was already predetermined.

Elliot: He is a man in his sixties. He was an Elder for ten years and a regular pioneer devoting 1000 hours a year to the preaching activity. The doctrinal modifications, the sudden power monopolisation from the Governing Body, and the change in the shunning policy represented a turning point in Elliot's life as a Witness. He then read Ray Franz's books and contacted some former members. He decided to resign from being an Elder and left the community.

Jordan: He is a man in his forties, and he was an Elder for eight years. Married with two sons, he is now a *fader*. Whilst one of his sons has been shunned, the other is an Elder. The disfellowshipping of his son represented a dramatic moment in Jordan's life. At the same time this event gave him the possibility to realise the harm that being shunned causes to the individual and their family. Torn between the community's precepts about shunning and the paternal love towards one's own child, Jordan decided to talk to his son and to listen to his reasons for not wanting to seek reinstatement. The conversation was eye-opening. Nonetheless, he is now in a delicate position. Overtly taking the side of his shunned son would compromise the

relationship with his other son and with his wife. For this reason, he secretly keeps in contact with the shunned son, whilst trying to help his wife to evaluate her creed critically.

Nate: He is a man in his fifties who recently has become a *fader* after being a PIMO member for four years. Whilst he was an Elder, a position he held for fifteen years, he was shunned because of some issues with the community. Being a devout believer, he sought reinstatement. He then became a Ministerial Servant. Nonetheless, the imposed blind obedience, and the Governing Body's power grab represented for Nate a turning point, which led him to start researching external information and to resign from his role. As an Elder, he attended many judicial committees, which made him feel very uncomfortable because of the impact of the discipline on the shunned individual. Moreover, he experienced first-hand how harmful religious shunning is. His wife is still a Jehovah's Witness and, although they are still married and they have a strong relationship, the fact that Nate is now a *fader* is putting a strain on their marriage.

Ross: He is a man in his twenties who was an Elder for three years. When he became an Elder, he truly believed that the community's teachings and beliefs were for the good of the members. Nonetheless, he soon realised that it was all about personal prestige, control, and double standards. He reached the breaking point when, whilst doing research, he read material about the community and the way the Jehovah's Witnesses handle cases of child sexual abuse. He shared his mistrust about the community with his wife, who felt the same. They planned to become PIMO, and for a couple of months kept up the appearance of devout members. Eventually, because of rising frustration, they communicated their decision to disassociate.

Steve: Steve is a man in his thirties who recently disassociates. He was an Elder for five years. He describes religious shunning as a tool to coerce and control members. As he stated, he hated being part of the judicial hearings' panel. He attended only a couple of judicial committees and none of them required the shunning of the individual. Because of the many doubts and concerns about the community's teachings he had since he was a teenager, he started reading apostate material. Also, he followed the development of the Australian Royal Commission investigation. After hearing the lies the member of the Governing Body told to the commission, Steve decided to resign. For his wife's sake and for being able to keep contacts with his family, he agreed to keep attending the meetings. However, the Elders contacted Nate, inviting him to meet them. After he refused to attend the meeting, they wrote a disassociation letter on his behalf. He has been disowned by his family, and his marriage is strained.

Appendix 17

Table 1 Participants' Demographics Group A

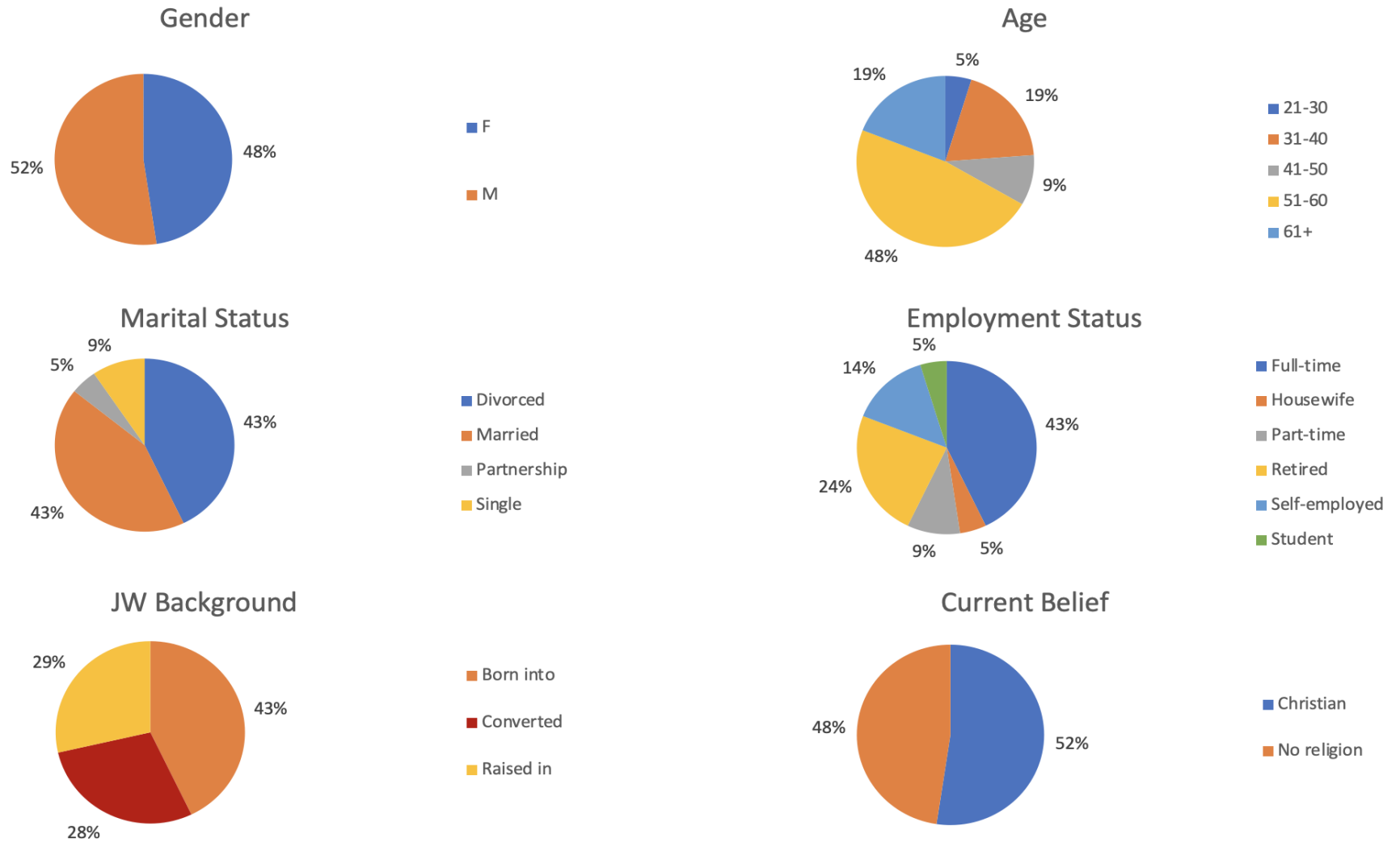
Participant	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Disability	Sexual Or.	Marital Status	Education	Employment Status	Occupation	Current beliefs	Born in/ Raised in or converted to	Year of Baptism	Year of Leaving
RP 1 Emma	51-60	F	White	Prefer not to say	Hetero	Divorced	BA	Full-time	Teacher/ Trainer	Anti-theist	Born into	1992	Disfellowshipped in 1998
RP 2 Angie	31-40	F	White	Yes	Lesbian	Live with partner	Currently studying Degree	Full-time	Support worker	No religion	Raised in from age 13	2001	Disfellowshipped in 2018
RP 3 Tom	51-60	M	White	No	Hetero	Divorced/ Affianced	ONC	Full-time	Company director	No religion	Born into	1978	Disfellowshipped in 1983
RP 4 Susan	51-60	F	White	No	Hetero	Married	High School	Full-time	Domestic cleaner/ Career	Christian	Converted	2006	Becoming a fader in 2017 and disfellowshipped in 2018
RP 5 Gaby	51-60	F	White	No	Hetero	Divorced	Diploma	Self-employed	Counsellor for ex-cults members	No religion	Born into	1967	Disfellowshipped in 1979. Disassociated when 26. Disfellowshipped in 2016
RP 6 Liza	31-40	F	White	No	Hetero	Divorced /Living with Partner	Diploma/ NVQ	Part-time	Office manager/ Account Assistant	No religion	Raised in from age 5	1993	Disfellowshipped in 2017
RP 7 Samuel	51-60	M	White	No	Hetero	Married	High School	Retired	/	Christian	Born into	1978	Becoming a fader in 1996 and disfellowshipped in 2001

Participant	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Disability	Sexual Or.	Marital Status	Education	Employment Status	Occupation	Current beliefs	Born in/ Raised in or converted to	Year of Baptism	Year of Leaving
RP 8 Oliver	31-40	M	White	No	Hetero	Divorced	HND	Full-time	Armed Forces	No religion	Born into	2001	Becoming a fader in 2014 and disfellowshipped in 2015
RP 9 Jacob	61+	M	White	No	Hetero	Married	Secondary Modern + Full City & Guilds course	Retired	Computer hardware/ design	Christian	Converted	1963	Disfellowshipped in 1999
RP 10 Grace	61+	F	White	No	Hetero	Married	Secondary Modern	Retired	Housewife	Christian	Raised in	1962	Disfellowshipped in 1999
RP 11 Liam	61+	M	White	Long-standing illness or health condition	Hetero	Married	/	Retired	/	Christian	Converted	1978	Becoming a fader in 2016 and disassociated in 2019
RP 12 Rose	51-60	F	White	Long-standing illness or health condition	Hetero	Married	/	Housewife	/	Christian	Converted	1982	Becoming a fader in 2016 and disassociated in 2019
RP 13 Noah	31-40	M	White	No	Hetero	Single	Home-schooled	Full-time	UK tourism manager	No religion	Born into	2001	Disfellowshipped in 2016
RP 14 Erin	21-30	F	White	No	Hetero	Single	Foundation degree health studies	Full-time	Assistant practitioner	No religion	Born into	2010	Disfellowshipped in 2015
RP 15 Luke	41-50	M	White	No	Hetero	Married	Bachelor of Theology	Self-employed	Minister	Christian	Converted	1994	Disassociated in 2008
RP 16 Dylan	41-50	M	White	No	Hetero	Divorced	Diploma	Full-time	Stonemason	No religion	Raised in From age 11	1987	Disfellowshipped in 1996 and in 2016

Participant	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Disability	Sexual Or.	Marital Status	Education	Employment Status	Occupation	Current beliefs	Born in/ Raised in or converted to	Year of Baptism	Year of Leaving
RP 17 Eric	51-60	M	Mixed White and Asian	No	Hetero	Divorced/ In partnership	GCSE	Self-employed	Window Cleaner	Christian	Raised in From age 2	1981	Disassociated by action in 1999
RP 18 Robert	61+	M	Mixed White and Black Caribbean	No	Hetero	Divorced	Certificates in Management and Accounting	Retired	Accountant	Christian	Raised in	1968	Disassociated in 2001
RP 19 Maggie	51-60	F	White	No	Hetero	Divorced	HE	Student	/	No religion	Born into	1976	Disfellowshipped in 1981 and 1984
RP 20 Charles	51-60	M	White	No	Hetero	Married	GCSE	Full-time	Police officer	Christian	Converted	1989	Disassociated by actions in 2000
RP 21 Carrie	51-60	F	White	No	Hetero	Married	GCSE	Part-time	Conference centre barista	Christian	Born into	1982	Disassociated by actions in 2000

Appendix 18

Figure 1 Recapitulative Pie Charts for Group A



Appendix 19

Table 2 Participants' Demographics Group B

Participant	Age	Nationality	Gender	Ethnicity	Disability	Sexual Or.	Marital Status	Education	Employment Status	Current belief	Born in / Raised in or converted to	Year of Baptism	Year of appointment as Elder
EL 1 Aaron	/	/	M	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
EL 2 Elias	51-60	African American	M	Black	No	Hetero	Married	Associate Degree	Full-time	No Religion	Raised in	1973	1990
EL 3 Horace	21-30	American	M	White	No	/	Single	Associate Degree	Full-time	Christian	Converted	2007	2014
EL 4 Zack	/	/	M	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
EL 5 Toby	41-50	American	M	White	No	Hetero	Divorced	BSME	Full-time	No Religion	Raised in From age 3	1989	2005
EL 6 Marc	41-50	Australian	M	White	No	Hetero	Married	College	Self-employed	No Religion	Raised in	1984	1997
EL 7 Gilbert	/	/	M	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	Born into	/	/
EL 8 Elliot	61+	American	M	White	No	Hetero	Married	High school	Retired	Christian	Converted	1974	1985
EL 9 Jordan	41-50	American	M	White	No	Hetero	Married	High school	Full-time	Christian	Converted	2004	2011
EL 10 Nate	51-60	American	M	White	No	Hetero	Married	BA	Full-time	No Religion	Converted	1987	1992
EL 11 Ross	21-30	American	M	Other Black BG	No	Hetero	Married	High school	Full-time	No Religion	Raised in	2005	2016
EL 12 Steve	31-40	American	M	White	No	Hetero	Married	High school	Full-time	No Religion	Born into	1997	2014

Appendix 20

Figure 2 Recapitulative Pie Charts for Group B

