Experiencing religious shunning: insights into the journey from being a member to leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses community

Experiencing Religious Shunning: Insights into the Journey From Being a Member to Leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses Community

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Abstract This research explores qualitatively the experiences of individuals shunned by the Jehovah's Witnesses community. Four key themes emerge from the 21 semistructured videoconferencing interviews which form the research data analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2019). These themes, namely Reasons for Being Shunned, the Judicial Committee, and Consequences of Religious Shunning and Reinstatement, shed light on the events and behaviour which led to the public announcement of the participants' formal shunning and on the controlling environment the religious community has created by endorsing a culture based on fear, guilt, and shame. Although research conducted to explore the experiences of religious shunning is not abundant, the findings of the current study are in line with previous research, highlighting that the individual's journey from being a member to leaving the community is a multifaceted experience, influenced by several factors, which has a detrimental impact on their well-being.

Keywords Shunning experiences, Religious shunning, Former Jehovah's Witnesses, Control and coercion, Disciplinary measures

Introduction

Shunning is one of the oldest sanctions adopted to correct or to manifest rejection of what is considered different, amoral, or a social norm violation (Wesselmann et al., 2015). However, while there is a plethora of research on shunning and ostracism (Morita et al., 1999; Tanaka, 2001; Wesselmann & Williams, 2017), the specific area of religious shunning remains largely under-researched. In a religious context, shunning is mainly adopted by the leaders of the community as a way for the individual to reflect on the shame they have brought upon themselves and the community, correct the wrongdoing, and return to the approved path. Moreover, religious shunning is seen as a way to protect the group from what is considered a harmful influence.

Religious shunning is an effective tool used to promote compliance as it involves the complete cutting of the social and spiritual ties between a former member and the community (Miller, 1988). This practice remains in force today as an official discipline practiced by a range of religious denominations typically described as authoritarian in nature or by cultic groups (Oblak, 2019). However, the focus of this article is upon a single religious group that practices religious shunning, namely the Jehovah's Witnesses community.

Despite the underrepresentation of religious shunning in the academic literature, recent research indicates that the effects of this disciplinary practice are detrimental to the individual's physical, psychological, and spiritual well-being (Grendele et al., in press). For example, psychological distress, depression, panic attacks, suicidal thoughts, and physical health conditions have been reported as possible consequences of being shunned and its cumulative effects (Grendele et al., in press; Testoni et al., 2019; Zamperini et al., 2020). As the research indicates, the psychological impact of losing family and friends is the major cause of harm to participants, and its effects are long-lasting (Grendele et al., in press). Shame and guilt, loss of social identity, social death, rejection-related emotions, ambiguous

loss, and self-esteem issues are further consequences which underline the deep psychological and emotional impact of religious shunning (Grendele et al., in press; Ransom et al., 2021; Testoni et al., 2019). Therefore, the purpose of this article is to further extend the existing body of literature by documenting the subjective experiences of individuals who have been shunned by the Jehovah's Witnesses.

The starting point for this research was the identification of pertinent areas of enquiry that enabled an in-depth exploration and understanding of the phenomenon. These are

1. the life cycle of religious affiliation,
2. the loss and disillusionment of being shunned and its impacts, and
3. personal challenge or personal development, leading to the question, What is the outcome for shunned individuals?

The present article only addresses the first research area; it provides an insightful representation of the experiences of shunning the participants endured.

Jehovah's Witnesses: Who are they?

The Jehovah's Witnesses community is a religious denomination founded in 1879 by Charles Taze Russel (Stark & Iannaccone, 1997; Wallis, 1984). Their doctrines, like those of other religious denominations, are built upon a binary worldview (Blankholm, 2009). For instance, their teaching is based on their understanding of the Bible's principles and is referred to as *the Truth*. *The World* refers to the rest of humankind, which does not know Jehovah God or does not follow the Truth and, therefore, is under the rule of God's enemy, the Devil (Blankholm, 2009). However, as Blankholm noted, because of the strong emphasis on the distinction between Truth and World, the Jehovah's Witnesses are strongly advised 'against having any unnecessary association with Worldly people [non-Jehovah's Witnesses]' (p. 197) or with family members who have not chosen the Jehovah's Witnesses path. Therefore, the

Jehovah's Witnesses are a community where the members' interactions with the wider society are kept minimal and superficial. This results in the Jehovah's Witnesses being a tight-knit community whose members share not only the same religious beliefs but often the same hobbies, other leisure activities, and, at times, business relationships as well. The Jehovah's Witnesses are defined as a high-cost religion (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010). This is due to the demands made upon members in terms of time, personal commitment, and resources.

Consequences of leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses community

Transgressing the community's set of rules may lead to being officially shunned, which may have several negative consequences, such as the immediate loss of one's supportive network, the severing of family and friendship ties, or preclusion from conducting business with members of the community (Miller, 1988; Ransom et al., 2021).

Shunning is the end result of an individual's membership status being revoked once they are *disassociated* or *disfellowshipped*. *Disassociation* is when baptized members decide to leave the community by choice (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Republic of Korea, 2019). *Disassociation* can also be imposed on a member (Ransom et al., 2021). In this instance, the individual has taken a course of action which could lead the body of elders to consider the individual as disassociating (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Republic of Korea, 2019). By contrast, when a member commits what the community considers a sin, they might be *disfellowshipped*. This is decided by a judicial hearing held by a panel of elders[1]. Those who *disassociate* and those who have been *disfellowshipped* are equally exposed to religious shunning.

[1] Being an elder is a position of authority that is male privilege.

Methodology

The present study was conceived as an exploratory project designed to gain a deeper understanding of religious shunning in terms of the meaning this has for the people experiencing it (Langdridge, 2007, p. 2). From this perspective, the participant is considered as an expert in their experiences, capable and eager to share with the researcher an in-depth view of their own reality (Gough & Madill, 2012; Josselson, 2004). At the same time, the researcher is no longer an external, neutral observer; rather, they become involved in the participant's sensemaking of the phenomenon, attempting to understand the way the event is viewed from the participant's standpoint (Biggerstaff, 2012).

Participants

Former members of the Jehovah's Witnesses community were recruited using a combination of purposeful and snowball sampling. Prospective participants were sought via Facebook and Reddit, and recruited participants were then asked to pass on details of the study to others who might also wish to take part in the research (Palinkas et al., 2015). Participants were eligible for the study if they were 18 years or over. Also, because the study was conducted in the UK, a second criterion was that the participants be British. Therefore, the findings of the present research are representative of a small group of the population with a specific cultural background. Being officially shunned by the Jehovah's Witnesses community was another fundamental inclusion criterion applied to the recruitment of participants. Thus, all participants were individuals who had lost their membership status, with the formal shunning of the participant taking place not less than 7 months before they were recruited. This lapse of time was set to address possible risks related to emotional distress over leaving the community and to give prospective participants a reasonable period of time to settle after formally becoming former members.

In total, 43 people expressed interest in the research, 15 of those did not match all the inclusion criteria, and 7 did not follow up with an 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. Nine were born into the Jehovah's Witnesses community. Six were raised in it, following their parent's conversion when they were young. Six converted, joining the community as adults. Of the 21 participants, 13 were disfellowshipped and 8 had disassociated (Table 1).

Table 1

Interview Respondents' Demographic Characteristics. A 'fader' is a member who is fading out of the faith.

	Age	Gender	Born in/Raised into/Converted	Year of Baptism	Year of Disfellowshipping	Current Status within the JW Community	Reason for Being Shunned
Emma	51–60	F	Born into	1992	1998	Disfellowshipped	Marital infidelity
Angie	31–40	F	Raised in	2001	2018	Disfellowshipped	Alcohol misuse
Tom	51–60	M	Born into	1978	1983	Disfellowshipped	Sex before marriage
Susan	51–60	F	Converted	2006	2018	Disfellowshipped	Apostasy
Gaby	51–60	F	Born into	1967	Disfellowshipped in 1979; fader when 26; disfellowshipped in 2016	Disfellowshipped	Association with a woman involved in witchcraft
Liza	31–40	F	Raised in	1993	2017	Disfellowshipped	Marital infidelity
Samuel	51–60	M	Born into	1978	Fader since 1996 disassociated in 2001	Disassociated by actions	Joined another religion
Oliver	31–40	M	Born into	2001	2015	Disfellowshipped	Joined the Navy
Jacob	61+	M	Converted	1963	1999	Disassociation by actions	Dissatisfaction

	Age	Gender	Born in/Raised into/Converted	Year of Baptism	Year of Disfellowshipping	Current Status within the JW Community	Reason for Being Shunned
Grace	61+	F	Raised in	1962	1999	Disassociation by actions	Dissatisfaction
Liam	61+	M	Converted	1978	Fader since 2016; disassociated in 2019	Disassociated	Dissatisfaction
Rose	51–60	F	Converted	1982	Fader since 2016; disassociated in 2019	Disassociated	Dissatisfaction
Noah	31–40	M	Born into	2001	2016	Disfellowshipped	Sex before marriage
Erin	21–30	F	Born into	2010	2015	Disfellowshipped	Sex before marriage
Luke	41–50	M	Converted	1994	2008	Disassociated	Dissatisfaction
Dylan	41–50	M	Raised in	1987	Disfellowshipped in 1996 and in 2016	Disfellowshipped	Marital infidelity
Eric	51–60	M	Raised in	1981	1999	Disassociated by action but no official announcement	Dissatisfaction
Robert	61+	M	Raised in	1968	2001	Disassociated	Joined another religion
Maggie	51–60	F	Born into	1976	Disfellowshipped in 1981 and in 1984	Fader	Dissatisfaction
Charles	51–60	M	Converted	1989	Around 2000	Disassociated by action	Joined another religion
Carrie	51–60	F	Born into	1982	Around 2000	Disassociated by action	Joined another religion

Procedure

To ensure the necessary ethical standards were met, the study received ethical approval from the School of Human and Social Sciences Ethics Panel of the University of West London (Ref. UWK/REC/PSW-00878, approval date: 31 January 2020). The present research also

adhered to the British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct (British Psychological Society, 2009, 2014). 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 the participants (Orb et al., 2000). Being that the topic of the research was sensitive, participants were often reminded of their right to answer as many questions as they felt comfortable with or to withdraw at any time. Although the participants re-experienced some unpleasant and distressing feelings, none of the interviews were halted. At the conclusion of the interview, the participants were debriefed.

Data were collected between February and September 2020. Videoconferencing or phone interviews were scheduled. Interviews with participants were audio-taped and lasted approximately one and a half hours. The rich interview material was transcribed verbatim and anonymized.

Analysis

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 (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017).

According to Creswell (2018), 'The insider-outsider perspective refers to the position of the researcher in relation to the research context and the participants in the study' (p. 34). Within the insider-outsider continuum, the first author of this article, who interviewed the respondents and conducted the data analysis, positions herself as being an *external-insider* (Banks, 1998). The researcher has a great understanding and knowledge of the belief system and culture which characterize the community. Therefore, the researcher easily understood participants' accounts of their past in the community and their use of Jehovah's Witnesses

jargon during her conversations with the research respondents (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002). For this reason, the researcher could be considered an insider. This prior knowledge was advantageous during the interview process because it allowed the researcher 'to gather richer and more focused data' (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002, p. 2). However, unlike the participants, the researcher did not have firsthand experience of shunning, positioning her as 'external' to the participants and a learner. To ensure the quality and trustfulness of the analysis, the second and third authors of the present article cross-checked the themes and subthemes generated.

Results

Some of the participants grew up within the community, whereas others joined the Jehovah's Witnesses as adults. Various themes permeated the data of those who grew up in the community, such as some of their life decisions being primed by having been raised in a family of devout Jehovah's Witnesses, limited life experience, lack of external points of reference, the community's expectations, and internalization of the community's culture and belief system. Other themes stood out for those who joined the community later in life, such as personal needs and proclivities paired with the community's structure and teachings having an influential role in directing the individual's choices. Nonetheless, although the reasons for becoming a member of the community differed, all the respondents were eventually officially shunned. The results section explores the events and behaviour which led to the public announcement of the participants' formal shunning and the consequences of their being shunned.

Reasons for being shunned

The elders' decision to shun a member is based on two factors: committing what the community considers a sin and the perceived degree of repentance. The reasons which led participants to be formally shunned were multiple.

> 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. (Angie, lines 35–38)

Angie started to attend Alcoholics Anonymous sessions, which were initially successful. She abstained from alcohol for 12 weeks, but then she had a relapse. Consequently, she was shunned for the third time. On all three of these 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. (Angie, lines 91–94)

Being shunned due to repeated misbehaviour is an experience that other participants shared:

> 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. (Erin, lines 134–137, 140, 162–168).

In the event of recurrent misconduct, the elders interpreted the repeated pattern of behaviour as a lack of repentance, and the participants were consequently shunned. Despite their misbehavior, some of the participants wanted to confess to the elders and make amends. Nonetheless, their expressions of remorse were not accepted and the elders decided to shun them. These testimonies 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's sinning or on the member's level of remorse.

Unlike those participants who confessed because they wanted to remain Jehovah's Witnesses, others attended the judicial hearing prepared to leave the community.

> 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. (Noah, lines 48–150, 170–174)

For such participants, the judicial hearing was an opportunity to make it clear that they were not repentant and that they no longer wished to remain a member of the community.

It is the Judicial Committee which ultimately decides whether those who sin are sufficiently repentant. Some of the respondents were considered by the elders to be sorry but not contrite and were therefore shunned.

> 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 favorite 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. (Tom, lines 69–70, 74–78)

Although the participants' behaviour revealed differences in their attitudes, the end result was the same and they all were shunned. Regardless of whether the individual was remorseful, and regardless of their personal circumstances, shunning was the outcome.

The experiences shared by some of the participants shed more light on the discretionary way the decision to shun a member is applied by the elders. For example, Maggie at the age of 20 stopped attending the meetings and no longer took an active part in the Jehovah's Witnesses' life. She describes her strong desire to be educated:

> 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. (lines 52–57)

She followed this up by saying: 'And I begged, begged, 'Please. Don't take my support away. I'm 21. I need support' (lines 57–58). Maggie was single and pregnant. Despite her need for support, her young age, and her pleading, shunning was deemed necessary.

The experience of Gaby sheds 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 Witnesses 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. (lines 391–393, 395–397. 404–405)

The events which led Gaby to be shunned highlight some relevant aspects not only of this practice but also of 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 Witnesses woman. That woman was involved in witchcraft, an activity which Jehovah's Witnesses condemn. Gaby then said, 'The elders found out where I was living and didn't like it' (lines 394–395).

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. 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, it appears there is a lack of genuine interest in the individual and their needs; the elders did not offer any practical help to the members in need.

> 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. (Gaby, lines 400–402)

Not only was no support offered to this member in need, but the support which came from outside the community was frowned upon. Gaby continued 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. (lines 396–400)

According to some of the participants, the elders seemed to disregard their viewpoint and their ability to evaluate the situation logically. Critical thinking was discouraged and silenced. Members who did not comply with the group's directives faced the possibility of shunning.

For some participants being shunned for their 'sins' represented an escape route from a life they no longer wanted to live.

> 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 mom would be able to understand that because it's temptation and it is the evil worldling,[2] and one day, he can come back and repent. And so, it sort of made it easier for her to take it. (Tom, lines 457–463)

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[2] 'Worldlings' or worldly people are all those who are not Jehovah's Witnesses. Their companionship is viewed as potentially contaminating the moral and spiritual standards of members.

> 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 died, 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. (Tom, lines 464–468)

As evidenced by the above quotes, the fear of disappointing others was well rooted in this participant. Thus, 'committing a sin' became a tactic he subconsciously implemented to gain freedom without crushing his parent's' hope that her son would repent and return to the community. Noah had a similar approach:

> I think, looking back, I said the things that I thought would make [my parents] 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, lines 195-198)

Two different motivations appeared to prompt participants to mislead their parents, fostering the false hope they would 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 to leave the community.

> 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. (Tom, lines 469–476)

According to the participants' accounts, being shunned for sinning appears to be an easy way out compared to the decision to leave. Unlike people who take the opportunity provided by the judicial panel's decision to break free, the individual who 'wakes up and decides to leave' (Tom, line 473) takes agency. Deciding to leave implies the individual's ability to think critically and to overtly confront the leadership. It is a bold decision to make, bearing in mind the serious resulting losses.

The accounts of the participants also suggest that there are ways to leave the Jehovah's Witnesses which are considered more tolerable from the community's perspective. Sinning because of weakness of the flesh, for example, is perceived as 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' (Tom, line 462). The non-Jehovah's Witnesses person becomes the scapegoat and has to be inculpated: 'It is the evil wordling' (Tom, line 462). These two factors act in mitigating the community's perception of the loss of a person's membership status, although shunning is nonetheless applied. On the other hand, leaving the community as an apostate[3] places the blame entirely on the individual. 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 their ability to control members if the apostate is not promptly removed from the community in order to avoid the spreading of dangerous thoughts. There are therefore no mitigating circumstances for an apostate.

[3] An apostate is a member who defects from the Jehovah's Witnesses' teachings. This is someone who 'turns aside' and who speaks out against the teachings, organisation, or directives of Jehovah's Witnesses.

For example, some members of the community wanted to raise awareness among their fellow members about the Australian Royal Commission investigation into child abuse, which involved Jehovah's Witnesses along with other organizations. However, this initiative was not welcomed by the elders, and the individuals were shunned for apostasy: '[The elders] had to stop me somehow' (Susan, line 272). As reflected in the experiences of the participants, shunning an apostate appears to be a tool used by the leadership more to protect their status than to bring the individual back into the fold.

This section has highlighted that although the reasons for being shunned differed from one individual to another, the participants' experiences were actually similar. Their actions and behaviour were all considered to have gone against the moral and spiritual standards set for members of the community. Moreover, 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 the sense of being in the hands of a powerful authority seems to characterize the respondents' experiences. Regardless of the participants' level of remorse, their need for support, or the underlying reasons for their misconduct, the end result was the same. The individual was 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 subjugate themselves to the group's demands and expectations, otherwise they will suffer the consequences.

The Judicial Committee

The judicial process which the individual faces is another experience which is shared by those who have been shunned. When the elders receive a report of an alleged wrongdoing, or

when a member spontaneously confesses to a sin, a Judicial Committee is formed in order to determine the member's culpability and level of repentance. Most Judicial Committees consist of three elders chosen from the body of elders of the congregation.

The participants provided detailed information about the judicial process they were involved in. Although some of the participants did not commit any wrongdoing, a story was concocted in order to have them removed from the community.

> And so, right at the beginning, we knew that the outcome was going to be, we are gonna get disfellowshipped. We're out, you know. There was a pre-designed agenda. That's what's gonna happen. It's just a case of how long, right? Normally, there should be a judicial meeting. Then an announcement. It takes two to three weeks, maximum. We stretched this out for 10 months. . . . This became a soap opera. (Jacob, lines 901–908)

After the panel of elders, who form the Judicial Committee, has taken the decision to shun the member, the individual has a week to appeal the decision. An Appeal Committee will then be formed to review the case. Some of the participants appealed as they were innocent of the accusations against them. The Appeal Committee acknowledged that a Jehovah's Witness had falsified the truth, and the decision to shun the individual was overturned. Nonetheless, the elders decided to form a second Judicial Committee, and the elders invoked the *disassociation by one's own actions* arrangement.

> But at the end, [the elders] said, 'Well, we're gonna make the announcement that you disassociated yourselves by your actions. 'Cuz we didn't fall into other categories and they couldn't let us reveal that we did nothing wrong, technically. We refused to disassociate ourselves. So, the category now was, 'Well, your actions. You did disassociate yourself by those actions.' So, we said, 'Well we can't stop you from making the announcement. If you're gonna go and do that, fair enough. But we will

> come to that meeting. We will be respectful, sit in front of the meeting hall. When the announcement is made at the end, we stand up, respectfully, and just say to all our friends, because that's just who they are, friends, that what you just said is not true.' And then it was all, 'If that is the case, well, okay, right'. And then a couple of days, 'Well, we're not gonna make the announcement.' But then they made the announcement without telling us. (Jacob, lines 942–956)

The judicial process appears to be an arrangement purposefully crafted to control and manipulate the individual. The people who are accused are exposed to a behaviour which is harassing and lacks due process. The experiences of the participants are a clear example of the levels of control and duress which can be placed on innocent members.

The individual who attends the committee is alone; no emotional nor legal support is permitted.

> They didn't allow me to record the meeting, you know, you can't take notes, 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, lines 976–980)

The above quote emphasizes the way the men who conduct the process have complete power over the individual. The elders act according to their liking; there is no ethical protocol. As soon as something has been agreed between the parties, it can be easily disregarded. A further theme which emerges from the participants' accounts is the way certain conditions for blaming and shaming are created during the hearing process.

> They asked me in great detail exactly what I've done, which, with hindsight, [is like] 'You still don't understand? It's like, I fornicated', like, 'Yes, but did you touch this? Did you do that? Did you do the other?' and it's like, well, you know, you feel obligated to tell them. (Tom, lines 449–453)

According to the participants, during a judicial process their privacy is not respected. Shame and guilt are heightened. In these circumstances, the psychological pressure leads to full admission: 'I just admitted everything' (Eric, line 79). The circumstances of the judicial process led most of the participants to feel vulnerable. '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' (Jacob, lines 911–912).

The accounts of the participants show that the compliance and retention of members are achieved over a period of time through the use of various tactics to control members. Fear is one of these:

> 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. . . . Jehovah was always watching. The Devil was always watching. . . . 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's part of your life to think about dying and how you would die. (Maggie, lines 24–36)

As the respondents highlighted, Jehovah's Witnesses employ fear and shunning to ensure compliance and to discourage their members from leaving.

Consequences of religious shunning

After the judicial hearing is concluded and shunning is deemed necessary, the announcement is made publicly in front of the community. The public announcement represented a critical moment in the life of the participants but also for the community. From that moment on, the individual is ignored, avoided, marginalized. An individual who is shunned no longer exists.

Some of the respondents became *inactive* and subsequently *disassociated*. They described 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 rumors. 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 town] for 22 years, we didn't know anybody. (Liam, lines 446–452)

The harsh treatment enacted by the community has a detrimental emotional effect on the shunned individual:

> Generally, [the Witnesses] 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 my wife would just automatically say 'Hi.' And they would just turn and walk the other way. (Samuel, lines 532–539)

Family members who are part of the community also take an active part in shunning their relative: 'None of them talk to me since . . . and that included my mom since I was disfellowshipped' (Angie, lines 125–126).

> A few weeks ago, [my younger sister] was walking with her husband. She lives 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, lines 197–201)

The deterioration of family relationships is one of the weighty consequences when an individual loses their membership status:

> 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. (Rob, lines 484–490)

Spouses put an end to their marriage. The shunned individual experiences expressions of disdain from their family members. Those shunned as apostates are represented by the leadership as hideous people who have rejected and betrayed God. This results in members’ evident signs of disgust or the vocalization of such a sentiment.

Reinstatement

In order to regain what religious shunning has taken away, some individuals seek reinstatement. Nonetheless, reinstatement is a long process which the individual may experience as mentally and emotionally draining. During this process, despite the individual’s efforts towards regaining their membership status, shunning continues to be enforced by the community.

After a period of time, usually not less than six months but it could also last for years, if the individual regularly attends all the meetings, they might feel that their request of reinstatement will be positively evaluated by the elders. The participants explained the next steps towards reinstatement:

> And then you have to write a letter to the elders, so, ‘I, Dylan, want to be considered for reinstatement.’ And then [the elders] come, and they have a series of discussions

> with you. And these can be lengthy discussions, they're not just a five-minute quick conversation. And if they think you're heartfelt and genuine and repentant for your errors, then they'll recommend that you get reinstated. And then once you get reinstated then you still have to have a long period of extra studies with these elders before you're classed as, 'Okay, you're not going to contaminate the congregation away.' (Dylan, lines 239–247)

The decision to reinstate a shunned member is based on observation, that is, the individual's meeting attendance and behaviour. Moreover, the discussions the elders have with the individual should provide further guidance to evaluate the degree of repentance of the individual. However, the elders are not able to determine the individual's real intention in pursuing reinstatement.

> 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 mom again. (Dylan, lines 256–259)

This quote evidences the way reinstatement can be used as a tool to reconnect with loved ones and to regain a certain ability to manage one's own life. During the conversations with the elders, the real motivations for seeking reinstatement can be concealed. Dylan continued:

> 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. (Dylan, lines 266–273)

Thus, seeking reinstatement may have little to do with the individual's spiritual needs and their desire to reconnect with God. Deception can be used to be reinstated as there is no

forum for determining the real intentions of an individual who seeks to re-enter. However, at times, the elders do not accept the individual's request to be reinstated.

> And I couldn't keep going along to the meetings with nobody talking to me. . . . It was just too much, 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.' (Erin, lines 271–277)

No emotional or physical support is offered to the individual during the period they are attempting to be reinstated. The reinstatement process can be as distressing as when the person is originally shunned, especially if the individual lives alone and has not yet built a meaningful social web outside the community. A rejected reinstatement request may further compromise the individual's sense of belonging and self-esteem, with adverse consequences for their well-being.

Discussion

This study revealed that the journey from being a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses to leaving the community is a complex experience. This article first illuminates the kinds of behaviors which led the participants to face a Judicial Committee and then to be shunned. Alcohol misuse, premarital sexual intercourses, and apostasy were all behaviors which were considered as falling short of the community's moral and spiritual standards, making shunning deemed necessary. Second, this article highlights the way the judicial system, which aims at determining the individual's culpability and level of repentance, appears to be an intrusive process in which the basic rights of the individual are overlooked. For example, according to the participants' experiences, the judicial process appears to be a questionable procedure, which has two implications. First, the judicial hearing does not have due process

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; their judgements have no backing in English law (Torrance, 2019). Second, secrecy and abuse of power seem to characterize the process. According to Lifton's (1961) model of thought reform, one of the techniques which may be adopted to promote members' 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 member's life and which aspects of their own life a member can keep private. There is a deliberate disregard for the individual's rights which a legal court would ordinarily grant. Also, the fact that the committee denies the individual the right to be accompanied or to take notes during the hearing raises doubts about the honorability of the process.

An important concept which also emerges in this article is the denial of support 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 for 'sinning' or the degree of remorse, the end result is often the same: the individual is shunned.

Lastly, this article provides evidence that once the individual is officially shunned, they are intentionally ignored, avoided, and marginalized by their family and friends and are treated by the community as if they do not exist. This is in line with other religious denominations, high-control groups, and cults that achieve a mind-numbing effect through a systematic, tight teaching schedule and through other techniques aimed at controlling and influencing members (Lifton, 1961; Rodriguez-Carballeira et al., 2015). Members slowly but inevitably undergo a process of internalization of the group's rules, beliefs, and worldview, which leads to 'the individual's identity reshaping to fit the rigid contour of the doctrinal mold' (Lifton, 1961, p. 431). The doctrine takes precedence over the people. The individual is persuaded to 'give an absolute value to the group doctrine and ideology, placing it above

people and social laws' (Rodriguez-Carballeira et al., 2015, p. 35) and to 'submit to the demands of the cult and obey without question' (Lalich & McLaren, 2018, p. 64). Being shunned by family members or friends is one such example.

This article has revealed that religious shunning manifests itself as a systematic practice, the roots of which are deeply embedded in a cultural religious system based on fear, guilt, and shame. The participants' accounts provided examples of ways in which, in some religious communities such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, the lives of members are constantly scrutinized. The system of control which these communities create can be compared to a patrol system in which members survey each other, and often the elders are those who take the lead in monitoring the activities of the other members. The wrongdoer, who is shunned because they are considered to be a harmful influence for the other fellow members, in turn becomes a victim, suffering the consequences of the collective behaviour. The journey of leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses community is a complex one involving humiliation, injustice, and vulnerability. It increases the imbalance of power and the vulnerability of its members.

Limitations

The authors acknowledge some research limitations of this article. First, although snowball sampling was considered the most advantageous method to access former members of the community, one major limitation of this sampling technique is distortion, which has two implications (Kirchherr & Charles, 2018; Waters, 2015). First, there is the concrete possibility of an overrepresentation of specific demographic or personal characteristics within the research sample. Second, 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 had commenced a spiritual journey towards becoming Christians once they left the community. This aspect only partially depicts the post-exiting experiences of former members of the Jehovah's Witnesses community who have been shunned.

A second limitation is represented by the first author/interviewer's familiarity with the topic. Such familiarity enabled the creation of a profound connection between the participants and the interviewer in which feelings and experiences were acknowledged and understood. At the same time, this also possibly impacted the way the author interpreted the research data, although this is unavoidable when conducting qualitative research because the researcher becomes an integral part of the knowledge production process (Braun et al., 2019). Despite the willingness to understand and learn from the participants, the author/interviewer identified a possible pitfall in her familiarity with the topic – the concrete risk that she would not be as impartial as she wished. 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 the author/interviewer's familiarity with the topic and the need to be as open as possible to new ways of understanding and new insights (Noble & Smith, 2015). For example, during the interviews, detailed descriptions and clarifications were solicited about Jehovah's Witnesses jargon and the community's procedures and policies, roles, and behaviours so as to not take anything for granted. Another strategy to enhance balance was the other authors' 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 the thought processes guiding data analysis and interpretations was recorded. Also, constant comparisons were made to seek out similarities and differences across the participants' accounts.

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