

Becoming 'part of the world': helping former Jehovah's Witnesses adjust to life outside the religion

Natasha Freestone

Jehovah's Witnesses (JWs) are taught to address mental health difficulties through prayer and the support of their congregation. They are permitted to take medication, but – fearing the influence of those outside the group – Jehovah's Witnesses are wary of psychotherapy. Those who pursue the difficult process of leaving the religion may nonetheless seek clinical help at that time or in the period following defection.

This paper is intended as a resource for those working therapeutically with ex-Jehovah's Witnesses. In Section 1, I describe the religion's central tenets, focusing on those aspects of its culture that may be relevant to the psychological challenges of leavers. In Section 2, I detail some of those challenges, and offer potential therapeutic responses. There is a wide variety of literature on assisting those who leave cultic groups and this review is by no means exhaustive; the issues relating to Jehovah's Witnesses that are highlighted here are those that have emerged from recent research studies and my psychotherapeutic work.

In this paper I refer to the Jehovah's Witnesses variously as a 'religion', 'sect', 'community', 'group' and 'cultic group'. JWs self-identify as a Christian religion; from a historical perspective, they are one of several Adventist sects. Sociologists sometimes categorize the JWs as a New Religious Movement (NRM), although the group has been active for well over a century (Trompf, 2012, p.65). My use of the word 'cult' to describe the Jehovah's Witnesses is based upon an understanding of the term as meaning any group 'employing unethical, manipulative or coercive techniques of persuasion and control [...] designed to advance the goals of the group's leaders, to the possible or actual detriment of members, their families or the community' (Langone, 1993, p.4).

Section 1: Inside the Organization

The JW Context

The Jehovah's Witnesses are a Christian sect founded in Pennsylvania, United States. Emerging from the Bible Student movement led by Charles Russell in the 1870s, the group now claims 8.3 million active members worldwide (*The 2017 Yearbook*, 2017). The religion is deeply authoritarian: through an extensive and well-organised bureaucracy, the group's leaders – eight men known as 'the Governing Body' – regulate every aspect of members' lives. The sect displays characteristics common to other Christian fundamentalist groups, such as an adherence to an apocalyptic ideology; a belief in biblical inerrancy; intolerance of dissent or debate; and a profound antipathy towards intellectualism and pluralism (Strozier, 1994; Holden, 2002).

The Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society (which is the legal name of the group, and often abbreviated among members as ‘the Society’ or ‘the Organization’) is directed by the Governing Body from the movement’s worldwide headquarters in Warwick, upstate New York. It is the Governing Body alone who – regarded by adherents as God’s representatives on earth – may interpret the meaning of Scripture. Any challenge to the status of the Governing Body is considered to be apostasy. Men also hold all the positions of authority within the wider group, as women are not permitted to take on leadership roles. Within Witness families, wives must defer to their husbands as the ‘head of the household’.



Figure 1: The worldwide headquarters of the Jehovah’s Witnesses in Warwick, New York.

Official membership of the group is marked by public baptism, a full-body immersion in water. For those brought up in the religion, this baptism – a process that also involves an eighty-question interview – usually takes place during the teenage years, although children may be baptised at ages as young as nine or ten. Upon leaving school, all young Witnesses are encouraged to serve as pioneers (who preach 50-70 hours monthly), missionaries (who are sent abroad as pioneers) or Bethelites (who work voluntarily in the various JW administrative headquarters, known as Bethels, across the world). Bethel complexes are composed of offices and extensive factories that print Bibles and JW literature. Life at Bethel often involves long hours of physical labour or repetitive tasks for those who volunteer there. However, Bethelites are held in high esteem by rank-and-file JWs: to ‘serve’ in this way is considered to be an honour and a mark of spiritual maturity.

Ordinary congregation members also follow a busy schedule. Preaching is obligatory for every JW, and each hour dedicated to this activity is logged. At the end of each month, these data are forwarded to the JW headquarters, where they are collated and published annually. In addition to their intensive evangelism, JWs must attend several meetings per week, studying set texts in preparation for those meetings, as well as engage in daily prayer and family Bible study. Witness men give regular ‘talks’ (sermons) to the congregation and are told to reach out for ‘privileges’, which can include everything from setting up the microphones at the meeting hall to becoming an elder (there are several elders in each congregation). *Activity* forms the core of the Jehovah’s Witness way of life: members who fail to regularly participate are regarded as spiritually weak and therefore a potential danger to other adherents, even if they still believe in the doctrines of the sect.

The religion prohibits numerous activities: smoking, drunkenness, body piercings, tattoos, swearing, sex outside of marriage, homosexuality, divorce on grounds other than adultery, masturbation (which JW's believe can lead to homosexuality), pornography, gambling, and dabbling in the occult (which includes astrology, meditation and yoga) are all forbidden. Witnesses are not permitted to celebrate any holiday (birthdays, Christmas, national holidays), engage in politics in any form (JW's do not vote or pledge the oath of allegiance), visit 'apostate' websites, socialize with ex-members, or join the military. Medication and medical treatment are allowed, with the exception of blood transfusions.

School-age children are discouraged from associating with classmates outside of school and from participating in extracurricular activities, so as to minimize the time spent with non-JW's. After puberty, Witnesses must avoid spending time alone with members of the opposite sex, and are accompanied by chaperones when dating. There are many directives from the Organization regarding dress and appearance, with Witnesses instructed to be 'modest' in dress (avoiding both expensive brands and revealing clothes). Witness females must avoid 'masculine' hairstyles and should wear dresses or skirts to congregation meetings and when preaching; Witness males are warned against following fashion trends that the Governing Body deems 'feminine', such as wearing skinny trousers. Men are expected to be clean-shaven if they hold positions of authority in the congregation.

The Organization discourages adherents from having children, and has done so for decades, considering child-rearing to be a distraction from 'the urgent work' of evangelism: 'Many Christian couples decline to have children so as to become more fully involved in the urgent work that Jehovah has given his people to do. Some couples have waited for a time before having children; others have decided to remain childless and consider the possibility of bearing children in Jehovah's righteous new world' (*The Watchtower*, 2000). Despite this advice, starting a family is the norm among members. Moreover, the group's future sustainability depends on having children born into the sect, given that the annual growth rate has fallen from an average of 5% between the years 1928 and 2000, to under 2% in the year ending 2016 (*The 2017 Yearbook*, 2017; Holden, 2002, p. 1).

Being 'no part of the world'

The Jehovah's Witnesses believe the world to be controlled by the Devil and so, in order to protect themselves against his corrupting influence, they limit their contact with non-JW's as much as is practically possible, citing Christ's words at John 16:17 as a guiding principle: 'Be no part of the world, just as I am no part of the world'. Alluding to this scripture, JW's refer to everything outside of the religion as 'the world'. For instance, a JW might say, 'She married someone in the world', meaning 'she married a non-Witness'. In contrast, Witnesses talk of themselves as being 'in the truth'.

JW's are taught that reporting the transgressions of fellow members is an act of brotherly love, as it keeps the congregation 'clean'. Those who violate the rules must appear before a committee of elders who will decide whether the transgressors have sufficiently repented of their 'sin'. This process includes the transgressor giving a detailed account of the sin in question to the committee. If the transgressor is judged to be repentant, it will be announced to the congregation

that the member has been 'reproved'; if deemed inadequately remorseful, the person will be announced to have been 'disfellowshipped': expelled.

With the aim of avoiding 'worldly' contamination, adherents tend to rigorously self-censor, especially as they believe they are under God's constant watch: 'Jehovah does not tolerate hypocritical worship. As his eyes "are roving about through all the earth", he can detect those whose heart is not "complete toward him"' (*The Watchtower*, 2014). Unable to meet Jehovah's exacting standards, JWs frequently experience feelings of unworthiness, and these are compounded by the Organization's reminders to dedicate ever more resources to the group: 'Jehovah encourages us to let nothing stop us from giving our best to him [...] We should ask ourselves: Is doing Jehovah's will more important to us than anything else? Can we think seriously about our life and plan how we can do more to support God's Kingdom in these last days?' (*The Watchtower*, 2013).

Jehovah's Witnesses have a policy of 'shunning' those who either leave the religion voluntarily (known as disassociation) or are disfellowshipped.¹ JWs are instructed not to talk to or associate with ex-members, a policy that the Organization frames in terms of life or death:

Imagine two hikers waiting to be rescued on a cold winter day. Because it is so cold, one hiker gets very tired and wants to sleep. But if he falls asleep in the snow, he will die. To help him stay awake, his friend slaps him in the face. Even though this hurts, it could save his life. David expressed a similar idea when he said: "Should the righteous one strike me, it would be an act of loyal love." (Psalm 141:5) David recognized that even though discipline was painful, it would help him. Just like that slap, disfellowshipping is often what a person needs to come back to Jehovah. (*The Watchtower*, 2015)

There are a few exceptions to the shunning rule that are worth noting. Married JWs do not shun their disfellowshipped spouses, except in cases of adultery (which is the only permissible grounds for divorce). Nor does the shunning rule apply to those who have never been baptized; a teenager, for example, may disaffiliate before reaching the point of baptism. Some families may thus keep in contact with their ex-JW relatives while others may not. To complicate matters further, individual members vary in their observance of the shunning rule, with some maintaining secret or discreet contact with loved ones who are disfellowshipped.

Those who are disfellowshipped can return to the religion and be 'reinstated' (re-admitted), but this process can take many months and sometimes longer. Those wishing to be reinstated must attend congregation meetings but sit at the back of the meeting hall. They are not permitted to talk to others until their reinstatement is announced to the congregation.

Becoming 'inactive' (avoiding meetings and evangelism) is often an individual's preferred exit-strategy in order to preserve family ties. Those who are inactive are usually ostracised by the congregation, but not officially shunned. Becoming inactive is sometimes known among ex-JWs as 'fading'. Inactive members may still be disfellowshipped at a later date if it is reported to

¹ Not all who leave voluntarily choose to notify the Organization. Some of these members are disfellowshipped *in absentia*; others are simply deemed 'inactive'.

congregation elders that they have engaged in forbidden practices, such as celebrating Christmas or living unmarried with a partner.

‘Spiritual Food’

Adherents study only material written by the Organization, and are warned that independent research, especially on the internet, leads to apostasy. Information that contradicts JW doctrine is deemed to be the work of Satan, as is any negative media coverage. The Jehovah’s Witnesses publish their own version of the Bible, along with many Bible commentaries. They also run a website (<https://www.jw.org>) and produce video sermons, presented by members of the Governing Body. In addition, the Organization creates cartoons designed to appeal to young JWs, featuring the model Jehovah’s Witness children, ‘Caleb and Sophia’.



Figure 2: A scene from the ‘Caleb and Sophia’ cartoons. In this cartoon, Caleb learns that he must resist the temptation to play with a toy wizard because it is a Satanic influence.

Although the Jehovah’s Witnesses place a strong emphasis on studying, the authority of the texts set for ‘study’ each week cannot be challenged. This reading material, produced by a team of writers on behalf of the Governing Body, is referred to as ‘spiritual food’ that, by implication, congregation members are invited to ‘eat’. ‘Studying’ within the JW community might thus be understood more as a bodily ritual that signals obedience and membership, rather than as an activity that encourages critical thinking.

The Last Days

Jehovah’s Witness literature rejects the doctrine of hellfire, and instead warns of a fast-approaching apocalypse, referred to as Armageddon. Armageddon will not entail the destruction of the Earth itself; JWs look forward instead to being among the handful of surviving inhabitants who will transform the Earth into an Edenic paradise, under the rule of Christ. As believers equate being a non-JW with pending death, they feel compelled to remain members and to persuade loved ones to do the same.

In the daily lives of Jehovah’s Witnesses, there are few outlets for assertion or aggression. The group condemns violence, and members are instructed to be ‘sheep-like’ and ‘slow to anger’. The

fantasy of Armageddon, however, provides a vehicle for the more hostile impulses of the group: many hours can be spent collectively imagining the triumph of the righteous few and the catastrophic destruction of the Other. Murderous rage is the monopoly of Jehovah and, as Charles Strozier observes, this 'shift in agency allows individual fundamentalists to separate themselves from the violence that suffuses their ideology' (1994, p.165).

Outsiders may be puzzled as to how a group such as the Jehovah's Witnesses can sustain a belief in the imminence of the end for well over a century, despite many disappointments. This phenomenon was investigated in Leon Festinger's well-known study of cognitive dissonance among members of a small apocalyptic group who believed they would be saved by a flying saucer (Festinger *et al*, 1956). While some members of that group lost faith in the teachings when their salvation failed to materialize, others would not accept that they had been mistaken and swiftly adjusted their doctrine to account for the saucer's non-appearance. Festinger and his colleagues noted the crucial role of social support (both belonging to a group and recruiting others) in sustaining beliefs in the face of disconfirmation. They also observed the difficulty of changing course when a considerable commitment, both public and private, has been made to it. Similarly, psychologist Robert Cialdini observes 'our nearly obsessive desire to be (and to appear) consistent with what we have already done. Once we have made a choice or taken a stand, we will encounter personal and interpersonal pressures to behave consistently with that commitment. Those pressures will cause us to respond in ways that justify our earlier decision' (2007, p.57). For those belonging to apocalyptic groups, something akin to the gambling mentality (or the 'sunk cost fallacy') can be at work: as time passes, more emotional and financial investment is sunk into the idea of a future reward, making withdrawal more psychologically painful than behaving consistently by paying the cost of one more round.

For the leaders of a group, creating an apocalyptic narrative can be a powerful technique of social control. When a state of emergency is perceived, individuals submit to authority more readily and tend to 'follow the herd'. Leaders of all stripes understand the potential of existential threats (whether real or illusory) to heighten emotional arousal and foster dependency. This is particularly the case within totalist systems, as Alexandra Stein notes: 'Along with the deliberate inculcation of fear, the group positions itself as the supposed safe haven - even though *it is the group* itself creating the threat' (2017, p. 71). The JW Organization uses various means to create an atmosphere of anxious vigilance about the imminence of Armageddon. The group's publications regularly feature images and descriptions of the looming 'destruction of the wicked' and members are reminded to heed the warning of the Gospels to 'keep on the watch' (as reflected in the titles of the JW magazines, *The Watchtower* and *Awake!*). At the religion's annual conventions, held all over the world, the Organization shows short films that depict the days preceding Armageddon (the actors are JW volunteers).



Fig 3: A still from a short film shown at the 2016 'Remain Loyal to Jehovah' convention. The film depicts faithful JWs confronted by armed police (all played by JW actors). Witnesses have been warned to expect similar scenarios during 'the time of the end'.

While JWs often ignore or postpone the priorities and milestones that are typical in the lives of non-members (such as attending university, launching a career or planning for retirement), certain world events (including major earthquakes, environmental catastrophes, or anything involving the United Nations) are given close attention and enthusiastically greeted as 'signs of the end'. Their discourse about everyday life is thus imbued with particular meanings known only to insiders, offering them a reassuring sense of control over the future and further contributing to a powerful group bond.

The special situation of child-abuse

In recent years, pedophilia scandals involving the Organization have captured the attention of the news media. Reporting child sexual abuse to outside authorities has not been encouraged by the Organization, and elders conduct investigations only through internal disciplinary boards. When dealing with allegations of child sexual abuse within congregations, JWs follow what is referred to as the 'two-witness rule'. This means that a congregational investigation takes place only if allegations are made by at least two congregation members (i.e., the supposed victim and a witness to the abuse), or if the alleged abuser confesses. The procedural handbook published specifically for Jehovah's Witness elders states:

If the accused denies the accusation, the investigating elders should try to arrange a meeting with him and the accuser together. (Note: If the accusation involves child sexual abuse and the victim is currently a minor, the elders should contact the branch office² before arranging a meeting with the child and the alleged abuser.) If the accuser or the accused is unwilling to meet with the elders or if the accused continues to deny the accusation of a single witness and the wrongdoing is not established, the elders will leave matters in Jehovah's hands. (*The Watchtower*, 2010, p.72)

Most likely in response to media focus on the Organization's pedophilia scandals, the Governing Body sent a letter to JW elders in April 2018, stipulating that pedophilia is 'a crime' which

² The branch office is made up of JW officials who supervise the movement in any given country.

congregation members may choose to report to the authorities:

We recognize that the authorities are responsible for addressing such crimes. The elders do not shield any perpetrator of child abuse from the authorities. In all cases, victims and their parents have the right to report an accusation of child abuse to the authorities. Therefore, victims, their parents, or anyone else who reports such an accusation to the elders are clearly informed by the elders that they have the right to report the matter to the authorities. Elders do not criticize anyone who chooses to make such a report. (*Jehovah's Witnesses' scripturally based position*, 2018)

Although the Organization's clarification that pedophilia is a crime (rather than simply a 'sin') is an important shift, there is no indication of a change to the two-witness rule for responding to allegations of abuse. Adherence to this rule, within a culture that prizes loyalty and compliance, has meant that countless allegations have not been thoroughly investigated. In some instances, victims of sexual abuse have been shunned by the JW community for deciding to leave, while perpetrators have remained in congregations, having been judged sufficiently 'repentant' by elders or not having undergone proper investigation at all.

The inadequacy of JW child protection policies was examined by the Australian Royal Commission, which concluded in its report:

The Royal Commission considers the management of the risk of reoffending to be an essential factor in the development of an institution's policies and procedures on the protection of children from sexual abuse. There is no evidence before the Royal Commission that the Jehovah's Witness organisation has properly considered that risk in developing its precautionary measures for dealing with known or alleged perpetrators of child sexual abuse. This suggests a serious lack of understanding on the part of the Jehovah's Witness organisation about the nature of child sexual abuse and the risk of reoffending, and it places children within the organisation at significant risk of sexual abuse. (Australian Royal Commission, 2016 p. 69)

* * *

It is clear that various characteristics of the JW cult can have a deleterious effect on the psychological well-being of members. These characteristics might be summarized as follows:

- The group's leadership is authoritarian and exclusively male, headed by a small co-opted clique and supported by a bureaucracy. The leaders are the sole moderators of 'the truth'.
- The culture prizes unquestioning obedience (framed as 'loyalty'). This can elicit fear and guilt, which can then be used to control the behavior of members.

- The focus on a supposed ‘apocalypse’ creates anxiety and excitement, keeping emotional arousal high. This can discourage rational analysis and induce compliant behaviors that continually privilege the Organization’s needs over the individual’s.
- Dualistic thinking (good versus bad, ‘the truth’ versus ‘the world’) can evoke both a fear of outsiders and a sense of superiority over them, resulting in a separation from the rest of humankind.
- Intellectual curiosity is discouraged (and compared to the ‘sin of Eve’) and secular education is seen as potentially harmful. Fear of ‘apostasy’ may deter members from searching for information online. Members may thus be unaware of some concepts that are embraced by mainstream society.

Section 2: Working therapeutically with ex-Jehovah’s Witnesses

It is important to note that being an ex-JW does not necessarily mean one is an ex-believer: numerous former Witnesses remain committed to the idea that the religion is ‘the truth’. ‘Believing’ ex-members are sometimes referred to by other ex-JWs as ‘POMI’ (physically out; mentally in). Those who are POMI may be wracked with guilt for having ‘dishonoured Jehovah’ and their JW families. They may feel unwilling or unable to return to the group, but still live in fear of death at Armageddon.

Conversely, there are members who no longer believe the group’s doctrines but choose to delay their exit, or even to remain Jehovah’s Witnesses. These members are sometimes referred to by ex-JWs as ‘PIMO’ (physically in; mentally out). Those who are PIMO often feel they cannot leave because of concerns about losing relationships with their family members.

Many different factors can prompt members to leave the cult. Younger JWs may yearn to escape from the litany of rules, and find the social attitudes of the group stifling and dated (Habibis & Hookway, 2013). Witnesses who are bi, gay or trans often feel they have little choice but to leave, as the Organization condemns not only non-heterosexual sex but also non-heterosexual *feelings*, so that even those who remain celibate inevitably fall short of what members refer to as ‘Jehovah’s standards’ (Lalich & McLaren, 2010). Some members may have disagreements over matters of doctrine and Biblical interpretation (Holden, 2002); others may feel uneasy about the Organization’s conduct in particular areas, such as the handling of sexual abuse cases or the treatment of ex-members. In some cases, leaving can be prompted by many of these factors combined (Gutgsell, 2017).

In this section, I detail some of the challenges that JWs may face during the process of separating themselves from the group and suggest possible therapeutic responses.

Issues encountered by ex-JWs

Authoritarian culture

The simplistic answers of fundamentalism can provide refuge from a complex world, and a protective shield against what Erich Fromm (1942) famously called ‘the fear of freedom’. Having left a totalist structure, former members may look to new authority figures, such as therapists, to provide immediate answers, quick fixes or grand narratives. They may be attracted to new groups that claim to possess ‘the truth’ or special knowledge, and that rely upon similar dynamics of domination and subjugation.

In his insightful study of ‘relational systems of subjugation’ in both families and cultic groups, psychoanalyst Daniel Shaw describes how the narcissistic parent shores up a position of dominance by attacking the subjectivity of the child, a relational pattern that lasts long into adulthood: ‘The child traumatized in this way now strives to be the right kind of object for the narcissist, because his separate subjectivity has been deemed of no value. The idol parent is the only one who has something to give, and the adult child can either kneel at the throne, be banished [or] disinherited’ (Shaw, 2014, p.194). Subjugation or banishment is a familiar choice for Jehovah’s Witnesses. The group promotes self-negation, with adherents expected to prioritize the demands of the Organization over their personal needs and desires. After the collapse of idealized parental figures in the form of Jehovah and the Organization, former members can feel betrayed and abandoned. As they come to realize the personal sacrifices they have made for the Organization, the grief over lost time and missed opportunities can be overwhelming.

Control through the use of fear and guilt

The use of fear and guilt, along with (crucially) intermittent gratification, keeps members dependent and ‘on their toes’ in a dynamic that is typical of abusive relationships. Indeed, the after-effects of involvement in the group can resemble those of separating from a 1:1 abusive relationship: anxiety, depression, identity confusion, poor self-care, and low self-worth (Giambalvo, 1993; Shaw, 2014). The social isolation that results from the JW shunning policy can evoke feelings of shame in ex-members, even among those who are convinced that the group is a cult. Those who are able to maintain contact with their JW families frequently experience the grief and frustration of feeling they cannot be completely honest with their JW relatives about their lives or beliefs, for fear of being judged a malign influence and therefore losing contact altogether.

Psychologist Meredith Friedson suggests that both current and former JWs may also struggle with obsessive-compulsive difficulties: ‘People with obsessive-compulsive tendencies often strive for perfection. They often have difficulty making decisions and vacillate between options because they are afraid of making the “wrong” choice and losing out on their ideal. Sometimes this indecision results in the loss of opportunity or a decision being forced upon them by default. In a religion where even the most minor infractions (e.g., smoking a cigarette) must be confessed to

a group of Elders (generally white, older men³) and can result in the person being disfellowshipped, a high emphasis on perfection—and an inherent anxiety in evaluating every act—is likely to result’ (Friedson, 2015, p.705).

Such anxieties can manifest themselves in the therapeutic process. There may be a reluctance to commit to therapy due to an understandable fear of domination (i.e., that the emotional intimacy of therapy will lead to their being trapped or manipulated) or of merger (for example, a fantasy that the therapist secretly wishes to ‘convert’ them to their own worldview). In sessions, the former member may fear displeasing the therapist and strive to be a ‘good’ client/patient who expresses the ‘right’ emotions.

Apocalyptic and dualistic thinking

When JWs leave the sect, they ‘lose’ the promised immortality (which includes the resurrection of loved ones) that they had once believed to be guaranteed. For those who adopt an apocalyptic mindset, much of their emotional investment is in their future salvation. For some exJWs, it is a disturbing shift to have to focus upon, and invest in, living *now*.

The apocalyptic outlook is one of searing clarity: it neatly divides the world into good and evil, righteous and unrighteous. When Jehovah’s Witnesses leave the religion, they are cut adrift from the comfort of this absolute certainty and, as a result, can feel deeply unsafe. If there is no punishment and no reward, how does one make ethical choices? If the JW worldview is not ‘the truth’, what is? If Armageddon is not coming, how will the world end? Worse: how can one bear the anxiety of things *not* ending? Even when a former member no longer believes in Armageddon, a tendency towards apocalyptic thinking can remain. This can manifest itself as an expectation of future punishment, hyper-vigilance about world events or a more generalized sense of ‘living on borrowed time’.

Having been raised in a self-isolating community, in which non-members are described as living under the rule of Satan, many exiting Jehovah’s Witnesses are naturally fearful about forming relationships with outsiders. They may have no social network outside the group. They may worry about being perceived as foolish or peculiar for having been in the group at all, or feel they do not know how to behave in certain social situations. This can mean that, despite leaving the group, ex-members can continue to feel separate from ‘the world’. Moreover, there can be some narcissistic wounding in no longer belonging to a special group or ‘chosen people’.

Discouragement of emotional insight and intellectual curiosity

In her important work on cultic groups, Alexandra Stein notes that in order to maintain power, group leaders must not only stifle the intellectual curiosity of members, but also prevent them from *thinking about feelings*. The leadership aims ‘to inhibit a person’s ability to reflect upon their actual situation and sense perceptions, and [...] impede the use of their higher-cognitive functions to make decisions about how to act on those perceptions. In giving up that ability to think about one’s feelings, the follower then hands over the power to interpret their reality to whoever places themselves as the holder of the correct interpretation, namely: the leader’ (2017, p.140). As JWs

³ Friedson’s work refers to the experience of JWs based in the USA. This is not the case in other countries of the world. However, seven of the eight members of the Governing Body are white, older men.

are not encouraged to think about their feelings, especially those deemed negative or shameful by the Organization, ex-members can be unfamiliar and uncomfortable with both reflecting upon and experiencing particular feeling states.

Since the Organization discourages further education and punishes dissent, critical thinking skills can be under-developed. There may be serious gaps in leavers' knowledge about the workings and beliefs of the outside world, and they may lack confidence in their ability to assess information. Upon leaving the group, ex-members often have few educational qualifications for well-paid work, and can face serious financial difficulties. This hardship is compounded if the ex-member is forced to leave the family home due to shunning.

Therapeutic responses to the issues presented by former JWs

Psychotherapy with well-informed clinicians provides a precious opportunity to both create a new life structure and explore past experiences. This dual process is well described in a paper by therapist Doni Whitsett in *Cult Recovery: A Clinician's Guide to Working with Former Members and Families* (2017). Since some former members may be in the midst of both practical and emotional crises when they seek clinical help, Whitsett notes that first attending to the ex-member's present life will serve to 'lay the foundation for the more in-depth psychological work of the second strand' (2017, p.196). Published by the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA), The *Cult Recovery* guide describes a wide variety of effective therapeutic approaches and is recommended reading for anyone working with former members.

It is worth noting that as Jehovah's Witnesses are taught to focus relentlessly on 'the end', they can experience anxiety when an end is not in sight. To alleviate such tension, the client may try to rush the therapy process in order to create an ending. Depending on the modality of the therapy, clinicians may suggest a review after a particular number of sessions. This can enable the ex-member to settle in to the therapeutic work within a temporal frame that feels both flexible and safe.

Learning about the psychology of coercive control helps former members to place their experiences of the Jehovah's Witnesses in a broader context. Susceptibility to manipulation and exploitation is, of course, universal, and the persuasive techniques used by the Organization are powerful and well-honed. If former JWs are able to recognize both the universality of human vulnerability to manipulation and the efficacy of the Organization's techniques, this can help to assuage the intense shame they may feel about their involvement. I have included Robert Lifton's *Eight Criteria for Thought Reform* as an Appendix to this paper; former members may find it a useful comparative checklist with their experience of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Lifton, an American psychiatrist, studied the process of 'brainwashing' (although he preferred the less sensationalist term, 'thought reform'). His 'Eight Criteria' are based upon research interviews conducted after the Korean War with both American former POWs and Chinese defectors. Written in 1961, Lifton's work remains a seminal text in thinking about coercive techniques and psychological manipulation.

The psychotherapeutic project – consisting, for the most part, of a non-judgemental exploration

of the inner life – runs completely counter to the Jehovah’s Witness culture, which offers absolute certainty in exchange for the suppression of thoughts and feelings that do not correspond to the JW ideal. Building the subject’s capacity to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty serves as an antidote to the temptations of dogma, and creates space for the suppressed aspects of the self to emerge. Clinicians are conscious of the transference pull to adopt the role of the idealized all-knowing authority figure; their ability to manage the state of not knowing, their willingness to learn and to admit mistakes should contrast with the impervious grandiosity of the Organization’s leaders (see Dubrow-Marshall, 2017, p. 224).

As JWs are encouraged to have a passive attitude to knowledge, allowing the Organization alone to confer meaning upon life, a part of the recovery process can therefore involve kindling the spirit of intellectual curiosity and openness that former members have previously regarded as sinful and threatening. Furthermore, living without an apocalyptic narrative means re-interpreting the world in a very different light, and might call for an engagement with subjects that had previously been taboo, such as evolutionary biology, theology, philosophy, psychology, and non-JW versions of history.

During the recovery process, ex-JWs can be encouraged to focus upon their own well-being, and to register the differences between relationships based on mutual esteem and those based upon paradigms of subjugation and dominance. As Linda Dubrow-Marshall and Rod Dubrow-Marshall note, ‘Former members of cult-like groups may find it hard not to view self-care as a selfish indulgence that is bereft of the formerly all-consuming and more important world-changing group mission and identity. Psychotherapists can help them to rebuild a sense of self that supports their individual needs for nurturance and well-being, particularly if the psychotherapists are also seen to be following this advice themselves’ (2017, p.225).

An understanding of the *external* dynamics of domination and subjugation can be used to shed light upon *intra-psychic* dynamics. Jehovah’s Witnesses are encouraged to subjugate themselves to the Organization, but also to identify with its infallibility and righteousness. Such splitting can leave aspects of the self inflected with a harsh authoritarianism or grandiosity, while others are burdened by shame and vulnerability. The therapeutic aim is not to collude with the fantasy of purging every trace of these JW selves (as JWs attempt to do with their ‘worldly’ selves when they convert), but to enter into a more conscious relationship to them. As the ex-member becomes more aware of the moments when they adopt a fundamentalist stance, or resort to self-destructive behaviors as a response to uncertainty, they can gradually devise alternative strategies for managing life’s unpredictability.

Such internal struggles are not particular to ex-JWs, but reflect wider, perhaps universal, tensions between our more fanatical tendencies and what Robert Lifton, in his foreword to *Cults in Our Midst* (1995), calls the ‘protean self’: ‘The protean self, in contrast to the fundamentalist or cult self, is open and many-sided; rather than narrowly prescribed, it calls forth odd combinations, and includes important elements of humor and mockery. The protean self is not without its difficulties in its constant quest for an ethical core. But it has the virtue of avoiding absolutes and dead ends and holding out an ever-present possibility for transformation and change’ (Singer & Lalich, 1995, p.xii).

There are Jehovah’s Witnesses in over 200 countries; the life experiences and attitudes of ex-

members are therefore diverse. After leaving, some JW's endorse liberal and often atheistic views; others, in contrast, remain deeply uncomfortable with secular society and may commit to new religious groups, sometimes with equal fervor. Between these poles one encounters ex-JW agnostics, socially liberal Christians, or those who reject organized religion but still maintain the JW position that the Bible is God's guidebook to life.

Unsurprisingly, tensions among these divergent communities become visible on the many forums and support groups for ex-Jehovah's Witnesses and there have been conflicts between the more prominent ex-JW activists. This said, the online experiences of ex-JWs tend to be overwhelmingly positive and sometimes profound: some members have secretly visited ex-JW websites for months or years before making the decision to leave the group themselves. As it is often the only space where Witnesses can openly discuss and critique the Organization, the internet frequently plays a key role in JW 'exit stories'. For all its flaws, online peer support can be invaluable for members during the leaving process.

Leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses is not a single event, but a long and often arduous journey. However, thousands of JW's leave the group each year, and begin a process of recovery that can lead to greater psychological freedom and equilibrium. Support from clinicians who are knowledgeable about the challenges faced by ex-members, or are willing to learn about them, plays a crucial role in this process. As they grow in confidence, ex-JWs can move away from the crushing dominance of the Organization and come to realize their own ability to lead meaningful lives as 'part of the world'.

Natasha Freestone, 2018.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Julia Gutzell for our many conversations about the impact of shunning upon ex-JWs.

Recommended Reading

Goldberg, L., Goldberg, W., Henry, R., Langone, M. (Eds.) (2017) *Cult recovery: A clinician's guide to working with former members and families*. Bonita Springs: International Cultic Studies Association.

Lalich, J. & McClaren, K. (2017) *Escaping utopia: Growing up in a cult, getting out and starting over*. New York: Routledge.

Lifton, R. (1961) *Thought reform and the psychology of totalism*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Shaw, D. (2014) *Narcissism: Relational systems of subjugation*. New York: Routledge.

Singer, M. & Lalich, J. (1995) *Cults in our midst*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Stein, A. (2016) *Terror, love and brainwashing: Attachment in cults and totalitarian systems*. New York: Routledge.

Zieman, B. (2015) *Exiting the JW cult: A healing handbook*. North Charleston: Create Space.

References

Australian Royal Commission Report (2016) *Royal commission into institutional responses to child sexual abuse – Case study 29: Jehovah’s Witnesses*. Retrieved from: <https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/file-list/Case%20Study%2029%20-%20Findings%20Report%20-%20Jehovahs%20Witnesses.pdf>

Cialdini, R. Influence (2007) *The psychology of persuasion*. New York: HarperCollins.

Dubrow-Marshall, L. & Dubrow-Marshall, R. (2017) ‘The role of self-care in cult recovery’ in Goldberg, L., Goldberg, W., Henry, R., Langone, M. (Eds.) (2017) *Cult recovery: A clinician’s guide to working with former members and families*. Bonita Springs: International Cultic Studies Association.

Festinger, L., Riecken, H & Schachter, S. (1956) *When prophecy fails*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Friedson, M. (2015) ‘Psychotherapy and the fundamentalist client: The aims and challenges of treating Jehovah’s Witnesses’. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 54 pp. 693–712.

Fromm, E. (1942) *The fear of freedom*. London: Routledge.

Giambalvo, C. (1993) ‘Post-cult problems: An exit counselor’s perspective’ in Langone, M. (Ed.) *Recovery from cults*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Gutgsell, J. (2017) ‘A loving provision? How former Jehovah’s Witnesses experience shunning’. (Master’s thesis). Vrije Universiteit, Brussels.

Habibis, D. & Hookway, D. (2013) ‘Losing my religion: Managing identity in a post-Jehovah’s Witness world’. *Journal of Sociology*, Vol 51 (4) pp.843-856.

Holden, A. (2002) *Jehovah's Witnesses: Portrait of a contemporary religious movement*. London: Routledge.

Jehovah’s Witnesses’ scripturally based position on child protection. (2018) Letter to congregation elders. cpt-E 4/18. New York: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society.

Lalich, J., & McLaren, K. (2010) ‘Inside and outcast: Multifaceted stigma and redemption in the lives of gay and lesbian Jehovah’s Witnesses’. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 57 (10), pp.1303–1333.

Langone, M. (Ed.) (1993) *Recovery from cults: Help for victims of psychological and spiritual abuse*. New York: W.W. Norton.

- Lifton, R. (1961) *Thought reform and the psychology of totalism*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Shaw, D. (2014) *Narcissism: Relational systems of subjugation*. New York: Routledge.
- Shepherd the flock of God*. (2010) New York: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society.
- Singer, M. & Lalich, J. (1995) *Cults in our midst*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Stein, A. (2016) *Terror, love and brainwashing: Attachment in cults and totalitarian systems*. New York: Routledge.
- Strozier, C. (1994) *Apocalypse: On the psychology of fundamentalism in America*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Strozier, C. (Ed.) (2010) *The fundamentalist mindset: Psychological perspectives on religion, violence and history*. Oxford: OUP.
- Trompf, G. (2012) 'History and the end of time in new religions'. *The Cambridge Companion to New Religious Movements*. Cambridge: CUP.
- The Watchtower*. (2000) New York: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society. Retrieved from: [https://www.jw.org/en/publications/magazines/w20000801/Why-Do-They-Have-No-Children/#?insight\[search_id\]=4462db43-ca35-437a-8502-a79621f4e5e7&insight\[search_result_index\]=0](https://www.jw.org/en/publications/magazines/w20000801/Why-Do-They-Have-No-Children/#?insight[search_id]=4462db43-ca35-437a-8502-a79621f4e5e7&insight[search_result_index]=0)
- The Watchtower*. (2013) New York: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society. Retrieved from: [https://www.jw.org/en/publications/magazines/ws20131215/will-you-make-sacrifices-kingdom/#?insight\[search_id\]=917e9cb9-c977-48a8-b56e-a2e1e846748f&insight\[search_result_index\]=14](https://www.jw.org/en/publications/magazines/ws20131215/will-you-make-sacrifices-kingdom/#?insight[search_id]=917e9cb9-c977-48a8-b56e-a2e1e846748f&insight[search_result_index]=14)
- The Watchtower*. (2014) New York: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society. Retrieved from: [https://www.jw.org/en/publications/magazines/w20140715/god-knows-those-belonging-to-him/#?insight\[search_id\]=20b7faa4-f55c-4833-8576-9c6368b9c93c&insight\[search_result_index\]=0](https://www.jw.org/en/publications/magazines/w20140715/god-knows-those-belonging-to-him/#?insight[search_id]=20b7faa4-f55c-4833-8576-9c6368b9c93c&insight[search_result_index]=0)
- The Watchtower*. (2015) New York: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society. Retrieved from: [https://www.jw.org/en/publications/magazines/ws20150515/disfellowshipping-a-loving-provision/#?insight\[search_id\]=29af6fa8-92c9-4533-8581-e67b85fbab0f&insight\[search_result_index\]=6](https://www.jw.org/en/publications/magazines/ws20150515/disfellowshipping-a-loving-provision/#?insight[search_id]=29af6fa8-92c9-4533-8581-e67b85fbab0f&insight[search_result_index]=6)
- Whitsett, D. (2017) 'A modern psychodynamic approach with first-generation cult members' in Goldberg, L., Goldberg, W., Henry, R., Langone, M. (Eds.) (2017) *Cult recovery: A clinician's guide to working with former members and families*. Bonita Springs: International Cultic Studies Association.
- The 2017 Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses*. (2017) New York: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society. Retrieved from: <https://www.jw.org/en/publications/books/2017-yearbook/2016-grand-totals/>

Appendix

Robert J. Lifton's Eight Criteria for Thought Reform

From *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism* (1961) New York: W.W. Norton.

1. **Milieu Control.** This involves the control of information and communication both within the environment and, ultimately, within the individual, resulting in a significant degree of isolation from society at large.
2. **Mystical Manipulation.** There is manipulation of experiences that appear spontaneous but in fact were planned and orchestrated by the group or its leaders in order to demonstrate divine authority or spiritual advancement or some special gift or talent that will then allow the leader to reinterpret events, scripture, and experiences as he or she wishes.
3. **Demand for Purity.** The world is viewed as black and white and the members are constantly exhorted to conform to the ideology of the group and strive for perfection. The induction of guilt and/or shame is a powerful control device used here.
4. **Confession.** Sins, as defined by the group, are to be confessed either to a personal monitor or publicly to the group. There is no confidentiality; members' 'sins,' 'attitudes,' and 'faults' are discussed and exploited by the leaders.
5. **Sacred Science.** The group's doctrine or ideology is considered to be the ultimate Truth, beyond all questioning or dispute. Truth is not to be found outside the group. The leader, as the spokesperson for God or for all humanity, is likewise above criticism.
6. **Loading the Language.** The group interprets or uses words and phrases in new ways so that often the outside world does not understand. This jargon consists of thought-terminating clichés, which serve to alter members' thought processes to conform to the group's way of thinking.
7. **Doctrine over person.** Member's personal experiences are subordinated to the sacred science and any contrary experiences must be denied or reinterpreted to fit the ideology of the group.
8. **Dispensing of existence.** The group has the prerogative to decide who has the right to exist and who does not. This is usually not literal but means that those in the outside world are not saved, unenlightened, unconscious and they must be converted to the group's ideology. If they do not join the group or are critical of the group, then they must be rejected by the members. Thus, the outside world loses all credibility. In conjunction, should any member leave the group, he or she must be rejected also.