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Exiters of Religious Fundamentalism: Reconstruction of Identity, Social Relationships and Support, and Meaning Related to Well-Being

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Exiters of Religious Fundamentalism: Reconstruction of Identity, Social Relationships
and Support, and Meaning Related to Well-Being

by

Andreea Alexandra Nica

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in
Sociology

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Abstract

Over the past decade, researchers have documented the steady growth of religious “nones” – those who do not affiliate with any organized religion. There is, however, limited research examining religious disaffiliation on health outcomes – that is, how the process of religious disaffiliation or exiting contributes to mental well-being. These trends and gap in the literature make it timely and it is important to consider the impact of leaving religion on the well-being of individuals experiencing this life transition. This qualitative study investigates a particularly understudied subgroup of exiters – individuals who have exited Christian fundamentalist religious groups.

Drawing on 24 in-depth, individual interviews, this research examines how former religious participants reconstruct identity, social relationships and support, and meaning related to well-being – conceptualized as the religious exiting process for this study. I employ *Iterative Thematic Inquiry* or *ITI*, a new qualitative analytic strategy that focuses on theme development before data collection, through an initial assessment of researcher preconceptions, and that writing, versus coding, is the primary procedure for data analysis. The results demonstrate that while it is challenging in the initial stages of the exiting process to forge a new sense of identity, cultivate new relationships and support, and achieve a positive meaning outcome, over time, this reconstruction contributes to greater life satisfaction.

Dedication

Dedicated to my grandmother, Elena Nica, whose spirit gave me the courage to exit and, more importantly, arrive.

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Introduction

Over the past decade, the rate of religious disaffiliation has increased. According to a recent report, nearly one in five Americans (18%) who were raised in a religious faith now have no religious affiliation (and thus are considered disaffiliated; Pew Research, 2015). The same report found that nonreligious people – those who do not affiliate with any organized religion – currently account for almost one quarter (23%) of the adult population. This is an increase from 1990, when 7% of Americans were nonreligious (Pew Research, 2015).

Despite the steady trend, religion continues to be a pervasive force with intersecting influences in the social, cultural and political domains (Bader & Desmond, 2006; Geertz, 1973; Turner, 2013). Moreover, religion serves as a powerful source of meaning and purpose (Silberman, 2005), offers forms of social support and coping resources (Nooney & Woodrum, 2002), and contributes to social identity development (Greenfield & Marks, 2007; Merino, 2014; Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2010). The documented increase in religious disaffiliation begs the exploration of societal impact and individual well-being of the rising wave of religious disaffiliates.

While much of the research in the sociology of religion has documented a positive religion-health association (Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001; Krause, 2015), some have found the opposite to be true across specific measures (Cragun, Hwang, & Hammer, 2009; Ellison, Burdette, & Hill, 2009; Exline, Yali, & Sanderson, 2000; Strawbridge, Shema, Cohen, Roberts, & Kaplan, 1998). Generally, the religion-health association has

been operationalized along measures of formal religious participation (e.g., religious attendance), physical health (e.g., hypertension, heart disease) and mental health (e.g., psychological distress, well-being). Yet, research exploring the association between religious disaffiliation and mental health is quite limited (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016). The few who have investigated this association have discovered that there are variations of social and health consequences to leaving religious groups, namely, exiting groups that are considered “high-cost”, fundamentalist, and/or strict (Berger, 2015; Fazzino, 2014; Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016; Iannaccone, 1994). Further, although there has been a steady increase of religiously unaffiliated Americans (Pew, 2012), still nonreligious identities, such as atheists, who may also be exiters of a religious group, experience social stigma given the pervasive Western Christian ideology in the United States (Smith, 2011; Streib, Silver, Csöff, Keller, & Hood, 2009; Zuckerman, 2009).

This research focuses on a subset of religious disaffiliates – exiters from fundamentalist religious groups – and, specifically, explores how this subset of exiters reconstruct identity, meaning, and social relationships and support, and how this reconstruction impacts well-being. I conceptualize social relationships and support, identity, and meaning as interrelated, but also, distinct concepts for my units of analysis – individual exiters of fundamentalist religious groups. For the purposes of this study, I conceive the “exiter” as having the following two characteristics: 1). Does not participate in “religious switching” – transitioning from one religion to another (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010). 2). An exiter may or may not deliberately take on a nonreligious

identity (e.g., atheist, agnostic, humanist, skeptic), yet the exiter is considered a disaffiliate from organized religion.

Strict religions (Iannaccone, 1994; Kelley, 1986), fundamentalist (Almond, Appleby, & Sivan, 2003), or high-cost religious groups (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010) have distinct characteristics of absolutism, fanaticism, and conformity. For this study, I use Kelley's (1986) original description of the following terms: *absolutism* is conceived of as members having a high commitment to and willingness to sacrifice on behalf of the religious group's goals or beliefs. In addition, the religious group refuses to admit to error, ambiguity, or ignorance in their beliefs. *Conformity* is considered an act of control through the obedience and discipline of members in the religious group. *Fanaticism* is conceived of as a one-way communication method, whereby there is a greater outflow of religious content from the organization, and significantly less inflow and contributory power from members.

For the purposes of this study I use high-cost, fundamentalist, and strict interchangeably, but primarily default to the term fundamentalist. Some examples of high-cost, fundamentalist, and/or strict religious groups include Latter-day Saints (LDS) or Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Islamic fundamentalists, Evangelical Christianity, Pentecostals, Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Community (Haredi Judaism), and some new religious movements (e.g., Scientology), to name a few (Iannaccone, 1994; Streib et al., 2009). These religious groups tend to maintain strict cultural and social norms of conduct and place significant limits on activities in, and exposure to, the outside world, thereby

increasing strong participation and promoting closer social ties within the group and less time outside the group (Iannaccone, 1994). Those who are born within high-cost religious groups and who decide to leave tend to experience greater hardships and emotional suffering (Berger, 2015; Streib et al., 2009), than perhaps those who join and voluntarily leave in adulthood, which is more common in new religious movements (Goldman, 1999; Jacobs, 1989). Yet, both types of exiters of high-cost religious settings experience various life challenges as they (re)integrate into nonreligious society, and these challenges are linked to their well-being (Berger, 2015; Coates, 2013; Jacobs, 1989).

Finally, because high-cost religious groups tend to foster a strong social support network through encouragement of high participation and involvement, along with a strong sense of meaning and purpose and identity, exiters are confronted with losses, to varying degrees, of these important aspects of social life. Exiters, however, may also experience gains in their new social world as they navigate the social complexities of the nonreligious landscape. Thus, it is important to empirically investigate how exiters reconstruct their identities, social relationships and support, and meaning in their nonreligious lives.

This research is a qualitative study of religious exiters of fundamentalist religious groups. For the purposes of this study, *organized religion* is defined as social institutions with a given set of beliefs and behavioral prescriptions and proscriptions, goal systems focused on the divine or higher powers, and provision of answers to existential questions (Park, 2011). I first review the state of the literature on exiters and identify salient

findings and gaps. Secondly, I develop a theoretical framework connecting the religious exiting experience to concepts of interest, namely, social support and relationships, meaning-making, and identity reconstruction to the outcome well-being. Next, I review the methodological research design, and then highlight the Results for this study. I conclude with the Discussion and Conclusion sections on the study's contributions in light of previous work and theory, as well as the limitations, implications, and future research directions.

Literature Review

In this section I review the pertinent findings and remaining questions in the literature on religious disaffiliation and well-being. I begin by addressing the relevant literature on social relationships and support and well-being. I then highlight the key research on identity and well-being, and, lastly, on meaning and well-being. I conclude with identifying gaps and directions.

Social Relationships and Support and Well-Being

When exiters leave high-cost religious groups that tend to operate as tight enclaves, there are perceived and actual social consequences and risks associated with the religious exiting process (Berger, 2015; Davidman & Greil, 2007; Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016; Jacobs, 1989; Zuckerman, 2012). Many exiters experience fear of punishment by the respective religious deity, the loss of family ties and social support, and a secure sense of identity (Davidman & Greil, 2007). Some are faced with the social reality of losing health-related benefits of affiliation afforded to them via forms of social support in the religious community (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010).

Generally, high-cost religious groups require memberships that entail great levels of commitment and time, and it is expected that members' social ties will be concentrated within the religious group (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010). In this way, members achieve a high level of social integration in the community – that is, the strong presence of a community and a significant quantity of social relationships (House, Umberson, & Landis, 1988). Thus, when members choose to leave, the exiting process is a challenging

one given the tightly-knit social support networks, both formal and informal, that have been developed within the religious group.

Social support can be considered in three types: emotional, informational, and instrumental support (House, Umberson, & Landis, 1988; Merino, 2014). *Emotional support* refers to the perceived receipt of caring and concern; *informational support* is the perceived receipt of advice; *instrumental support* refers to the perceived receipt of resources or practical help. The fear of loss of forms of informal (e.g., provision services among church members; social relationships) and formal (e.g., pastoral counseling, distribution of health-related services) social support fostered in these religious groups can create distress for exiters (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010).

Exiters, specifically those leaving new religious movements, report that they feel ostracized and rejected by group members who had formerly been friends and confidants. In some cases, exiters experience this as a rejection of that part of themselves that still identified with the religious leader and community (Jacobs, 1989). Furthermore, exiters experience a difficult time navigating the nonreligious terrain, especially in forming new social relationships. That is, the loss of various forms of social support and relationships cultivated in the religious group creates support-related challenges as exiters integrate into nonreligious life. Exiters transition from a religious group that likely possesses high density, as part of the social network structure and, in some cases, move into *social isolation* for some time which, in part, contributes to negative health outcomes (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010).

Exiters of the Ultra-Orthodox Jewish community share a similar story. They often migrate into a nonreligious society with minimal social support, and without the life skills necessary to guide them (Berger, 2015). Major life challenges experienced by Ultra-Orthodox Jewish exiters include social challenges of the nonreligious world, typically involving difficulties related to the new structured rules and norms of behavior, such as gaining familiarity with the new language and culture – a world different from the one into which they were born – as well as managing the tension of leaving a religious system connected to strong social ties (Berger, 2015).

In addition to challenges integrating into a new culture where one is required to relearn social norms, redefine values, and conform to new standards, those who leave find very limited institutional support. To put this dearth of support in perspective, there is a lot more institutional support for individuals experiencing conversion than for those experiencing deconversion (or religious exiting) trajectories, specifically regarding the lack of provision of institutional scripts in helping exiters navigate life challenges (Davidman & Greil, 2007), especially if they exit on their own. In the narratives of Ultra-Orthodox Jewish exiters, new religious movement exiters, and exiters of other strict groups, the theme of “scriptlessness” is common. Specifically, exiters of these groups report lacking a sufficient script for sharing their deconversion narrative (Bromley, 1997; Davidman & Greil, 2007; Jacobs, 1989).

Many of the exiters find themselves with no social guide or “script” to navigate life challenges in the logistical, social, legal, and financial domains. Religious institutions

typically provide “scripts” for members to conduct themselves according to specific community standards. Given the lack of secular social support structures for exiters (Zuckerman, 2012), many face difficulties navigating the nonreligious culture without a sufficient social script. For instance, many report not knowing idioms, popular culture references, or where to go to seek financial advice or educational support (Berger, 2015), all of which provide individuals with a sense of belonging and connectedness in the world.

Beyond the lack of scripts, nonreligious life is nearly absent of a community where individuals experiencing a religious exit may support, guide, and motivate one another (Zuckerman, 2012). However, some exiters do discover forms of social support outside of their former religious communities. Some enter educational programs, as these institutions provide new social relationships and training for professional opportunities (Jacobs, 1989). Other exiters form new social relationships with nonreligious persons and/or join secular-based communities, such as atheist or humanist organizations, that provide a sense of social support and community (Pasquale, 2007; Smith, 2011).

Although exiters who seek it do find avenues for social support and relationships in the nonreligious world, institutional support is scarce. The awareness of and accessibility to social services are lacking for people who leave fundamentalist religions. These services typically focus on addressing basic needs such as temporary affordable housing, training exiters about the world that they are entering including information about educational and employment requirements and opportunities, bureaucratic and

legal procedures, norms for social interactions and behaviors, and familiarity with secular language and concepts (Berger, 2015). As noted, exiters are required to relearn a new language and culture to achieve social integration into nonreligious society (Zuckerman, 2012); however, in light of limited social support, exiters' integration into nonreligious society linked to well-being is underexplored.

Much research has linked the association of social relationships and support to health and well-being, focusing on two primary issues: "(a) whether the quantity and quality of social relationships are causally related to health; and (b) whether social relationships benefit health principally via buffering (also termed moderating or interactive) effects on the relationship between stress and health or via main (or additive) effects on health" (House, Umberson, & Landis, 1988, p. 295). Social support can also act as a *mediator* where it *explains* the relationship between the stressor and health outcome (Pearlin, 1989), versus having a *moderating effect* where it *strengthens* the relationship between the stressor and health outcome. I would argue that depending on the exiter's unique experience, social support can act as a mediator or moderator during the religious exiting process.

Research also finds that there is a well-being and health disadvantage associated with religious disaffiliation, mediated by frequency of church attendance, and it varies by religious denominations, wherein Evangelical Protestant (a high-cost religious group) disaffiliates experience health disadvantages. The well-being disadvantage for Evangelical exiters goes beyond the loss of religious attendance (Fenelon & Danielsen,

2016). That is, other aspects of Evangelical religion may contribute to exiters' well-being disadvantage, such as exiters' (possibly residual) beliefs of guilt and sin, as well as loss of emotional and coping resources cultivated in the community (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016). Taken together with loss of social ties in the religious community and, in some instances, the severing of familial, spousal, and friendship bonds, leaving these religious communities can reduce well-being for exiters.

Although some studies have examined features of secular social support (i.e., secular civic engagement) on well-being (Acevedo, Ellison, & Xiaohe, 2014), it is not well-established how exiters' reconstruction of social relationships and support contributes to well-being. For instance, Acevedo et al. (2014) found that, at least for the adult population in Texas, some forms of secular support such as secular civic engagement does not compensate fully for the loss of social support connected to the religious community and, thus, does not likely reduce psychological distress; however, secular volunteering does mitigate negative effects of financial hardship on distress.

Other research generally highlights exiters' narratives of an overall positive experience in choosing to leave religion and/or adopting a nonreligious identity (Fazzino, 2014; Smith, 2011; Zuckerman, 2012). However, the reality of exiting is complicated, involving an intricate interplay of gains and losses along specific dimensions of social support and relationships that contribute to exiters' well-being (Berger, 2015; Ebaugh, 1988; Streib et al., 2009). The current research adds empirical value to the investigation of religious disaffiliation and health and offers a unique contribution to exploring how

exiters of specifically high-cost religious groups reconstruct social relationships and support and its impact on well-being.

Identity and Well-Being

Due to the characteristics of high-cost religious groups mentioned earlier (absolutism, fanaticism, and conformity), individuals' identity construction is tightly and intricately enriched and developed in the religious community. In the exiting process, many experience hardships in coming to terms with developing a new sense of identity apart from their former religious community – an identity that, for many, was so deeply embedded in the religious system. Research highlights that exiters of high-cost religious groups typically move through stages of deconversion (Fazzino, 2014; Jacobs, 1989). Some report grappling with initial doubts of their religious beliefs which causes distress, and consequently leads from belief to non-belief and, lastly, identity changes in social and cognitive activities (Fazzino, 2014). Some cognitive activities include gaining new information and self-reflection, further endorsing their decision to leave their religious communities. Social activities prompted exiters to seek out secular social networks which provided them with validation, acceptance and support in their process (Fazzino, 2014; Smith, 2011). In this way, exiters reconstruct their identity by seeking out new information and social groups that supported them in their identity reconstruction.

In the construction of a new identity, some exiters take on a new identity label to validate their exit from a former religious identity. One such label is atheist. Others include agnostic, humanist, secularist, and spiritual but not religious (Fazzino, 2014;

Pasquale, 2007; Smith, 2011; Streib et al., 2009). Taking on an atheist label, and other nonreligious identities, specifically in the United States, is a cause of social stigma, given the dominant Western Christian ideology that continues to prevail American culture (Smith, 2011). Further, similar to the process described by Link and Phelan (2010) in which perceived and actual stigma leads to psychological distress for individuals labeled mentally ill, I would propose that a stigmatized label such as nonreligious or atheist also contributes to distress for individuals.

For exiters, perceived and/or actual stigma from the public, including exiters' religious family and community can lead to distress (Bromley, 1998). However, despite the stigma attached to some nonreligious identities, adopting the identity label, admittedly difficult in the beginning stages of exiting, can also be a critical step to developing a new self-concept and sense of self-empowerment (Smith, 2011). In the sociology of mental health literature, *self-concepts* are conceived as psychosocial resources. Important elements of self-concept include self-esteem, self-efficacy, and personal mastery; all of which have been demonstrated to mediate the effects of social factors that predict health. These factors include, socioeconomic status, stressful life events, chronic stressors, and social support (George, Ellison, & Larson, 2009). While not all exiters of high-cost religions take on a new identity label, those who do mitigate some of the distress associated with reconstructing a new sense of identity. I propose that identifying with a new label associated to new ideological values, and, in some cases, connected to a social network, can enhance well-being.

If individuals decide to leave the religious community, they have come to the decision that, to a great degree, leaving the high-cost religious community outweighs the potential risks and costs (i.e., loss of social ties and sense of identity). However, prior to exiting, the exiter may not be fully aware of the extent to which an identity crisis or level of cognitive dissonance will occur; and trying to make sense of how to reconstruct a new identity in relation to what to discard in the old world, and what to embrace in the new world, can prove impossible to predict. Many experience the loss of friendship and family, a sense of meaning and purpose, social security, rituals, and sense of belonging, all of which enhances sense of identity and well-being. These structural characteristics typically found in high-cost religious groups, to varying degrees, are related to the social identity that was once nurtured in these communities (Adam, 2009).

Coates (2013) reports that *social selves* describe their personal history as being highly dependent on others and raised in more authoritarian households. In disaffiliation, *social selves*, a personality characterization, find themselves closely tied to the membership of the religious group. Therefore, *social selves* who do not receive support outside of the religious group, to some extent, their sense of self tied to the religious group, are at a higher risk of experiencing an identity crisis (Coates, 2013). In contrast, *protected selves* reported personal histories of dealing with social anxiety and challenges in social relationships, and childhood environments that were neglectful and, in some instances, abusive (Coates, 2013). In disaffiliation, *protected selves* seek to rediscover an

authentic self, apart from the religious community; thereby, reducing the risk of experiencing an identity crisis (Coates, 2013).

There are cases where identity reconstruction can threaten the social and emotional well-being of exiters, as the growth pains of creating a new social identity can be challenging (Adam, 2009). Social support networks and institutional scripts, as explained in the previous section on social relationships and support, help individuals reconstruct their identities in providing a deconversion narrative. Thus, given minimum social support and lack of scripts to navigate the new world, many are confronted with questions of how to reconstruct new identities and identity narratives outside of their former religious communities (Adam, 2009; Bromley, 1988; Davidman & Greil, 2007). Further, research demonstrates that the emotional effects of this transition include fear, loss, confusion, guilt, rejection, depression, anxiety, grief, suffering and anger (Adam, 2009). These negative emotional aspects of religious exiting are likely to have an impact on the process of identity reconstruction.

Research has not fully explored how exiters' identity reconstruction contributes to well-being. Although some qualitative research shows that participants generally report a positive outcome in their decision to leave their former religious group, despite experienced hardships (Fazzino, 2014; Streib, et al., 2009; Zuckerman, 2012), these studies do not fully capture the concrete interplay of gains and losses in the identity reconstruction process. Rather than measuring for overall perceived well-being in the religious exiting process, understanding how specific dimensions of identity

reconstruction (i.e., roles, self-concepts, identity labels) contribute to well-being is critical to understanding how exiters of high-cost religious groups reconstruct their identities.

Meaning and Well-Being

The literature on meaning-making in the nonreligious terrain is sparse. Therefore, I will primarily draw from the more established literature on meaning-making and religion/spirituality and extrapolate from this work. Generally, the few studies examining meaning and religious exiting often conflate identity and social support with meaning-making. In this section I will be drawing on four literatures: on the meaning-making model, on meaning construction in advancing the stress process, on implicit religions, and on existential orientations (or cultures) to conceptualize the meaning reconstruction process of exiters from fundamentalist religions.

The body of work on religion and meaning has measured and conceptualized meaning as purpose, goals, or objectives, as well as coherence in one's life (Ivtzan, Chan, Gardner, & Prashar, 2011); these, in turn, significantly contribute to individuals' well-being (Emmons, 2005; Karoly, 1999). Spiritual and religious goals tend to be meaningful given their orientation towards the sacred and focus on ultimate purpose, emphasis on the divine, and commitment to a higher power (Emmons, 2005). Both religious and spiritual goals appear to help in establishing a goal and value system that contribute to well-being (Emmons, 2005). In one study, participants described their spiritual identity as aiming at

authenticity and personal meaning, as well as highlighting agency and self-realization, also associated with health outcomes (Russo-Netzer & Maysless, 2014).

Meaning-making systems have been found to enhance individuals' well-being (Park, 2010). Religious meaning permeates an individual's identity, sense of control and efficacy, and social relationships and interactions with the natural world (Ozorak 2005; Slattery & Park, 2011). In the face of stressful life events, religious meanings can provide "coherent and comforting perspectives, a sense of certainty, and existential answers" (Park, 2011, p. 409). Religion is conceived as possessing a unique meaning-making system insofar as it rests on the belief that social life is sacred. *Sacred* typically refers to a divine being or object, Ultimate Reality, or Ultimate Truth (Ivtzan et al., 2011), but aspects of social life, such as, social relationships, work, health, people, cultural and material products, can also be considered sacred or highly powerful and significant within a religious meaning-making system (Silberman, 2005).

However, it is important to recognize that religion *informs* meaning-making, it does not *cause* a sense of meaning in any mechanical way. Individuals are active in the process of identifying, articulating and maintaining what is sacred based on the religious or spiritual system and personal experiences, and they also can transform or alter the sacred (Ivtzan et al., 2011). Religion tends to provide participants with a unique meaning-making system that institutionalizes and emphasizes that: aspects of life are sacred, there is an Ultimate Truth and Reality, and a strong focus on a higher power. When one decides to leave religion, this global meaning-making framework is disrupted – the

sacredness of one's social world is altered, which one can infer has important implications for well-being.

One's membership in a social group influences the development of specific coping strategies, a stress-mediating resource that contributes to mental health outcomes (Pearlin, 1989). A primary coping strategy typically cultivated and utilized in religion is *meaning-making coping*. This form of coping focuses on creating positive appraisals and interpreting a negative situation in a positive manner and, generally, one's value or belief system (including religion) is salient in enabling the individual to reappraise the negative situation (Harris, Allen, Dunn, & Parmelee, 2013). Thus, when individuals leave religion, their coping strategies, to varying degrees, have been influenced by their membership in the religious group. For instance, across care recipients and caregivers, religion contributed to positive experiences that assisted in coping. That is, their religious values and beliefs were integrated into their coping strategy, whereby participants regarded God being of importance (a value or belief) and indicated a reliance on God (religious coping) to cope with the mundane stresses of life (Harris et al., 2013). Meaning-making coping can, therefore, involve positive reappraisals of the situational meaning, which can be done by detecting the personal growth or benefits of the transition, or, by altering the global beliefs to accommodate the new situational meaning-making framework (Park, 2010).

Global meaning frameworks refers to general meaning-oriented systems; whereas *situational meaning* refers to the influence of global meaning in particular social

situations, typically precipitating a stressful life event (Park, 2010). When a stressful life event occurs, the meaning-making model proposes that global meanings shift, prompting individuals to access coping resources and undergo meaning-making attempts (i.e., positive appraisal of situational meaning) to manage and mitigate psychological distress.

It is important to note that a reconciliation must occur in order to decrease distress – that is, “meaning made” between the global meaning-making framework and the new meaning gained from the situational crisis (i.e., exiting religion). Meaning-making relates to well-being insofar that it helps individuals assess the emotional and value significance of and cope with the stress that arises in life conditions (Park, 2010; Pearlin, 1989). However, the meaning-making model proposes that it only leads to increased well-being if individuals establish new meaning in their stressful life event. If reconciliation or a “satisfactory product or meaning made” is not achieved, then it can lead to greater psychological distress (Park, 2010).

Using Park and Folkman’s (1997) meaning-making model, McLeod (2012) argues that stress researchers have given limited attention to meaning construction related to well-being. McLeod (2012) calls for a closer examination of meaning construction in advancing the stress process model by considering “the structural and cultural origins of meaning and the negotiation of meaning in interpersonal interactions” (p. 176), whereby structure refers to stratification systems and macro factors, and culture refers to ideologies and traditions. Generally, stress researchers have not explored whether and why meanings vary on the basis of individuals’ structural location or cultural ideologies

(McLeod, 2012). Interestingly, McLeod (2012) argues that there might not always be an acceptance of dominant ideologies or assumptions of certain life circumstances or life events, and thus, it is possible that individuals develop alternative interpretations to assist in achieving a more positive meaning regarding the life event and/or strain.

Further, in McLeod's (2012) argument, individuals from different religious groups and, thus, ideological frameworks, may present different narrative accounts of the same life event, which begs the question: under what conditions then do people resist or challenge ideologies and traditions with the intent of achieving a more positive meaning resolution? Meaning negotiation in interpersonal interactions allows for advancements of the stress process in better understanding how individuals negotiate meaning with a range of others in interpreting the meaning of life events and circumstances outside of only a personal interpretation (McLeod, 2012). A non-conventional approach to exploring meaning reconstruction would be useful to expand knowledge of meaning-making among exiters. For instance, using qualitative methods to better grasp how people make sense of life experiences based on their social locations and cultural origins is encouraged (McLeod, 2012; as cited in Orbuch, 1997), which this research, in part, aims to do.

Some studies provide unique insights to meaning-making, specifically among atheists (Schnell & Keenan, 2011; Smith, 2011) – a nonreligious identity that some individuals adopt that may assist in validating their exit from their former religious group. Certain measures of meaningfulness, namely those related to well-being, appear to reduce the likelihood of experiencing a crisis of meaning among different types of atheists

(Schnell & Keenan, 2011). To specify, well-being and relatedness were defined as “cultivating and enjoying life’s pleasures in privacy and company” (Schnell & Keenan, 2011). Atheists tend to experience less meaningfulness than identified religionists and other nonreligious identities, and crises of meaning are just as frequent among atheists as among religionists and the nonreligious (Schnell & Keenan, 2011).

However, when examining different atheist types, low-commitment type of atheism, characterized by low commitment to all sources of meaning, scored lowest on meaningfulness, yet experienced the highest crisis of meaning. Broad-commitment atheists are committed to sources of meaning, with an emphasis on well-being and relatedness, and contributes to the highest level of meaningfulness for this type of atheist. Broad-commitment atheists are also less likely to experience crisis of meaning (Schnell & Keenan, 2011). While their research focuses on a specific nonreligious identity – atheists – it provides insights on nonreligious identities broadly – potential exiters who may take on the identity of *atheist*, and its implications for meaning-making related to well-being.

Park (2011) develops the concept of *implicit religion* which, like traditional religion, has the basic structural properties of myth (patterns of thinking), ritual (acting), transcendence (feeling), and commitment, but differs from explicit (i.e., traditional) religion in what, and to what extent, is sacred and moral. Examples of implicit religions include humanism, sports fandom, and environmentalism. These implicit religions provide coherent meaning systems that connect to something beyond themselves and

“shape an individual’s understanding of why a situation occurred, its relevance, and its implication for his or her global goals and purposes” (Park, 2011, p. 412). The conceptualization of implicit religions maps onto the religious exiting phenomenon in providing a better understanding of how exiters can create new meaning in social networks.

While neither the meaning-making model, nor work on implicit religion, has been applied to the study of exiters; both offer a useful way of thinking about the latter. Religious exiting can reasonably be considered a stressful life event, so the meaning-making model ought to be useful in predicting health outcomes. On the other hand, the concept of implicit religions attempts to explain how individuals can derive meaning in networks that are not explicitly religious, and this idea should be helpful in understanding life trajectories, and specifically, meaning-making after leaving religion.

Lee (2015) coined “existential cultures” to refer to notions of meaning and purpose in life. These cultures or orientations relate to (nonreligious) moral and ethical practices, and epistemological concerns of human consciousness and origins of life. In Lee’s (2015) analysis of nonreligious identities in the UK, she found that individuals were inclined to reside in one or more of the following five existential cultures – humanism, agnosticism, theism, subjectivist, and anti-existential. I propose that these existential cultures/orientations represent how exiters make sense of their exiting process connected to meaning reconstruction and how their global and situational meaning was appraised in a way that led them to such orientations. It is important to understand

exiters' existential orientations after undergoing the meaning-making process as it provides theoretical insight into how exiters think, consider, operate in, and interact with their new social world. I will provide a brief overview of each existential culture in Lee's (2015) typology: Humanism, agnosticism, theism, subjectivist, and anti-existential.

Humanism claims that humans are universally capable of finding a moral knowledge and goodness in themselves with a focus on a deep respect for the human species. This orientation proposes that humans are inherently moral and only need to search for it in themselves. *Agnosticism*, on the other hand, considers that knowledge is limited and emphasizes what humanity does not and cannot know (Lee, 2015).

Agnosticism also places an emphasis on the connectedness of people and things. There is a sense of romanticism and appeal in conceiving the world as limited and complex, and that some things are left to mystery.

Theism makes sense of the world, both the origins of life and outcomes – as centralizing around a transcendent being. Thus, knowledge is derived from an external being. *Subjectivism* focuses on the “subjective-life”, or how an individual's personal feelings and experiences serve as knowledge about the world. Like agnosticism, subjectivists tend to interpret the physical world as a complex and connected network, but instead, view the individual experience as a central way of knowing (Lee, 2015). Lastly, the *anti-existential* orientation generally rejects all existential cultures. That is, they struggle to understand why people would be concerned with theological questions or

questions about origins of life, and life in terms of meaning. Everyday needs, responsibilities, and pleasures are instead emphasized in this orientation (Lee, 2015).

This typology of five existential cultures offers a useful framework for the meaning reconstruction of exiters in terms of orientation. To recap, after undergoing a stressful life event – that is, leaving the global meaning religious framework and confronted with a situational meaning (exiting religion), individuals undergo a meaning-making process and, in some cases, achieve meaning-made which determines well-being. The existential cultures framework extends the meaning-making model as mapped onto the religious exiting process, by offering a conceptualization of meaning orientations for how exiters interact with, perceive, and make sense of their new social world. While there may be more existential cultures that exiters gravitate towards, or, perhaps exiters fall within multiple existential cultures; this typology provides an advantageous way of considering how exiters interact and interpret the world after leaving their religious meaning-making framework. This typology also pairs with the meaning-making model in its contribution to exiters' destinations regarding existential matters.

Research shows that exiters' identity reconstruction process (e.g., adopting a nonreligious identity) can provide meaning to their lives and enhance well-being, and, that secular forms of social support are also important in helping exiters integrate into nonreligious society, thereby also increasing well-being (Jacobs, 1989; Smith, 2011; Zuckerman, 2012). However, empirically capturing the reconstruction of meaning and meaning destinations among exiters of high-cost religious groups is nearly absent.

Further, it is worthwhile to not only explore how exiters reconstruct meaning, but also how they mitigate and manage additional potential situational meaning crises during their exiting process. For instance, some exiters, in their new social world, continue to deal with “the recurring dilemmas of work, relationships, and the search for meaning”, yet they are not willing to revert to their former global meaning framework embedded in religion (Rothbaum, 1988, p. 224).

Concluding Remarks

Research in religious disaffiliation is growing rapidly, which is not surprising, given the steady increase in the rise of the nonreligious in the United States (Pew Research, 2015). However, there are gaps that require attention; specifically, the examination of how exiters of strict or high-cost religious groups reconstruct important factors of their social lives – social relationships and support, identity, and meaning, and how this reconstruction contributes to well-being. Across all three factors, we do not have a comprehensive understanding of how each uniquely and its interrelationships impact the well-being of religious exiters. As stated earlier, research finds that some exiters report an overall improvement in well-being after leaving religion but does not fully explore the interplay of gains and losses along dimensions of reconstruction (Fazzino, 2014; Streib et al., 2009; Zuckerman, 2012). An exiter, for instance, might have gained new social relationships and access to networks where they also cultivated a new sense of identity, but still struggle to reconstruct meaning in life.

Additionally, research has established that exiters of high-cost religious groups experience life hardships and a variety of stressors (e.g., family tension) when leaving their religious communities (Berger, 2015; Davidman & Greil, 2007; Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016; Streib et al., 2009). Thus, although some research has highlighted that exiters report feeling overall satisfied with their decision to leave religion, research does not fully capture the stressors involved in the exiting process. Exploring exiters' reconstruction of social relationships and support, meaning, and identity are important to understanding how individuals rebuild integral factors of social life in connection to well-being, and helps to illuminate the stressors involved. Examining well-being broadly, and specifically life satisfaction, as an outcome along these factors assists in capturing the gains and losses of the exiting process – that is, the reconstruction of social relationships and support, meaning, and identity.

While research documenting the relationship between identity and well-being, and social support and well-being, in relation to religious exiting is burgeoning; the literature on meaning-making and well-being is nearly absent. Often, research conflates identity and social support with meaning-making, which assumes that these factors are interrelated. However, it is important to conceptualize them as also distinct (Pearlin, 1989), specifically because research on religious exiting shows that some exiters of high-cost religious groups still search for meaning and purpose, even after, to some degree, establishing forms of social support and a new sense of identity (Bromley, 1988; Jacobs, 1989).

Thirdly, network structure, size, and quality of relationships influence receipt of social support, a coping resource, leading to positive mental health outcomes (Thoits, 1995). House, Umberson, and Landis (1988) propose that “networks of small size, strong ties, high density, homogeneity, and low dispersion”, are helpful in maintaining *social identity* and therefore well-being (p. 304). However, “change in social roles and identities, and hence health and well-being during such change, is facilitated by larger networks with weaker ties, lower density, and greater social and cultural heterogeneity” (House, Umberson, & Landis, 1988, p. 304). In addition, social relationships and supports are considered determinants of health outcomes, at least from a sociological perspective (House, Umberson, & Landis, 1988). Thoits (1995) takes this a step further by highlighting four specific approaches: using appraisals, the context, identity salience, and belief systems to better examine how people attach emotional significance and meaning to a life event or strain and the surrounding stressors. Meaning is generally attached to a stressful life event, which determines its emotional and value significance (Pearlin, 1989).

I propose that the meaning-making model offers an analytical pathway to investigating how exiters of high-cost religious groups make sense of their exiting process and reconstruct meaning in their lives. While research has documented religion as providing a unique meaning-making system to individuals (Silberman, 2005), it has not fully investigated how exiters reconstruct meaning after leaving their religious communities (Saroglou, 2014). Research highlights that having a sense of meaning and

purpose enhances well-being and that religion provides meaning to individuals (Emmons, 2005; Saroglou, 2014). We also know that nonreligious identities are concerned with the universal need for meaning-making and tend to face existential anxiety (Saroglou, 2014; Schnell & Keenan, 2011). However, they seem to adopt, to some extent, pathways for creating meaning – the pursuit of autonomy and nonconformity, skepticism, open mindedness, and intelligence (Saroglou, 2014).

The current research offers a significant contribution to the body of work on religious disaffiliation in connection to the literature in sociology of mental health. To my knowledge, the religious exiting process has not been paired with the literature in the sociology of mental health, namely the stress process, as conceived by Pearlin. This linkage provides a unique lens on how exiters of strict religious groups manage and mitigate stressors of the religious exiting process along important factors and its dimensions related to well-being.

Theory

Empirical research in religious disaffiliation and health has not fully captured how exiters of specifically strict religious groups reconstruct important factors of life – identity, meaning, and social relationships and support – and its impact on well-being. In this section I develop theoretical ideas to address this gap. First, I introduce Pearlin’s (1989) basic stress model, and I apply it to examples of the religious exiting process. Second, I identify areas of the basic stress model that need enhancement, for the purposes of studying religious exiting. Finally, I explicate theoretical causal arguments for the relationship between each of my key explanatory concepts — identity, meaning, and social relationships and support — and well-being.

Stress Model

Pearlin’s (1989) conceptualization of the stress model helps to theoretically situate the religious exiting process as a stressful life event experienced by exiters of strict religious groups. The stress model is generally conceived as consisting of three components – stressors, stress mediators, and stress outcomes. Structural factors — consisting of social stratification, social institutions, and interpersonal relationships — shape and influence individuals’ exposure to stressors, such as stressful life events and strains. Strains can consist of both chronic strains (e.g., prolonged family strain) and role strains (e.g., role loss from religious group).

In the organization of structural arrangements, individuals are sorted into social locations based on their status; and their exposure to stressful life events and chronic

strains is inversely related to the status of their location in the social hierarchy. In the stress process, it is assumed that systems of social stratification generate an unequal distribution of resources and opportunities and that those who occupy a low status in their social role have a higher likelihood of exposure to stressful life events and resultant role strains (Pearlin, 1989). Role loss also entails a loss in social status, because the exiter is no longer affiliated with the group membership status of the religious network. In some cases, the exiter may also experience disaffiliation from interpersonal relationships (e.g., family and friends) embedded in the religious network, increasing exposure to more stressful life events and resultant strains. Conversely, exiting one institution may provide exiters promising opportunities and resources via access to other social institutions (e.g., education).

Stressors are the first component of the stress model. They are the key sources of stress production, and they generally include (1) life events, (2) chronic strains, and (3) (diminished) self-concepts (Pearlin, Menaghan, Lieberman, & Mullan, 1981). I propose that exiting a strict religious group can be conceived as a *stressful life event*. Some examples of *chronic strains* deriving from a stressful life event include financial, occupational, or family strains (Pearlin et al., 1981). *Mastery* and *self-esteem* are two components of the self-concept that are relevant to the stress process. *Mastery* is conceived as the sense of control individuals possess and feel over their lives, and *self-esteem* consists of the judgements individuals make regarding their self-worth (Pearlin et al., 1981). The convergence of stressful life events and chronic strains may lead to the

diminishment of these self-concepts. For instance, the exiter might experience the loss of family relations (chronic strain) as a result of leaving the religious network (stressful life event), and this convergence may lead to the diminishment of mastery and self-esteem.

The second basic component of the stress process are *stress mediators*. While stressors combine in the production of stress, stress mediators provide individuals with ways to *cope* and access forms of *social support* in stressful life conditions. In the stress model, social support is conceived as both access to and use of individuals, groups, and organizations in dealing with stressors (Pearlin et al., 1981). However, *social support* should not be confused with simply having connection to *social networks*—that is, not all *social networks* offer support to effectively manage stressful times (Pearlin et al., 1981). In the exiting process, the exiter loses, to varying degrees, access to forms of support within the religious network, and typically does not receive support from the religious network during the exiting process.

Coping is the second *stress mediator* that assists individuals in dealing with stressful life events and chronic strains. From a sociological standpoint, coping serves several beneficial functions in reducing the impact of a stressor: it *changes* the situation from which the stressors originate, *manages* the meaning of the stressful situation to reduce its threat, and *maintains* the symptoms of stress in a way that is manageable to the individual (Pearlin, 1989). Importantly, coping is not purely a psychological concept: while individuals may vary in coping behaviors and strategies, coping is learned, to some degree, from group membership, social networks, and interpersonal relationships, and is

clearly also a sociological phenomenon (Pearlin, 1989). In this way, the exiter has, to some degree, learned coping strategies within the religious network that may be used outside of the network. It is also conceivable that the exiter learns new ways of coping, possibly via alternative nonreligious networks, to better integrate into nonreligious life.

The third and last component of the stress process model are *stress outcomes*. Stress outcomes are generally classified as either situational or global assessments. Stress researchers typically examine global indicators of stress outcomes, such as depression and psychological distress. Global assessments of stress outcomes are those associated with psychological states that remain constant as one moves across different social roles (Pearlin et al., 1981). On the other hand, situational assessments capture the effect of episodic life events, such as exiting religion that leads to, say, family strain, leading to stress outcomes (e.g., reduced well-being).

Next, I will identify areas of the basic stress model that need enhancement for the purposes of this study. That is, I will discuss in greater detail the mechanisms connecting each factor – identity, social relationships and support, and meaning – to well-being that is under-theorized in the basic stress model.

Identity Reconstruction and Well-Being

In the stress process model, identity is generally conceived as consisting of self-concepts, which, in turn, have two components, personal mastery and self-esteem. Self-concepts, in part, are shaped and influenced by the social roles and statuses embedded in structural arrangements. The stress model proposes that individuals are sorted into social

roles based on their status, and, their exposure to stressful life events and chronic strains is inversely related to the status of the location of their role in the social hierarchy, which differentially contributes to stress outcomes. However, the mechanisms connecting identity (re)construction to well-being are not fully explicated.

The *social identity perspective* allows for a theoretical explanation of exiters' former membership in the religious group and how that might impact their identity reconstruction outside the group, and, perhaps while embedded in a nonreligious group. The social identity perspective is founded on the proposition that individuals' belonging to a social group is attached to some emotional and value significance (Tajfel, 1972). Furthermore, social identity and group belongingness are linked in the sense that an individual's conception of who one is, to a great degree, is composed of self-descriptions attached to characteristics of the social group to which one belongs (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). In other words, the self is defined in part based on the ingroup, which provides the individual with a sense of well-being, enhanced self-worth and self-esteem (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Thus, when an individual leaves the religious network, their sense of self-worth and self-esteem (self-concepts) is compromised, compromising well-being.

Identity and roles come together in the conceptualization of identity reconstruction by understanding identity as a self-concept and roles as a set of behaviors and performances. A link between identity and roles exists to the extent that the *meaning* given to each is the same (Burke & Reitzes, 1981). An identity is a social product in that it is developed through interactions, within a social hierarchy, and is a reflexive process

(Burke & Reitzes, 1981). The meaning attached to identities is linked to one's role and what others in that particular role structure or system deems appropriate for that identity (Burke & Reitzes, 1981). Identities drive decisions to engage in certain behavior and performances, and these decisions have meanings that complement and reinforce the identity (Burke & Reitzes, 1981). In this way, the term "role-identity" assumes that people define themselves, to varying degrees, with regard to social roles and activities and in their interactions with role partners (Thoits, 2010). Therefore, leaving a network may lead to an *identity crisis*, and identity crises are likely to expose the individual to a variety of stressors, and a need for coping not contemplated in Pearlin's basic stress model. *Role strain* may be conceived as one cause, and one component of the identity crisis.

Burke & Reitzes (1981) argue that a role is a set of behaviors and performances linked to a social structure, and I would argue that there are three general role possibilities that exiters may experience when leaving a religious network. First, in the initial stages, an exiter experiences a *role loss* in leaving the religious organization that provided them with a role structure. During the role loss experience, the exiter also loses the status that is attached to the religious network. Second, the exiter might transition into a *nonreligious role* – a role in a nonreligious social group that offers role restructuring, and possibly relief from the role loss. Third, an exiter might adopt an *exiter role*, whereby the former religious organization or an external organization directs the type of exiter role (Bromley, 1998). In this instance, the organization influences and shapes the exiting

process by providing social expectations and behaviors for the exiter role. I would assume that much of the exiter population *do not* take on an exiter role, but the small subset who do is worth mentioning.

Regarding the exiter role, Bromley (1998) indicates three distinct types linked to the former religious organization. The *defector* role negotiates the exit with religious organizational authorities, thereby reducing tension between the organization and role, yet the organizational authorities have more control over the narrative of the exit role. The *whistle-blower* role forms an alliance with an external regulatory body and reveals information of the inner organizational practices of the former religious group, which creates significant tension between the role and religious organization. The *apostate* role allies with an oppositional organization to the former religious network, and the oppositional coalition provides social networks through which exiters can reinterpret grievances against the religious organization, and controls role transition in favorable ways.

Role strain theory argues that in the elimination of one role (i.e., member of the religious organization) requires maintenance of self-concepts and its accompanying network of role relationships such as, friends, family, and religious community (Goode, 1960). The elimination of role relationships can prove difficult because role obligations and duties are connected to status positions embedded in social institutions (Goode, 1960). Family relationships form social interactions that relate to social control – processes that regulate and manage behavior leading to conformity. Thus, *formal*

withdrawal from these relationships can be challenging, and *informal withdrawal* incites guilt and social pressures from others (Goode, 1960); well-being is impacted in both forms of withdrawal. Balancing roles in different structures – e.g., family and church — are both, in turn, part of an encompassing community, such that roles in both are strongly conditioned by values, norms, and expectations that cut across family and church. In some cases, structures such as family and church are integrated into a "religious community" to such a degree that the *religion* becomes an inherent constituent of *family*. So, an exiter cannot leave the *religious network* without also, to varying degrees, leaving the *religious family*. In this way, the family network can alleviate or exacerbate the entering and exiting of role relationships. The exiter risks losing the status connected to the role relationships and identity (self-concepts) embedded in the former religious community, linked to well-being.

Lastly, the stress model does not consider the loss of resources that accompany roles. The *role as resources perspective* draws attention to how cultural, social, and economic capital are accessed through particular roles, as well as more fully explains structural power dynamics and the agency individuals possess within social systems (Callero, 1994). According to this perspective, roles are connected to agency in exercising the ability to make action possible. Roles, as existing within social structures, are comprised of schemas and resources. *Schemas* are conceived as general assumptions, rules and procedures in cultural and social life. *Resources* are considered a source of power – economic, social, and cultural capital.

From the role as resource theoretical perspective, we can anticipate a number of interesting things that, according to the theory, should be happening during the exiting process. First, the exiter may lose access to resources or forms of capital (i.e., social, cultural, economic) embedded in the religious network. On the other hand, exiters may gain access to resources in a nonreligious institution where they occupy new roles attached to a new status. It can also be assumed that exiters can transfer forms of resources accumulated in the religious group to a nonreligious group. Individuals' well-being, then, depends on the configuration of capital gains and losses that accompany roles across social institutions.

Social Relationships and Support and Well-Being

While the stress model identifies the significance of social support, the conception of social support needs to be expanded to recognize: the complex structure and processes of social relationships, family and gender processes, and specific and various forms of capital embedded in social support networks (which an exiter stands to lose and may struggle to regain). I begin with a brief overview of the structure and processes of social relationships as theorized by House, Umberson, & Landis (1988).

The structure of *social relationships* can be segmented into two components: (a) *social integration*, which refers to the existence or quantity of social relationships, and (b) *social network structure*, referring to the structural characteristics that describe a set of social relationships between two or more people in a network. Social network variables include, but are not limited to: reciprocity, density, durability in the context of

structural characteristics of social relationships. There are three social processes through which these structures may have their effects: (i) *social support*, refers to the emotional, informational, or instrumental quality of social relationships; (ii) *relational demands and conflict*, refers to the negative aspects of social relationships; and (iii) *social regulation or control*, refers to the controlling or regulating quality of social relationships. Social relationships and supports are considered determinants of health outcomes, at least from a sociological perspective (House, Umberson, & Landis, 1988). This conceptualization provides a more global framework for the complexities involved in the reconstruction of social relationships and support.

Family and gender

Family plays an important role in providing or withholding social support in times of distress and strain. Milkie (2009) argues that specifically assessing family-level moderators to better understand how individuals in a family system cope for one another and offer instrumental and emotional support requires further exploration in the stress process paradigm. In addition, the examination of gender in the stress process model performs an integral role in shaping and contributing to social expectations and power relations, and also assists in better understanding how family systems distribute stressors and how people in the family unit offer social support for others' problems (Milkie, 2009). These suggested advancements in the stress process model contribute to a greater knowledge of how family relations and gendered social expectations might impact exiters' reconstruction process.

Capital losses/gains

Individuals lose forms of capital embedded in the religious network during the exiting process. Social capital, as originally conceived by Bourdieu, is defined as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 248). There are two forms of social capital – economic and cultural. Portes (1998) conceives economic capital to be financial advice and access to financial opportunities (e.g., occupational mobility). Cultural capital can be understood as developing rapport and collaborating with experts in a field by which one can learn skills and talents (embodied cultural capital), versus institutionalized cultural capital – affiliation with institutions that offer valued credentials (Portes, 1998).

Social capital is obtained through social networks. However, not all social networks automatically provide members with these forms of capital. Members must also intentionally invest cultural and economic capital to receive these forms of capital within the network. There are also variations across groups in terms of how social capital is governed. For instance, networks that are dense and operate as enclaves tend to produce the same information, while weaker social ties can be sources of new knowledge and resources (Portes, 1998). For example, high-cost religious groups tend to convey information that is redundant to maintain social closure and create shared meaning through ritualization, as compared to groups that allow for and embrace new forms of and accessibility to knowledge and resources. In the former, social capital is, in part, limited

and restricted within the network, whereas groups that promote weaker social ties allow for an increased flow of knowledge and resources.

In sum, religious groups that demand a serious commitment (financial, time, stronger social ties) require a greater investment of capital. Thus, disassociation from such a group represents a substantial sacrifice of accumulated capital. Individuals may also feel inclined to divest by changing or leaving their faith as part of the process of acculturation into a new lifestyle, or exchange, if relevant, forms of capital across different fields (religion to education) (Verter, 2003). Thus, for exiters, the losses and gains of forms of resources, conceived as forms of capital, embedded in social networks, are linked to their well-being.

Meaning Reconstruction and Well-Being

Religion serves as a unique meaning-making system because it focuses on what is sacred in social life. Sacred typically refers to “concepts of higher powers, such as the divine, God, or the transcendent, which are considered holy and set apart from the ordinary” (Silberman, 2005, p. 646). Moreover, the connection to the sacred can be understood in each of the components of the meaning system: beliefs, contingencies, expectations, goals, emotions, and actions (Silberman, 2003). To better understand how exiters reconstruct meaning after leaving a unique meaning-making system, the meaning-making model, as developed by Park and Folkman (1997), offers a promising theoretical pathway linking meaning to well-being.

The meaning-making model builds on a few notions listed as follows: (a) people possess orienting systems generally developed early in life and modified based on personal experiences, referred to as *global meaning*, that provide them with cognitive frameworks with which to interpret their experiences with motivation; (b) when encountering situations that have the potential to challenge or stress their global meaning, individuals appraise the situations and assign meaning to them, referred to as *situation meaning*; (c) the extent to which that appraised meaning is discrepant with their global meaning determines the extent to which they experience distress; (d) the distress caused by discrepancy initiates a process of new meaning-making; (e) through meaning-making efforts, individuals attempt to reduce the discrepancy between appraised and global meaning and restore a sense of the world as meaningful and their own lives as worthwhile; and (f) this process, when successful, leads to better adjustment to the stressful event (Park, 2010, pp. 257-58).

Park's meaning-making model helps to think about the exiting process, specifically meaning reconstruction, as exiters experiencing a stressful life event that requires individuals to resolve the discrepancy between the global meaning (cultivated in religion) and the situational meaning (exiting the religion). Regarding *meaning-making processes* (conceptualized as both automatic and deliberate processes that also use coping strategies), *meaning-based coping* has been distinguished from other coping strategies by its motive to reduce the global-appraised meaning discrepancy that is generating distress (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2007).

Further, meaning-making processes can involve using an *accommodation* versus *assimilation approach* in reconciling the discrepancy between global and situational appraised meaning. *Assimilation* is when an individual changes the situational appraised meaning to be consistent with the existing global meaning. Changing global beliefs or goals is *accommodation*. Some have proposed that assimilation is more common and that global beliefs change only when individuals experience events too discrepant with global meaning to enable assimilation (Janoff-Bulman, 1992); however, others have proposed the opposite to be true (Brandtstadter, 2002).

As part of the meaning-making process, Janoff-Bulman and Frantz (1997) distinguished between *searching for meaning as comprehensibility* (attempts to make the event make sense or align with a set of norms) and *searching for significance* (determining the value of an event). For an exiter, meaning-making calls for making sense of the discrepancy between global meaning (in religion) and situational meaning (exiting religion) which is likely to occur via integration into nonreligious life in aligning with a new set of norms and values, or an attempt to understand the value and significance of the event while residing in their new nonreligious environment.

Meanings made is conceptualized as a determinant of success or failure in relation to adjustment in life or well-being and includes sense of having made meaning, acceptance, reattributions/causal understanding, perceptions of growth or positive life changes, changed global beliefs and goals, restored or changed sense of meaning in life (Park, 2010). While this model has a psychological orientation, there are social and

cultural influences that shape individuals' meaning-making processes and outcomes, including social constraints and regulation, as well as the quality and quantity of their social networks and relationships (Park, 2010). As mentioned previously, another outcome of meaning making involves identity reconstruction, a shift in biographical narrative because of life experiences (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006).

The meaning-making model helps to understand the exiting process as a stressful life event where global meaning (former religious cognitive framework) conflicts with situational meaning (leaving the religious framework), generating distress due to the discrepancies. Theoretically speaking, upon exit from the religious network, exiters undergo a meaning-making process in attempt to make sense of their stressful life event (i.e., exiting) and to achieve meaning made, which contributes to well-being.

Concluding Remarks

Overall, the theoretical frameworks of the factors explored in this study – identity, social relationships and support, and meaning reconstruction – extend and complement the basic foundations of the stress process model. Further, each factor maps onto and helps to better understand the religious exiting phenomenon, while the stress model provides a theoretical grounding for conceiving the exiting process as a stressful life event, comprised of stressors, stress mediating resources, and stress outcomes. It is important to note that each factor of the exiting process is interrelated, yet distinct. That is, each reconstruction contributes uniquely to the stress outcome – well-being. Yet, each may also interact with the others in ways that are investigated in this research.

Methods

This research investigates (1) how exiters of fundamentalist religious groups reconstruct identity, meaning, and social relationships and support; and (2) how this reconstruction impacts well-being. Moreover, both the single factors and their pairwise interrelationships are examined related to well-being. The pairwise combinations explored in this study include identity and meaning; social relationships and support and meaning; social relationships and support and identity. To answer these research questions, I conducted 24 in-depth, individual interviews with exiters from the following fundamentalist religions: Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventist (SDA), Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS)/Mormon, Evangelical Christianity (non-denominational), Assemblies of God/Pentecostal denomination, Conservative and Reformed Baptist.

An innovative qualitative methodology, *Iterative Thematic Inquiry (ITI)*, is used to explore the religious exiting process. Further details regarding ITI, and how it was used in my data analysis, are presented in Appendix C. The outcome of interest, well-being, is measured as a *single-item life satisfaction scale* ("Thinking about your own life and personal circumstances, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole?") (International Wellbeing Group, 2013), and, more broadly, "how did that impact your well-being?" across each reconstruction factor. Specifically, the interview protocol includes probes investigating the gains and losses across each factor and its impact on well-being (see Appendix B for interview protocol). Participants' narratives were

primarily used in the analysis of the three factors on the measure of well-being, more broadly.

Sampling strategy

Participants are sourced from a nonrandom, purposive sample of members of nationally-based secular organizations, which have local branches in the Portland, Oregon area. These organizations include the *Freedom from Religion Foundation*, *Humanists of Greater Portland*, and the *Center for Inquiry*. Because there are very few organizations in the United States that provide aid and resources to those who leave religion, secular-based groups provide a viable sampling ground for the research design. Research suggests that the composition of secular-based groups includes individuals who identify as nonreligious (Pasquale, 2007), many of whom are also exiters of religion. For convenience and privacy, the *research site* offered to participants was a reserved private room at the Portland State University Library. In offering this option, participants were also asked their site preference for the interview. Only one participant asked to meet in a community area at the apartment complex where they resided. Additionally, pseudonyms were assigned to protect participants' identities.

Participant Recruitment

My contacts at the secular organizations distributed the *call for interviews* to their membership email contact lists and posted the call on their social media pages. The *call for interviews* was distributed to ensure participants met the eligibility criteria: (1) identify as no longer affiliated with any organized religion; and (2) have left a

fundamentalist religion. To ensure a degree of homogeneity across fundamentalist religions in a small-N qualitative study, the exited religions were limited to Christian fundamentalism. A typology of fundamentalist religious groups, including Christian fundamentalist religions, was accessed from a comprehensive study on religious deconversion (Streib et al., 2009) to guide the initial participant recruitment process. The duration of former religious membership and time of exit was considered in the data collection and analysis of the qualitative study.

Data collection

I began with a snowball sample with the organizationally affiliated individuals of other exiters known to them but not affiliated with any organization to maximize participant recruitment and to diversify the sample. Specifically, in the examination and analysis of social relationships and support reconstruction and its interrelationships with identity and meaning reconstruction. Thus, a 50:50 sample split was achieved between those affiliated with a nonreligious organization and those who are unaffiliated.

Using the telephone screening recruitment questions (see Appendix A), I screened participants who met the two eligibility requirements via arranging a telephone call after receipt of their initial email correspondence expressing their interest in the study. I developed a cluster sample to ensure representation of specific populations of interest (see below). I achieved this sample representation through requesting that contacts at the secular organizations distribute the call for interviews three separate times throughout the interview process.

1. *Years out of religion.* I recruited participants to get three, equal size samples representing years out of religion: 3-5 years; 6-8 years; 9+ years.

2. *Affiliation/ Unaffiliation Status.* Half the sample (and half of each years-out-of-religion subsample) consist of individuals affiliated with an organization that supports “freedom from religion” (N=12), and the other half are organizationally-unaffiliated (N=12). The organizationally-unaffiliated were recruited through references from the first group and identified through snowball sampling.

3. *Gender.* Cross-tabulating *years-out-of-religion* and *affiliation status* we get a table as the one shown below that has six cells with four participants. To ensure adequate gender diversity in the sample, I achieved a 50:50 gender split (2=male; 2=female) for each cell.

4. *Religion.* The sample consists of participants from Christian fundamentalist groups. This decision is necessary to maintain a reasonable degree of homogeneity within the qualitative sample.

5. *Other Demographic Groups.* When possible, I attempted to diversify my sample across clusters by race, class, and sexual orientation, but it is important to note that there are limits to how much diversity can be included in each cell, and race, class, and sexual orientation are not of primary interest to this study. *Years-out-of-religion* and *gender* are of primary analytical interest, mainly because this particular study aims to identify shared and divergent experiences throughout the religious exiting process, and

also because research in the field has identified gender specifically to be salient in religious and religious exiting experiences (Goldman, 1999; Jacobs, 1989).

Table 1. Sample representation

	3-5 years	6-8 years	9+ years
Organizationally-affiliated participants N=12	N=4 (2 male; 2 female)	N=4 (2 male; 2 female)	N=4 (2 male; 2 female)
Unaffiliated participants N=12	N=4 (2 male; 2 female)	N= 4 (2 male; 2 female)	N-4 (2 male; 2 female)

Analytic approach: Individual interviews

After conducting the telephone screenings, I arranged 24 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with eligible participants to understand how they reconstruct three integral aspects of social life – meaning, identity, and social relationships and support, namely, through their integration into nonreligious life. As mentioned, in order to more accurately capture the stages (beginning, middle, and late) of the exiting process, I organized a cluster sampling of three sets of eight individuals who have been outside of organized religion: a). 3-5 years; b). 6-8 years; c). 9+ years. The individual interviews were audiotaped and transcribed, with an average length of 60 minutes or less for each individual interview.

I use a narrative data collection and analysis framework, specifically a *life-story approach*, to examine participants’ religious exiting process on well-being in the

interviews. A narrative analysis approach offers a systematic lens on the life stories and adaptive process of individuals in the study (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). Previous research has shown that individuals “who find redemptive meanings in suffering and adversity, and who construct life stories that feature themes of personal agency and exploration”, tend to report increased well-being (McAdams & McLean, 2013, p. 233), providing strong methodological grounds for using the approach in this study.

There were two distinct, yet complementary parts to the *life stories approach* during the interview process. **Part one** involved participants narrating their life stories in connection to their religious exiting experiences before, during, and after the exit. This part is open-ended allowing the participants to freely share their religious exiting process, with prompts only to guide individuals in speaking to the *before*, *during* and *after* the exit experiences – a three-part life story narration. After participants construct their life stories in the *after* exit, I administered a *single-item life satisfaction scale* (See Appendix B). Administering the scale assists in assessing the well-being of participants in their current state in relation to how satisfied they feel in life after leaving the religion.

Part two of the life stories approach interviewing involved the narrative exploration of the outcome well-being, with probes to understand how the reconstruction of identity, meaning, and social relationships and support influence well-being. The probes are also dependent on what participants have already shared in part one of the interview. For example, if a participant stated that they lost intimate friendships after their exit, I would use a probe of, “I heard you mention that you lost intimate friendships

(under social relationships and support) after your exit, can you tell me how that has impacted your life satisfaction?” Essentially, part two of the interview process allows for a broader examination of the outcome in relation to the three influences – identity, meaning, and social relationships and support reconstruction. The two sections of the life-story interview approach assist in the interpretation and analysis of both homogeneous and heterogeneous features of the exiting process; and helps to identify linkages across the reconstruction of identity, social relationships and support, and meaning related to well-being.

Data analysis

I employ *Iterative Thematic Inquiry* or *ITI*, a new qualitative analytic strategy developed by methodologist, David Morgan (Morgan, 2017). As a method, there are four distinct tasks in ITI: (1) assessing researcher preconceptions or beliefs in relation to the analytical problem; (2) building new conceptions through encounters with the data; (3) identifying tentative themes in the data; and, (4) evaluating the tentative themes through coding.

The chart below highlights some contrasts between ITI and three common approaches to the analysis of qualitative data (Morgan, 2017).

Table 2. Qualitative Data Analysis Comparison Chart

	Iterative Thematic Inquiry	Thematic Analysis	Grounded Theory	Qualitative Content Analysis
Goal of Coding	Check tentative themes	Search for patterns	Search for Patterns	Search for patterns
Coding Begins	After data analysis	After data collection	During data collection	After data collection
Initial Source of Codes	Can be inductive or deductive	Can be inductive or deductive	Inductive, data driven	Can be inductive or deductive
Memoing	Throughout	During analysis	Accompanies Coding	During analysis

In brief, the two main distinctive features of ITI, compared to the other approaches, are that theme development begins as early as possible, through an assessment of researcher preconceptions, and that writing, versus coding, is the primary procedure for data analysis. ITI calls for a continual application of themes as an organizing principle, starting in the earliest phases of qualitative analysis (Morgan, 2017). Thus, an advantage of ITI in producing research results is that researcher preconceptions in the earliest phases are explicit and directly related to the analysis process, versus solely using a reflective journal (a strategy typically used in the other qualitative methods). Also, whereas meaning typically emerges during the coding stages in the other qualitative approaches; in ITI, the researcher struggles with the meaning(s) at every step in the

analysis process contributing to a more thorough and careful assessment of theme development linked to research findings.

Analytic procedure

First, I developed an initial, extensive outline of my preconceptions and its origins (i.e., previous research/theory, informal interactions, personal experience) across the three factors of analysis on well-being and its interrelationships on the health outcome. In addition, I developed a Results section write-up using this preconceptions outline as a guide. During data collection, methodological and personal reflective memos were written after each interview.

For the second step of ITI, I answered the following questions in each methodological memo based on the preconceptions phase (step one): What should I possibly add; What should I possibly change; What should I possibly drop? Next, I revised the preconceptions Results section based on the information in the methodological memos to produce a *post-preconceptions Results section*. This step required thinking about the data more broadly, as well as considering the short-term framework of what emerged in the data.

In the third step, I derived a coding system from the revised preconceptions Results section from step two, and then applied it to the final phase. This involved generated codes for each of the three basic influences on well-being and for the pairwise combinations of those three on the outcome. Under each of those six larger groupings I

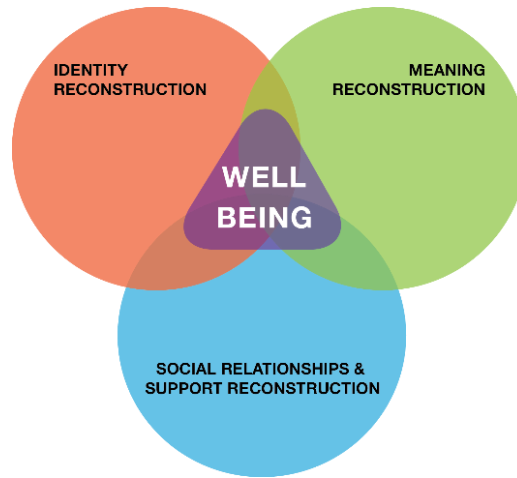
listed specific themes from my tentative conclusions. See *coding section* below for details on the coding system.

In the fourth and final step, I used these codes to mark the corresponding segments of the transcribed interviews. I also used this coding to interpret how well the codes account for the key elements in each interview, as well as whether there are other reoccurring elements that I did not have in my second-phase summaries. Once this was completed, I rewrote the final Results section based on the evaluation from this step.

Coding

The overall goal of data analysis, interpretation, and coding for this research project is to identify the linkages and independent influences of identity, meaning, and social relationships and support reconstruction to the outcome. To explicate, each factor can share a relationship with the other(s); however, each factor can still be independent of the others. Their influence on the outcome, well-being, is at the center of both their interrelationships and the independent influence of each factor (see Figure 1. below).

Figure 1. Integrative Conceptual Model



I used the qualitative software Dedoose (2018) for data analysis, coding, and interpretation. Because prior research in religious disaffiliation and well-being is limited (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016), the current research is more exploratory, taking on an inductive approach. Yet, it also takes on a deductive orientation in that it draws on theoretical constructs and the small body of literature on religious disaffiliation and health. The codebook derived in step three of ITI, included potential codes gains, losses, and ongoing strains and stressors across each factor: roles (informal and formal); status (high, low, neutral); self-concepts (diminished and improved); meaning outcome (positive, negative, mixed); meaning-making (security, orientation, structure); social support (emotional, instrumental, and informational); social relationships (informal and formal); well-being (increased, decreased, mixed).

In being open to the possibility of another code category emerging, a unique meaning-making pathway for this study's sample was revealed. That is, under meaning

reconstruction, the sub-codes, meaning structure, orientation, and security emerged, which will be discussed in further detail in the Results chapter. Iterative Thematic Inquiry (ITI) is useful in systematically checking for tentative themes, after a reflexive process of outlining preconceptions, revising the Results section, and consistent memoing during data collection. ITI is also useful for the exploratory research questions at hand, given its flexibility in the employment of both inductive and deductive approaches (Morgan, 2017).

Researcher considerations

It is important to note that my identity as a researcher and religious exiter shapes data collection and analysis. The advantage of my relevant identity is that I am experientially and analytically inclined to understand the experiences involved in the religious exiting process, which enables me as the researcher to connect with participants and their life stories. In developing a critical distance and researcher reflexivity of my own process, I am better equipped as a researcher to relate to, identify features of, and be sensitive to a complex and, often, life-altering process. That said, I am aware of certain researcher biases that may have emerged during this research given my own personal experiences, and had prepared myself through creating a reflexive process, whereby I maintained a journal and recorded personal notes after each individual interview, openly noting emotions and judgements that arose in the process. This contributed to a personal accountability that, in turn, minimized biases in this qualitative work. In addition, Phase One of Iterative Thematic Inquiry, the qualitative methodology employed in this study,

called for an analysis and evaluation of preconceptions and beliefs and its origins in relation to this research. This initial, analytical step increased my awareness of personal biases before data collection and analysis.

Results

The impact on well-being depends on a number of factors linked to identity, social relationships and support, and meaning reconstruction. Further, across each factor and its pairwise combinations, disruptions occur which contribute to three outputs: *losses*, *ongoing strains and stressors*, and *gains* in the exiting process. Across these factors, ongoing strains and stressors may occur as a result of the loss or gain and are organized accordingly in this chapter. The only exception of this conceptual explanation is in the single factor meaning reconstruction, and this will be further discussed in its appropriate subsection of this chapter. The terms “informal” and “formal” in identity and social relationships reconstruction are defined as: *informal role* tied to the religious system or outside the religious system (i.e., nonfamilial such as friend or non-marriage partner); *formal role* connected to the religious system (i.e., pastor, employee, volunteer), and outside the religious system (i.e., family member, spouse, employee, volunteer).

To note, I use a critical distance in my interpretations of the findings and select material that reflected participants’ overall statements. The rationale to this approach is that it situates the study within its theoretical and analytical frameworks. This stance has the advantage of providing interpretive details that may otherwise have not emerged in participants’ narratives. A limitation of this critical stance is that it does not take participants’ narratives as the *only* account of their life stories. The primary emphasis in this chapter is on results that relate to the research questions and theoretical framework, but there is also a brief concluding section on other issues that emerged during the

research. I also include a summary overview of the results in this study (table 5). I begin with highlighting exiters' losses, ongoing strains and stressors, and gains in the identity reconstruction process linked to well-being. First, I provide participants' demographics (table 3), along with a brief description, and life satisfaction scale data (table 4).

Table 3. Participant Demographics

Category	Descriptor	Percentage (of sum 24)
Gender	Female	50%
	Male	50%
Race/Ethnicity	Biracial	8.3%
	Latino	8.3%
	White	83.3%
Sexual Orientation	Bisexual	12.5%
	Heterosexual	79.2%
	Gay	4.2%
	Queer	4.2%
Former Religious Affiliation	Evangelical (non-denominational)	29.2%
	Jehovah's Witnesses	16.7%
	Mormon (LDS)	12.5%
	Baptist (Conservative/Reformed)	8.3%
	Evangelical (denominational)	20.8%
	Baptist/Evangelical (non-denominational)	4.2%
	Evangelical (denominational)/Baptist	4.2%
	Seventh-Day Adventist	4.2%
Years out of religion	3-5 years	33.3%
	6-8 years	33.3%
	9+ years	33.3%
Age	Range	23-68

Table 4. Life Satisfaction Scale

Sample Standard Deviation, s	1.293
Variance (Sample Standard), s ²	1.673
Total Number (N)	24
Median:	8
Mean (Average):	8.25
Standard Error of the Mean (SE _{\bar{x}}):	0.264
Range	5-10

Description of demographics

While there was great interest from organizational members, it was challenging to achieve an equal sample representation across fundamentalist religious categories. For instance, one participant formerly affiliated with the Seventh-Day Adventist Church was recruited. The majority of participants were from Evangelical (denominational and non-denominational) religious backgrounds, followed by former Jehovah's Witnesses and LDS/Mormons. Of primary analytical interest were gender and years-out-of-religion, and based on recruitment efforts, an equal representation of gender (Male, N=12; Female, N=12), and years out of religion were achieved.

Identity Reconstruction and Well-Being

The formal and informal loss of roles and positions in the religious community were described by many participants to have an impact on well-being. Further, the loss of social status attached to the roles connected to individual positions in the religious organization also have an impact on well-being. *Formal roles* or positions in religion may include pastor, employee, volunteer, music/worship leader, missionary. *Informal roles* or

positions can take the form of a friend or non-marriage partner in the religious community. The loss of either of these types of roles and positions generally lead to reduced well-being. In most cases, at least in the transitional stage (i.e., during the exit) of the exiting process. In addition, the loss of roles contributes to diminished self-concepts (i.e., self-efficacy, self-esteem, and personal mastery), more broadly.

Losses

Regarding the loss of a formal role, Ken, an ex-Evangelical and former lay pastor, described:

“I think it was how I was raised that we always had to be on stage and things behind the scenes were a shit show, but come Sunday, we had to be on point and act and perform...while I found some joy in the preparation and doing it...you feel that energy or you feel them engaged. That is a super addictive thing because you know you’ve got them...and so that acting – that sort of the part of doing and preparing – is like, ‘Shit, man. That feels good.’ You get done and it’s like this adrenaline rush that you’re just like wow, people are coming up to you. ‘That was so amazing’ and all that stuff. You start to believe it—how good you are.”

In this way, the performative role of lay pastor in the church contributed, in part, to improved self-concepts, but it did not sustain membership in the religious community, primarily due to the identity-role conflict the participant, like many exiters, experience in the beginning stages of the exit. The participant went on to explain that he gradually felt a disconnection from the religious identity, which contributed to reduced well-being.

In a similar vein, Mya, a former pastor's wife, also highlighted how the loss of her status in the religious community linked to the formal role of pianist (one of her many formal roles in the church) impacted well-being:

“... it's just sort of a status...I would say that I lost...I don't like that. I don't like losing that status. I've gained some of it back with playing with chamber music groups, but it's not the same as performing. I think I miss that the most being on the stage and being known. That's really changed, and I miss that. I don't think I'll ever have that again. I don't know, maybe I will.”

Though participants lose the status attached to the formal roles in the religion, they reported improved self-concepts after the exit, given the commonly experienced identity-role conflict before the exit. For example, if the roles and positions in the religion present an identity-role conflict linked to the motivating reasons for ultimately leaving the religion, then many felt that exiting those specific roles and positions in the religion increased well-being.

Diane, an ex-Evangelical, expressed how the identity-role conflict involved no longer believing in the doctrine or religious ideology and, after speaking with elders in the church about her doubts, they were unable to provide the answers she needed; therefore, she felt she had no choice but to leave her formal religious roles:

“...to me there was no question because I couldn't have lived with myself. I would have known. If I had chosen to stay, I would have known I didn't buy it. I

would have known that I was just pretending for the sake of staying in the community and I couldn't have lived with myself doing that.”

Participants also lose formal familial roles as a result of the exit, which typically contributes to reduced well-being during, and in some cases after, the exit. For instance, Fred, an ex-Jehovah's Witnesses, expressed how losing the formal role of “son” reduced his well-being. Another exiter of Jehovah's Witnesses, Steve, explained how his exit led to the formal role loss of husband, and, subsequently, his former wife's status loss tied to her husband in the religion:

“...it took me a couple of years after I started school to kind of brace myself and get ready to leave. It basically meant the end of my marriage. Because...for my wife at the time...your whole status as a woman in the church is based upon like who you're married [to]. So, for her having someone who is basically being ostracized by the church, meant she had zero status in the church. It's almost worse than having a husband who's not part of it. You have a husband who's an apostate; that's a very big thing, so she couldn't really deal with that, and I had to leave knowing that I would lose all my friends and possibly family. So, that kind of took about a year to work up to.”

If the roles and positions in the religion are diminished to the degree (i.e., identity-role conflict is too great) that the perceived and actual costs of leaving these roles are low, the negative impact on well-being is reduced. For instance, some participants

reported feeling like an “outlier” and disconnected from the religious identity for some time.

Kathy, an ex-Evangelical spoke to how she and her husband got married at 16 years old as a way to escape the religion:

“...I think [husband] and I were kind of outliers even in the church. Even in the church, we didn’t feel accepted really. So, I think leaving that, we weren’t really leaving a whole lot, to be honest. Yeah, I never really fit in with any of them and neither did he. So, we were just misfits and we got together.”

In this way, some participants experienced diminished self-concepts in the religion, given the identity-role conflict, which contributed to reduced well-being before the exit. Thus, in leaving, participants also reported improved self-concepts linked to increased well-being. Diane, another ex-Evangelical, exemplified this best, “I take a lot more responsibility for me. I feel a lot more empowered to be who I am and to choose who I am.” Most notable in exiters’ narratives, in this context, is the increased *personal mastery* (e.g., “I take a lot of responsibility for me”), a component of self-concepts, experienced once they endured some of the challenges associated with identity reconstruction.

Ongoing strains and stressors

The incurred losses of exiters, specifically in the transitional stages of the exit, were also commonly associated with feelings of guilt, fear, and shame, which contributed to diminished self-concepts. These negative emotions are considered ongoing stressors in

the exiting process; that is, they are not concrete losses or gains, rather an output of a disruption in the exiting process that the exiter continues to manage. Sara, a former Baptist, highlighted:

“...as a Christian, you’re taught that you’re a sinner, and that’s why you become a Christian is because you need God to save you from your sins...as an atheist, I don’t actually even believe in sin. I mean, we all make choices and there are some people who make great choices and some people who make bad choices, but I don’t believe in the concept of sin anymore, so I don’t have anything constantly pressing on me, saying, ‘You’re a sinner. You’re doing bad things. You need help.’ So, emotionally, it was very...positive...”

Once exiters move away from the religious ideology (alleviating the identity-role conflict), self-concepts are improved, contributing to increased well-being. That is, for many, once they exit, feelings of guilt, shame, and fear wane significantly; however, for some, these particular feelings continued long after the exit. Some participants reported that taking on a nonreligious identity assisted in alleviating some of the prolonged guilt. Fred, ex-Jehovah’s Witnesses, explained:

“During the exit, it took me two years of still believing in the religion and still feeling the guilt from it, like that I still thought it was the truth...it wasn’t until two years later that I was able to think about it critically and say, ‘You know what? I’m never going back. I might as well start doing some research into this group.’ It took me one day to find out – to go down that rabbit hole and find out

that it was all a sham and pretty much know that I didn't agree with it and – at that point – I was pretty much, 'Well, what am I?' I'm not what they consider an apostate because I succumbed to that kind of thinking, critical thinking. Then it was the next day it was like, 'Well, what am I?' Then that's when I'm like, 'I'm an atheist'".

Some exiters found that adopting a nonreligious identity supported them in moving away from the religious ideology associated with feelings of guilt, which improves self-concepts and well-being. However, some participants found that adopting a specific nonreligious identity was mostly helpful in a particular stage of the exiting process. Diane, former Evangelical, stated:

"Got a little bit into the whole tendency of what I call fundamentalist atheists, but I didn't stay there very long. I didn't want another dogma. I still love the science of it, but I'm not at all interested in arguing anyone into my position. I'm comfortable with other people's spirituality. I sometimes struggle when it is too close to what I come out of...but if it's stuff that's really different like they're into reincarnation or whatever, that's fine with me. I don't need to engage in proving them wrong or I'm not uncomfortable with it. I often will try to gauge whether or not I should come out as an atheist."

Taken together, feelings of guilt, shame, and fear were alleviated for some exiters in the identity reconstruction process once they took on a nonreligious identity. Other ways self-concepts were diminished in the religion which required attention in the

reconstruction of identity was experienced trauma. Several participants reported trauma linked to leaving the religion that had negative effects long after leaving the religion associated with diminished self-concepts and reduced well-being.

For instance, Lisa, ex-Evangelical, shared her experience of sexual abuse in the religion, and had since sought therapy support:

“It has impacted my life significantly, to say the least. I do have trouble with my own parenting and I’ve been in therapy probably off and on since I was a teenager. So, I had postpartum depression and that was something that triggered more issues. I don't know what the extent of the impact will be, but it’s definitely not in a positive way, you know? So, I’m not trusting, and I worry. I have anxiety and so I think part of it stems from that.”

In the role losses associated, in some cases, with status loss, along with ongoing stressors and strains – linked to self-concepts – the consequences of leaving the religion are significant when examining participants’ identity reconstruction associated with well-being.

Gains

Despite role losses and ongoing stressors (i.e., feelings of guilt, instances of trauma), exiters manage to reconstruct an identity linked to gains in the new social world. For many, these new roles and positions contributed to increased well-being. An achieved higher status in the role and position further enhances well-being and, generally,

improves self-concepts. Skyler, former Baptist and Pastor, spoke to the acquisition of a number of formal roles:

“...my job changed quite a bit. I’ve been involved with much more science studies...I want to help progress of mankind and their understanding, so I get involved with it instead of saying it’s not necessary anymore. I do a lot more volunteering and charity work out of my own volition instead of the idea of I need to do this, it’s forced or...to get some brownie points...I’ve also now been involved in a...community organization...I’m a part of a group where we collaborate together on ideas...through community service.”

Skyler’s perspective regarding the new formal roles changed in nonreligion. That is to say, he found that his identity was more authentically connected to the formal occupational and volunteer roles and the benefits derived from the work was directly tied to his self-concepts. Also, like Skyler, some exiters utilized the skills and talents gained in their former religious roles to acquire new roles in nonreligion. For instance, one of Mya’s many religious roles included building/social coordinator, which, to some extent, contributed to pursuing an occupational role in interior design.

For several participants, the exploration of alternative ways of thinking linked to role acquisition improved well-being. Max, a former Evangelical, highlighted his acquisition of roles husband, parent, and polyamorous partner:

“I think where...my wife and I – where we’ve gone now from being this monogamous couple to being polyamorous, that’s the religious aspect. We

escaped from that religion. It wasn't necessarily a catalyst, but it edged us towards that because I think it made us question the entire idea of monogamy for a lifetime and whatnot when we had these other desires and needs... So, that's one aspect I think leaving religion kind of allowed us to explore that. I think it just made me much more... willing to explore different ideas and different things."

In this way, exiters had the flexibility to explore alternative ideologies tied to identity reconstruction, once they left the religion, and gained new roles in nonreligion that improved self-concepts and increased well-being.

Ongoing strains and stressors

Other exiters experienced ongoing strains and stressors in their gains, contributing to a mixed outcome on well-being. That is, for some, new roles and positions were challenging to gain in nonreligion and, thus, do not *feel* as satisfactory. For example, Mya, former Evangelical, expressed how occupying the role of pastor's wife amongst other roles in the church made her feel like "a large fish in a small pond" versus in nonreligion, a "small fish in a large pond." A lower status attached to the new roles and positions generally do not improve well-being. Tim, also a former Evangelical, shared how the religious ideology impacted his self-concepts, specifically, the religious belief that life on earth is temporary:

"...as a kid I was taught that the end times were coming. As a result of that, I never thought that I would make it to adulthood. I thought the rapture would happen and that the world would end before. School was never a priority. I felt

like why prepare, why go to college, why graduate from high school, why try hard if the world's going to end? I never thought I'd get married. I never thought that I would ever drive a car. I admit, I didn't get my driver's license until I was 23. I didn't do well in high school because of that either. There was just no point. Because of that, I'll be 32 in a couple weeks and I'm still in community college, so that's definitely affected my life in that regard. I feel like if things had been different, if I had been properly motivated and not had that idea that I didn't have a future, that I could have focused on school and done things the right way."

For many participants, this religious notion contributed to diminished self-concepts, which impacted the acquisition of new roles and positions attached to a higher status, thereby reducing well-being in nonreligion. Many exiters were also challenged with maintaining a familial role and a nonreligious identity, which had a mixed outcome on well-being. For instance, Steve, former Jehovah's Witnesses, spoke to the dilemma of having to conceal his exit and nonreligious identity from the religious community, or else he risked losing his role tied to the religious family system:

"...when I finally said I was leaving, I tried to express myself in such a way that I was not attacking the church, because if I had done anything like that, then it would be like a formal shunning. And so, I had to make a point of saying as much as I could without saying the wrong thing and getting myself disfellowshipped. If I had been disfellowshipped, and it was found out that my mom still talks to me, she could actually risk being removed too. I had to make a point of trying to walk

a very fine line with saying what I thought, and still not being so vocal that they make a production of kicking me out. And so, as a result I can still talk to my family, but I still have to sort of walk a very careful line. Because, if I get too vocal in my beliefs then that will dry out.”

This form of nonreligious identity concealment, experienced by many exiters in this study, contributed to a mixed outcome on well-being. This was especially true for those who specifically left Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). That is to say, in limiting the full expression of a nonreligious identity in order to prevent full ostracization and shunning, exiters were restricted, to some degree, in their ability to fully reconstruct their identities in ways that improved their self-concepts.

Concluding Remarks on Identity

Exiters’ identity reconstruction, comprised of losses, ongoing stressors and strains, and gains; have a significant impact on well-being. In the narrative accounts, we can see that exiters’ identity reconstruction is complex in that participants manage the diminishment of self-concepts associated with losses and ongoing stressors, while also working to acquire new gains in this particular reconstruction in nonreligion. As well, while some utilize skills and talents acquired in their former roles, others find it challenging to attain new roles attached to a higher status, given particular conditioned religious ideologies. In this way, although gains are evident in exiters’ identity reconstruction linked to improved self-concepts and increased well-being, participants

also continue to manage the residual impact of the religion left behind in this reconstruction.

Social Support and Relationships Reconstruction and Well-Being

The losses, ongoing strains and stressors, and gains connected to social support and relationships reconstruction were described by participants as related to well-being. Because fundamentalist religions cultivate strong social ties and forms of social support attached to these relational connections, the losses in this reconstruction factor can be significant. The social relationships fostered in religion – both tied to the religious membership and personal relationships – impact well-being. However, the perceived quality of these relationships contributes to well-being differently. For some exiters, when the perceived quality of these relationships and corresponding supports are high, the loss has a greater impact on well-being.

Losses

With regard to the loss of social relationships tied to religious membership, Victoria, a former Jehovah's Witnesses, shared:

“I learned to speak Russian so that I could help in a Russian-speaking congregation and I had to leave that. I was very involved with Russian-speaking people – immigrants who moved here from Russian-speaking countries, so I kind of gave that up, because in my everyday life, I don't encounter that many Russian-speaking people. Then, basically, my whole support group, friends I had since 1978 are gone. A lot of friendships.”

Sara, ex-Baptist, echoed a similar story:

“I was active in the women’s group...I helped out with this little coffee shop. Any of the friendships that I made were gone. Those are probably the biggest ones...I felt like something was missing, but when I thought about it, I realized that it was something that I really wasn’t that into anyway, and I was only doing it because I thought I needed to. There were a couple of the friendships that I missed, but because of the way they ended up, I was fine with not having them anymore.”

In Sara’s narrative, she explained how although she incurred relational losses tied to religious membership, the perceived quality of those relationships was low; therefore, it did not significantly impact well-being, whereas in Victoria’s case, those social relationships in religion were of value, which had a greater impact on well-being.

Regarding *personal relationships*, these losses appeared to have a greater impact on well-being in general. Karen, an ex-Evangelical, shared:

“...leaving my family and how my mom pretty much distanced herself almost completely from me...that affects me so much right now because I don’t have any other family...I’m going through chemotherapy right now. I just had abdominal surgery last month. I almost died from a bee sting. It’s like, I really could use a mother. That just makes me mad. It’s just like, how myopic.”

The personal relationship losses typically occurred as a result of no longer sharing a common ground rooted in the religious ideology. Diane, ex-Evangelical, highlighted:

“...they [relationships in religion] just couldn’t wrap my reality and my leaving into their world and it was there between us when we would try to get together for coffee or whatever. We no longer had a common ground and it was like a herd of elephants in the room that I no longer believed what they did. So, my social life with them ended and I knew it would and I went through a very lonely time and very isolated time in that.”

Participants also experienced a great sense of loss in instances of formal excommunication from the church and family. Victoria, former Jehovah’s Witnesses, missed being as involved in her nieces’ and nephews’ lives, and these relational losses contributed to reduced well-being.

“It creates a lot of stress, because [crying] I miss my brother. I miss doing things with my brother. I miss his kids. I’m not there to watch his kids grow up. It’s painful to be excluded and to be viewed as a bad person. The term that they’re taught is ‘bad association.’ My mom and my brother view me as a bad person and they can’t let their children be influenced by me. I’m excluded from our family party that we would have every year...they lied about it [participant’s exit]. They tell lies because they don’t want to face it, but they just don’t talk about it at all.”

The *loss of social support* linked to these relationships also had an impact on well-being. Common support losses included emotional and instrumental. Some participants, like Vanessa, a former Baptist, specifically spoke to the loss of financial

(i.e., instrumental) and emotional support tied to her strained relationship with her mother:

“Psychologically, I was really bad. I had to go to therapy and that became part of my routine. Since my mom cut me off financially, I didn’t really have any money and when I was living with my girlfriend...it’s the first time I actually held a job. And so, I had to start on that little path because I couldn’t go back to school because I couldn’t financially afford it...I was really depressed for a really long time. Suicidal. Couldn’t talk to anybody...it took about two years to finally be in an okay place, but for two years, or at least a year and a half, it was very dark and not very good psychologically at all.”

For this participant, like many others, the loss of support limited opportunities and resources in the new social world, or, at least, made it more challenging to navigate their new social world, given the significant loss. The support loss also contributed to increased relational strain between the exiter and the member tied to the support loss compounding to reduce well-being. Fred, former Jehovah’s Witnesses, explained the significance of emotional support loss:

“It sucks. So, for a long time I didn’t have a support system because you lose everybody, and I left when I was 17 for a time – for about six months – and I kind of lost everybody because I didn’t want to go to meetings anymore and my mom stopped talking to me then and everybody – And I was a young kid, so I mean I couldn’t deal with it back then. So, I ended up going back. Now, I’m an adult. I

have a wife and luckily she was brave enough to leave as well...But I had her as a support system for not wanting to go anymore and it's been tough and then we started having problems and so we went to marriage counseling and that helped.”

The significance of this support loss for exiters is two-fold: (1) the incurred support loss connected to the religious community, (2) which contributes to challenges in navigating and obtaining replacement supports in nonreligion. For instance, Tim, a former Evangelical, and Vanessa, a former Reformed Baptist, spoke to the loss of social capital and financial support connected to the religious community and religious family members. In Vanessa's case, her parents no longer provided financial support which made it difficult for her to pursue education and advance her career. Similarly, Tim expressed how being detached from the religious community limited job and networking opportunities that were accessible in the religious network and, moreover, reported that attaining social capital embedded in social networks was challenging in nonreligion due to periods of social isolation:

“... basically, I'm just on my own when it comes to finding a job. I have no connections, as far as that goes, where a lot of people in my church, that's how they would find jobs, is through friends and through that networking capability. Not being a part of that does affect my ability to find a better job...It's basically just on me to figure that out without knowing anybody, without having those relationships.”

Thus, the loss of social capital tied to the religious community and members, along with the difficulties in gaining access to social support and forms of capital (i.e., social and economic) in nonreligion, contribute to reduced well-being.

Ongoing strains and stressors

Traumatic events occurring in the religion also impact the social support and relationships reconstruction process. That is to say, instances of trauma in the religion and, in connection to the religious family network, strain specific religious relationships and the supports attached to these relationships. For instance, Lisa, a former Evangelical, reported that her mother's husband, a leader in the church, abused her, and that her mother did not do anything about it. This subsequently contributed to the participant seeking therapy to support her own nonreligious parenting and to manage the stressor of being estranged from her mother, as a result of the traumatic event.

Kathy, a former Evangelical, was a witness of sexual abuse in her religious family. Long after her exit, the participant discovered that her father had been sexually abusing her sister. This led to the participant's temporary estrangement from her parents. Kathy shared:

“...it was a moment in my life when I found out the ultimate hypocrisy you know and that was why we were estranged...you know you have all these rules. You're supposed to be living this pristine life, you know, and I found out that my father was molesting my sister and that was kind of more than I could give them room to be their religious selves...”

In this way, traumatic events can exacerbate the social relationships and support reconstruction process for exiters. That is to say, the traumatic events in religion have negative ongoing effects on exiters who experience these compounded stressful life events (i.e., trauma and the religious exit), and as they navigate their new social world.

Gains

While exiters experience relationship and support losses and ongoing strains and stressors, participants also gain new social relationships and social support in nonreligion. Generally, these can develop as part of joining a nonreligious organization, in new partnerships or marriage, or in new formal settings such as the workplace. The majority of exiters gain emotional and informational support, and some also gain intermittent instrumental support. For instance, those who left the religion and partnered with a nonreligious person reported feeling more satisfied with their new relationship and support system, contributing to increased well-being. Amanda, an ex-Mormon, spoke to her marriage to a nonreligious partner and newly formed family, as well as the informational support she received from her nonreligious husband:

“...my husband’s been an atheist for...like his entire adult life...He was already into Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris...that was kind of the support for being an atheist now...There was already an example of what that looks like...I’m married so I get a lot of emotional support there. I just had a kid so there’s a lot of – I feel that there’s a lot of love in our house.”

Other exiters receive emotional, informational, and instrumental support through nonreligious groups. Nicky, a former Jehovah's Witnesses, highlighted:

“...the sick and disabled people of color and black and Indigenous people and queer people, trans people...these are complex networks where I give and receive a lot of emotional care, but also I know – in the back of my mind – if I had some emergency financially...then that community would take care of me and I think that because that community doesn't have any systemic support or specific systems that support them...we're incredibly good at emotional support without judgment or...It's almost like a bunch of therapists. People like that get really good at doing emotional labor...basically it's this informal network or web of people who all they have is each other or they don't have a system, so they have each other and protect each other.”

The participant went on to say that the network also assisted in providing financial support in an emotionally challenging situation:

“...like when I had to leave my last partner because he got arrested because he was abusive, and they helped to make a GoFundMe [Internet fundraising platform] so I could move out of my apartment. So, I raised \$2,500.00 in only a couple days because people really show up for that.”

Many exiters also expressed their belief that the new relationships and forms of support are more authentic in nonreligion. Specifically, participants noted that in religion the relationships were mostly based on a shared religious ideology, and once that

ideology was removed, the diminishment or loss of the relationship and support followed. Whereas, in nonreligion, exiters found that they could be themselves and garner more authentic relationships based on who they are, not strictly on an ideology. Diane, an ex-Evangelical, explained:

“...I think I have better support now than I’ve ever had. With my authentic relating community, I mean it’s a large community, but there’s a subset within it that we’ve been really intentional like we really want to be in each other’s lives. We want to see each other regularly. We want to know what’s going on. We want to be supportive. We want to be able to challenge one another on our own personal growth. So, I think I have better support now than I’ve ever had...”

Many exiters echoed this sentiment of authenticity in their relationships and support. Additionally, they highlighted how in nonreligion, the support is also more of a “give and take” versus mostly giving in religion. Many participants also discovered informational support online with nonreligious communities. Rob, an ex-Evangelical, noted how finding support, at least in the initial exiting stages, can be a struggle given many participants feel fear in coming out; therefore, online informational support is considered safer and more accessible:

“It’s like hiding in the closet. It’s like something that was really important happening to me that I wasn’t allowed to talk about which is frustrating which is why I spent so much time on the internet and I started finding online, stuff like that, and doing Meetups [social website for shared interests] and even if it was

just like arguing with people and comments and YouTube [video website] or something. I needed to do it somewhere.”

Rob, like many exiters, found informational support online engaging with other individuals who left religion and/or discussing secular-related matters with other nonreligious identities (e.g., atheists, agnostics, skeptics, etc.). Additionally, participants accessed literature related to topics around atheism, nonreligion, and secular-oriented philosophy, as well as revisiting religious doctrine in adulthood. Tina, an ex-Evangelical, shared:

“One of the things that I did was I read a lot of books on Bibles and atheism and then I read – I remember still the first moment that someone had recommended getting the Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, book and reading that like opened so much for me in terms of answering questions that couldn’t be answered when I was in middle school and then, on top of that, being okay to question...I think for me, it opened a door to read more books. It opened the door for me to actually read the Bible from beginning to end and then realizing that when you read something as an adult it’s a lot different than when something’s taught to you as a child as, ‘This is normal...’”

In this way, participants found some relief in accessing informational support, whether it was gathering information online or via books that related, to varying degrees, to their exiting process. This form of informational support also assisted in feeling more connected and a relatedness to a nonreligious community.

Ongoing strains and stressors

While exiters reap a number of social benefits in this reconstruction process, the reconstruction of supports and relationships also has its challenges in nonreligion. A couple of particularly challenging scenarios are: when exiters leave in pairs, and in the relational maintenance with religious friends and family. In the former, Kathy, an ex-Evangelical, left the religion with her husband whom she met in the church and married when they were 16 years old. The participant expressed that they relied on each other for most forms of social support throughout their marriage, and they found it challenging to cultivate new social relationships and support outside of each another, given that many did not understand their life path and exit from a fundamentalist religion. In this way, the outcome on well-being is mixed. That is to say, exiting the religion in a pair can enhance the particular relationship because of its strong relatedness component, but limits the reconstruction process in forging new relationships and forms of support.

In a similar vein, a younger participant, Fred, former Jehovah's Witnesses, stayed married to the woman he met in the religion, but had difficulties maintaining the relationship and had sought therapy to improve the relational quality. The difficulties were primarily due to what he reported was a constant reminder of what they left behind making the social relationships and support reconstruction somewhat challenging:

“So, that [seeing a marriage counselor] helped us get to a better place because we were thinking about possibly separating. And then the therapist kind of opened up a new realm of trying to meet new people and get out there and get a support

system. So, that kind of prompted a lot of...groups and meeting new people and especially for my wife because she was kind of just happy going to work.”

With regard to challenges linked to the maintenance of religious relationships, a complex process was revealed. For some exiters, maintenance versus complete loss of religious relationships alleviated distress associated with relational demands and conflicts; primarily, via the mechanism of relating to other nonreligious identities. That is to say, although the maintenance of religious relationships acted as a stressor for many exiters, given they no longer shared a common religious ideological basis, the ability to relate to a nonreligious community produced a mixed outcome on well-being. By connecting with a nonreligious community linked to emotional and informational support, it lessened the stress associated with the maintenance of religious relationships.

However, in some cases, the relational maintenance with religious members can act as a more severe stressor, contributing to reduced well-being. Many exiters who maintained relationships with religious family and/or friends limited this particular reconstruction byway of constant reminders in interactions that their choice to exit and integrate into nonreligion was wrong. Vanessa, an ex-Baptist who maintained relations with some family members highlighted:

“I knew that it would be difficult when I came out to my parents. I knew it would probably cause this, but I didn’t expect the degree to which it would. But when I did exit, I was living in Indiana with my girlfriend and I was getting sent messages from the people in the congregation that I had known my whole life

saying, ‘We’re praying for your misery and that God brings you low and reminds you of where you should be in life,’ and then I got multiple emails and messages from the elders, which is actually a big part of it...when I got excommunicated, it was unanimous and my mom voted for me as well as my brother.”

This formal excommunication from the church, given the participant’s choice to leave, strained her relations with family members in the religion, and contributed to reduced well-being.

Other participants such as Lisa, former Evangelical, and Cameron, former Seventh-day Adventist, negotiated the maintenance of their religious relationships based on how religious the individuals are. That is, if the religious members did not exhibit a great degree of religiosity, participants felt the relational maintenance versus the complete loss was more advantageous to their overall well-being. As previously highlighted, not all participants, however, had the opportunity to decide which religious relationships to maintain. For instance, Lenny, a former Evangelical, reported that the informal rejection he experienced from religious friends had a reduced impact on well-being. He expressed:

“Some of the friendships, the ones that don’t want to talk to me. It probably would have been a friendship that I would have continued trying to tell them...And because they know that I would try to affect them with my new viewpoints, it’s even less likely that they’ll talk to me.”

Like several others, although this participant was out of the religion for 9+ years, this form of rejection continued to be impactful. In this way, for some participants, the rejection from the religious group can have an ongoing negative impact on well-being in the life course of exiters.

Concluding Remarks on Social Relationships & Support

In some ways, this particular reconstruction can be more significant to well-being than identity and meaning reconstruction (as single factors) because the fundamentalist religions tend to cultivate strong, concentrated social relationships and support. Therefore, when exiters choose to leave, the losses and ongoing strains and stressors have a greater impact on well-being, and also impact this reconstruction process in greater ways (e.g., formal excommunication). However, participants also reported significant gains in nonreligion tied to new forms of support (emotional, instrumental, and informational), and new relationships within partnerships and nonreligious communities that are considered more authentic and equitable, contributing to increased well-being.

Meaning Reconstruction and Well-Being

In accordance with the meaning-making model, exiters experience a situational crisis in leaving religion—a global meaning-making framework – and undergo a meaning-making process to achieve a positive resolution in leaving the religion. As a reminder, this reconstruction factor requires a separate conceptual explanation. That is, in meaning reconstruction, exiters experience disruptions associated with two distinct

outputs: partial (i.e., meaning structure) and full (i.e., meaning security and meaning orientation) replacement related to well-being.

The extent to which exiters have made sense of their experience in leaving the religion contributes differently to well-being. Further, some exiters reported a positive and negative resolution, which has a mixed outcome on well-being. The meaning-making process, in the context of religious exiting, consists of three components – meaning orientation, meaning security, and meaning structure – related to the meaning outcome (i.e., positive/negative resolution or meaning-made).

The reconstruction of these components consists of *meaning structure* – degree of participation, social cohesion, common purpose, and sense of community. *Meaning orientation* includes a nonreligious perspective or “existential culture” (e.g., atheism, agnosticism, humanism, skepticism), increased empathy and critical thinking, as well as enhanced interest in social justice issues and a personal morality no longer attached to a religious deity. *Meaning security* entails personal liberation, freedom, independence, and autonomy. I conclude with participants’ narrative accounts regarding meaning outcomes and well-being.

Partial replacement

With regard to *meaning structure*, interestingly, some participants make a distinction between the perceived quality of social relationships and support associated with the religious group versus the structural properties of the meaning structure. That is to say, properties such as social cohesion, participation, commitment, and a sense of

community is missed, but, *not* the religious ideology linked to the meaning structure that pervaded relationships. Amanda, ex-Mormon highlighted this distinction:

“...I think when you’re in Mormonism, you spend so much time with those people...and then you have young women’s activities on Wednesday or Thursday night and then – on top of church – you’ll have fireside Sunday night sometimes and you have seminary if you’re in high school. I feel like it’s kind of a common group of people who you know who their families are, you know who their parents are, you know a lot about them...I used to say something like, ‘You could meet a Mormon on the street and you’d already be friends.’ Because you have something in common, you already have a basis of understanding somebody else. I feel like that is a big thing of what I lost like meeting somebody that you don’t know and knowing right away that you’ll get along because you have some sort of common foundation on which to at least talk about something.”

Cameron, former Seventh-day Adventist, mentioned a similar feeling with regard to sense of community, a component of meaning structure:

“...it was nice having that consistent kind of regimented, required, but still social moments – be it church service, be it prayer meeting, be it the Pathfinders [religious activity]. That had benefits as any kind of social gathering or construct can be beneficial for the purposes under the header of the Christ journey...Though I’m part of groups, they’re not about spiritual progression...”

Cameron went on to share how a reconstructed meaning structure with a different meaning orientation might look like:

“I’m kind of looking at ways to connect with people now, though I haven’t really found anything yet...other than the one-on-ones that I mentioned where I’ve had friends that were progressive and/or free thinker – but not in terms of meeting with a group of people that felt that way...that’s something I’m pursuing and one thing that was nice about being in a religion was the social piece, under the header of spiritual journey...I can commiserate with my wife and individual friends, but I don’t even know what it would look like in terms of a group of free thinkers...I would enjoy that.”

The participant highlighted the difficulty of finding a social group under the “header of spiritual journey” or one that focuses on “spiritual progression”, yet, also expressed discomfort at more liberal spiritual communities, that appear to resemble other features of a meaning structure too close to the religion left (i.e., regimented, ritualistic). More specifically, although exiters no longer aligned with the religious ideology and belief system after leaving the religion, some participants missed having a meaning-making community that focused on a shared common goal linked to a higher emotional significance (e.g., spiritual journey).

Full replacement

To specifically flesh out this meaning-making process for exiters, I begin with the reconstruction of *meaning orientation*. Cameron, former Seventh-day Adventist, explained increased interest in social justice issues after leaving religion:

“When I was within religion, I wasn’t so much worried about sustaining the health of the planet, for example, because when God came, it was going to be destroyed and rebuilt or whatever. So, that wasn’t of consequence to me. Now, I think it’s imperative. That’s something that is essential, critical...doing things that bolster social justice issues, whether it’s the environment, whether it’s rights, various rights – be it women’s rights in terms of abortion rights or other rights – even to animals, funding and participating in those sorts of things, I do that actively whereas before that’s just not something you saw...because the...objective was to recruit and save as many [individuals] as you could, go to your grave with that done, and rise with Jesus when he came again...that’s a shift in terms of my thinking and how I gauge [now].”

In this way, in adopting a nonreligious orientation that focused more on ‘secular’ affairs, exiters experienced not just a shift in their existential culture, but it encompassed interests in other areas of daily life, such as engagement with social justice topics. With regard to morality under meaning orientation, Karen, former Evangelical, highlighted:

“I would say when I was inside of religion, I felt, kind of, like a bird in a cage. I felt like I had the burned ashes, and then, rise politically from that cage like a

Phoenix, and I feel free. I don't feel like I'm guilty or questioning everything that I do or don't do. I don't feel like I'm a bad person. I feel like I do have morals and values and that I don't need a religion to tell me what's good or bad."

Adam, a former Mormon, spoke to the increased empathy under this sub-reconstruction:

"I learned that it is possible to change things that run very deep, but it's not easy and it can often – there's not a clear path from A to B, but that simply wanting to get there and groping around in the dark sometimes works and I think I learned more about just the human condition in general and I may be more empathetic and sympathetic to people who don't believe the same things as me because I know how difficult it is to change your mind about something."

Critical thinking linked to meaning orientation is also enhanced for participants after exiting religion. Typically, in the religion, participants felt constrained and fearful to convey doubts or ask questions regarding the religious ideology and/or doctrine, given the perceived and actual social consequences of doing so. Diane, an ex-Evangelical, shared:

"Mental freedom and the freedom to be really rigorous in critical thinking. Everything before had to be filtered through a predetermined set of what is true, and you couldn't be open to anything else before filtering it...freedom to be more mentally analytical. I have a lot more...moments of real joy and peace...I have a lot more awareness..."

The nonreligious orientation shapes, in part, reconstructed views on morality, social justice, and empathy linked to a broader, more critical perspective of the human condition. For instance, Tina, former Evangelical, expressed how an atheist orientation shaped her worldview more broadly:

“I think...honestly being more open to everything in life really. I think sometimes when you come from a specific religious background, you're close minded to other things or other people's ideas...the other thing is just being more reconciled in bad things that can happen. I left the church and kind of became more of an atheist before I became a nurse and I feel like I've always been happier that I did that because you see some patients and you see some things that just don't make sense and you see a bunch of people that have cancer and they're really young or they're old and you see people that are really old that just never took care of their bodies and they're still alive and well and here's someone, 24 [years old], and they're going to die in three months. I think things like that are easier for me to reconcile now that I don't have a specific religion.”

In this way, participants found mental strategies for making sense of their exit by taking on a nonreligious orientation that contributed to enhanced empathy, critical thinking, and a personal morality, as well as an increased interest in social justice and secular-oriented affairs, which led to overall increased well-being.

Regarding the sub-reconstruction of *meaning security*, participants reported feeling increased autonomy, personal freedom, independence, and liberation. Victoria, ex-Jehovah's Witnesses shared:

“I think the freedoms. Freedom to dress how I want. Freedom to do things like celebrate holidays, vote. Freedom to have an opinion. Freedom to view myself as an equal as a woman, especially in a relationship. Freedom of thinking. Freedom of information. Freedom of emotion. Freedom of behaviors. It's like I get to decide what's okay and what's not okay for me, versus turning that over to somebody else to decide for you.”

Echoing a shared experience, Gary, an ex-Evangelical stated:

“I've learned not to be so judgmental of people because there's a strict morality involved in church and there's a lot of things that are bad and evil like being a homosexual or transgender or anything that's out of the ordinary in the fundamentalist church is bad and you judge people for that. You judge people who aren't part of your church and say, 'They're going to hell.' So, I've gotten rid of the sense of judgment and that is a huge – that's a wonderful relief not to judge people based on their belief or how they behave, their sexuality, or anything like that. So, that's a great liberation for me.”

Many exiters experience freedom through no longer being tied to a religious ideology that feels, to them, constraining and judgmental about outsiders' lifestyles. Indeed, as Victoria noted, this form of freedom is personally grounded in that exiters feel

more enabled to make decisions on how to think, act, and feel, rather than adhere to a prescribed set of rules that, for many, involves excluding individuals and ideologies that do not align with that of the religious group.

Meaning outcomes

Moving on to the last portion of meaning reconstruction – *meaning outcome* or *meaning-made* – most exiters reported a positive resolution in exiting the religion.

However, some highlighted instances of a mixed outcome (i.e., positive and negative), which are worthy to note. Adam, former Mormon, shared:

“I think when I was first becoming an atheist I thought, ‘Okay, well I’ll deal with these existential questions and have them resolved’ but found that it’s not an easy resolution. It’s sort of like staying in shape. You have to keep working at it and the fact that we’re eventually going to die is still troubling and it still bothers me. It still makes me afraid for death and things like that and I don’t think it’s something that can be easily resolved. I think it’s something that has to be lived with and dealt with in a real day-to-day way that takes a higher amount of mental energy.”

Working within this reconstructed meaning-making framework, the participant also mentioned becoming more comfortable with searching for answers, while also being comfortable with not having all the answers – contrast to what was common in a religious meaning-making framework. In a similar vein, Tim, former Evangelical, reported that he

continues to think through “irrational” thoughts from religion in attempting to make sense of the new social world.

Thus, while some participants are still in the process of making sense of their exiting experience, which can cause distress transitionally, once they reach a level of satisfactory resolution (i.e., meaning-made), it contributes to increased well-being. Making sense of the exit is not purely a cognitive process. Victoria, former Jehovah’s Witnesses, stated that her “thoughts are still catching up to her emotions”. That is to say, for many exiters, making sense of the experience requires a constant negotiation and organization between cognition (thought) and emotion (feeling). Others found meaning-making replacements in nonreligion to assist with the emotional aspects. For instance, Rob, former Evangelical, reported that nonreligious meditation became a substitute for the emotional benefits of religious prayer.

To reiterate, most participants reported a *positive resolution* or meaning-made, but, important to note, meaning reconstruction (and its components) is a process and, while it may be challenging in the initial stages of the exit, many participants found their decision to exit a positive one. Diane, an ex-Evangelical, conveyed this best:

“Now, I would call it definitely positive. But if you had talked to me a year after I left, it would have been – I would have been resolute because obviously I finished – I’m still doing it – but I would have called it painful and negative but necessary. That’s what I would have described it as – painful, negative, and necessary. Now, I wish I had left 15 years earlier.”

Similarly, Victoria, ex-Jehovah's Witnesses made the following remark linked to her reported positive resolution in exiting the religion, "My worst day being out of the church, is far better than my best day being in the church."

Concluding Remarks on Meaning

The primary replacements in meaning reconstruction that led to increased well-being for exiters are meaning security (freedom, personal liberation, autonomy, independence) and meaning orientation (empathy, social justice interests, critical thinking, nonreligious perspective). Meaning structure appeared to be partially replaced for those exiters who highlighted distinct structural features, and their search for a version of such a meaning structure in nonreligion. Exiters who reported a positive resolution in leaving the religion, which were the majority, was associated with increased well-being. Conversely, those who reported a mixed outcome tend to not have fully achieved making sense of the exit and are still in the meaning reconstruction process (i.e., undergoing meaning-making attempts).

Identity and Social Support & Relationships Reconstruction and Well-Being

The status connected to roles and individual positions in religion is of importance to well-being. Further, the status attached to the role is closely tied to the status of the social support and relationships embedded in the religious community. Importantly, the reconstruction of this combination also impacts self-concepts. Exiters' narrative accounts convey the losses, ongoing strains and stressors, and gains in this interrelationship linked to well-being.

Losses

For Natalie, former Mormon, the loss of her formal roles tied to the religious community impacted her well-being in the transitional stage or during the exit. The participant spoke to the formal roles she held for about 15 years in the religious community:

“My role was to work with young women...ages 12 to 17. As a leader, I would teach Sunday class and then, as a young woman leader, I would meet up with the youth on Wednesdays. I was also a basketball, volleyball coach – like the athletic director – and then I became a state athletic director. I was camp leader for the ward. I’ve been ward camp director. I’ve had a state calling [volunteer position]...responsible for 27 girls and when you go to state, it’s like 300 plus girls...I had to let that go, which was heartbreaking because I felt like they’d [women] be alone and who’s going to support them because nobody would really see the invisible ones that were lonely and hurting...that was the hardest thing to leave. That’s what kept me in for so long was my influence in that. It feels good to reach out and be meaningful to young kids that don’t have much.”

Some exiters also experienced formal shunning or ostracization from the community which led to diminished self-concepts and reduced well-being.

Vanessa, a younger former Baptist, experienced a formal excommunication that coincided with cohabiting with her girlfriend:

“The official, everybody voting on it [excommunication]...convincing people that this [participant’s lifestyle and exit] is ungodly behavior...By the time they told me, sent me the formal letter saying that I’d been excommunicated...I was actually more relieved than anything. Because I was just glad it was over, and I felt like at that point, people would leave me alone. Because for that two or three months, it was just beratement of not only physical mail...and letters I would receive, but text messages, Facebook messages, emails, phone calls, basically any form of communication you could imagine...”

Vanessa further stated:

“I felt this constant that God was judging me, and I felt everything that they were messaging me was unnecessary because I already felt it myself. And I felt this weight on me and I would find it hard to sleep and wake up crying because I felt that I was going to hell for what I was doing, and I was still trapped in it mentally. But it was getting to the point where I either had to find something new or kill myself because it was just too much.”

Additionally, the participant reported feeling disappointment in realizing how little she meant to her biological family after leaving, which also led to diminished self-concepts and reduced well-being. Specifically, her family’s lack of acceptance of her sexual identity and choice to leave the religion, made the transition out more challenging. Like other exiters, the younger participant incurred a loss of family support (i.e., financial support) and the status attached to the religious community in the formal

excommunication. For this exiter, however, the formal exit was compounded by coming out as a lesbian – a sexual identity not typically supported in the religious community.

Ken, an ex-Evangelical, explained how occupying a nonreligious identity contributed to a strained divorce and custody issues:

“...basically, how things have gone with my kids. I think that’s been the hardest thing for me is because my ex was upset frankly that I left, and she didn’t understand why I didn’t want to be married anymore...I tried so hard to just get 50-50 time and all that and it was like I couldn’t be trusted basically because I wasn’t a Christian. That was basically the only reason why I couldn’t do it. So, am I satisfied with life? Yeah. I feel a million times better. [But], there’s a little pain there about that aspect...”

Several other participants spoke to the difficulties of their former religious partners, friends, and family accepting their nonreligious parenting linked to a new identity. This tension between a developing nonreligious identity and the religious social relationships presented a stressor for exiters. That is to say, exiters’ identity change, in this context, nonreligious parenting, conflicts with the social relationships in religion.

To be clear, personal relationships versus relationships tied to membership in the church contribute differently to well-being; whereby role loss connected to personal relationships tends to be more impactful on well-being. Further, this varying impact is also related to the exiter’s perceived value of the relationship and support tied to the status of the occupied role.

Ongoing strains and stressors

If the individual experiences an identity-role conflict in religion the loss of status attached to the role is not perceived as socially risky, so the exiter chooses to incur the loss and, therefore, some exiters subsequently experience ongoing stressors in their status, relationships and support, and identity contributing to a mixed outcome on well-being. The following narratives highlight this process.

Tim, former Evangelical, exemplified:

“When I moved out here [Portland, Oregon], the only person I knew was my girlfriend and her family. I ended up being homeless for a couple years and I went into a church for help with that. They asked for five references. I gave them my girlfriend’s mother and four people that I had grown up with, and I had only been here for a few weeks at the time. They only called her and didn’t call any of the other people, and since we had never had really a good relationship – and so they wouldn’t find me a place to stay because their reference didn’t come back. As far as ostracization, other than my family, I don’t have much contact with other people. But with them [family]...we differ on a lot of things, a lot of social issues, and a lot of it has to do with their religious beliefs. I can’t have valid opinions because I don’t believe the same way that they do. My opinions...don’t matter...”

The participant found it challenging to find social support in the transitional stage of the exit, and, like others, reverted to seeking support in a familiar setting, even though his identity no longer aligned with the religious ideology underlying those relationships.

The exiter further expressed how social support embedded in the religious network is lost in leaving the religion, so although the identity-role conflict is alleviated (i.e., via role loss), the loss and diminishment of the relationships and support in religion are impactful, which, taken together, contributes to a mixed outcome on well-being.

For those exiters who left specifically Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormon or LDS Church, this interrelationship becomes more complex. That is to say, if these exiters choose to be vocal about their exit and announce it in and outside of the religious community, they risk being formally ostracized, which means that they risk being formally shunned from family members and friends in the community. If these exiters chose to conceal their exit and nonreligious identity, they are less likely to be at risk of being shunned from the religious community.

However, in the latter decision, their identity and social relationships reconstruction is limited to the degree that they must conceal their nonreligious identity in the maintenance of relationships with religious members, which contributes to a mixed outcome on well-being – positive in preventing a full loss of community and family and negative in limiting the reconstruction of a nonreligious identity. Further, in this decision, religious members may visit the exiter to attempt to recruit them back into the religious group, whereas in complete nonreligious identity disclosure, this is less likely to occur. Victoria, former Jehovah's Witnesses, shared how she had to conceal her exit:

“I was working on making friends on the outside, in case my family found out that I was leaving. I looked at my overall situation and saw the consequences if

they found out, and tried to plan for if it goes really bad, how can I protect myself? I also got in touch with family members who were not in the church and started building my relationships with them, and going on trips to see them, and getting their contact information from my family, in case they quit talking to me...the church called my mom and my brother to let them know that I was no longer there and wanted to know why...I didn't really have much to say to my mom without letting her know that I no longer believed what they believe..."

She went on to say:

It was hard when members, who are my friends, calling and wanting to do stuff...Luckily, I had Caller ID, so I could tell who was calling and...in the year after I left, I would still go out to eat with some of them, if they approached me – a few people that I was friends with for decades...but I had to hide my whole life on the outside from them. After about a year I got tired of that and decided that if they called or came to my house, which they were, that I wouldn't answer the door or return their phone calls or texts."

Like Victoria, many reported stressors associated with perceived social consequences of exiting, contributing to diminished self-concepts in the transitional stage. Steve, also a former Jehovah's Witnesses, expressed how people don't really understand what it's like to be an exiter, which makes the process feel isolative. Similar to other former Mormon and Jehovah's Witnesses participants, Steve did not fully disclose his nonreligious identity to the religious community, so it was an informal exit

meaning he did not receive full shunning from his family. Although he established a nonreligious, polyamorous romantic partnership linked to a wider friendship network, he felt that the relatedness to his exiting process was still missing, contributing to a mixed outcome on well-being.

Gains

Exiters often gain new social relationships and forms of social support in nonreligion, but in the transitional stage of the exit, exiters are more likely to be confronted with a variety of stressors, such as improving their self-concepts, finding new roles and positions, and forging and/or reconstructing relationships and supports. In several cases, participants used their skills and interests gained from roles and positions in the religion as a springboard for finding new roles and social networks in nonreligion. For instance, and, as previously highlighted, Mya, former pastor's wife, organized social events and was a building coordinator in the church community. In nonreligion, she pursued interior design as part of her educational and professional career, which expanded her social networks. Skyler, former pastor in a Baptist church, continued work in social services in nonreligion – after having gained transferable skills in religion (i.e., forms of social and cultural capital). The leveraging of acquired skills and abilities cultivated in religion, and transferring these to nonreligion, enabled exiters to improve self-concepts, and find new social relationships, support, and roles through educational, volunteer, and/or professional pursuits, contributing to increased well-being.

Once exiters attained new roles attached to a new status, and forged new social relationships and support, they tend to report increased well-being. Victoria, ex-Jehovah's Witnesses, shared:

“I have many new roles. I started a support group for people who left my church. I also do volunteer work. I volunteered at the historical society in my city – I started a genealogy department and taught classes. I volunteer at the homeless shelter in my city. I tutor students – high school and college students...I also live with somebody I'm not married to, which wasn't allowed in my family.”

Further, Nicky, ex-Jehovah's Witnesses, highlighted how she had the opportunity to pursue education and explore an aspect of her identity linked to relationships:

“[pursuing] schooling...I'm very satisfied about [that]. I've been able to have dated several women. That would not have been a possibility before and so I've been able to kind of be myself in that way...and just be the sexuality that I have. I never would have had that otherwise.”

While many of the participants found new roles and relationships and support in the workplace, educational setting, and voluntary sector, some also discovered new roles and relationships at nonreligious and secular-based organizations. In particular, these secular-based organizations provide exiters with access to new forms of social support and relationships, as well as the opportunity to have their nonreligious identities validated and self-concepts improved, contributing to increased well-being.

For Diane and Gary, both former Evangelicals, the social relationships and support reconstruction is salient linked to their construction of a nonreligious identity. These participants are involved in a number of local nonreligious and secular organizations, taking on various roles within these organizations. They found that being part of these communities contributed to the formation of more authentic relationships and identities, when compared to being part of the religious group. Exiters reported that some key characteristics of the nonreligious organizations consisted of encouraging identity exploration and a greater identity acceptance; whereas, in religion, participants reported a greater pressure to conform to a (stricter) religious identity. In this way, participants had the social space and support to explore parts of their identities that went unexplored in religion, which led to improved self-concepts and increased well-being.

Concluding Remarks on Identity and Social Relationships and Support

The reconstruction of identity and social relationships and support illuminates some new insights, versus when examining each factor separately on well-being. First, in the exiter choosing to incur a role loss due to the experienced identity-role conflict in religion, this loss generally contributes to increased well-being, however, when examining this role loss in relation to the diminishment of social relationships and support, it has a mixed outcome on well-being. Second, we see in the narrative accounts that when exiters take on a nonreligious identity, they also tend to explore and consider alternative relational arrangements.

Identity and Meaning Reconstruction and Well-Being

Participants reconstruct their identities and sense of meaning in a number of ways across meaning orientation, meaning security, and meaning structure connected to self-concepts and roles related to well-being. As exiters attempt to make sense of their exiting process, they are also reconstructing their identity and, as such, this combination is integral to more fully understanding the exiting process. In this particular interrelationship, it is important to understand the components of meaning reconstruction – security, orientation, and structure – also in a religious context.

In religion, as revealed in participants' narratives, *meaning security* consists of social control and regulation and existential certainty. *Meaning orientation* entails religious ideology, values, and beliefs attached to a religious deity. *Meaning structure* involves collective belief focused on the sacred, divine, or higher purpose that requires a high time commitment and participation. In this pairwise reconstruction, the following conceptual explanation is required: the sub-components meaning security, orientation and structure are either considered lost, ongoing strains and stressors, or gained; identity (self-concepts) are improved or diminished; and roles are lost or gained. Often, these distinct outputs depend on the stage of the exit.

Losses

In this pairwise factor, exiters find themselves challenged with releasing the *meaning orientation* fostered in religion and ultimately improving self-concepts, but in the transitional stage (i.e., during the exit), many experience diminished self-concepts as

they undergo attempts to reconstruct meaning orientation. Max, former Evangelical, explained:

“...when I was inside, we had this belief that we were children of God and so our purpose was God’s purpose. I remember that would still kind of bother me in a way because I’d be fervently praying, ‘What am I supposed to do with my life?’ and not obviously getting an answer...it was frustrating because it was that idea that your purpose is external to yourself and I think that was one thing I was afraid to explore being part of that because they don’t like – you’re not really supposed to question these things, but I had never really liked that idea that my existence, my purpose, is someone else’s that because I was created by God that now I’m under their dictates...I mean that was the view and I believed it that my identity was as a Christian I was like a Lamb of God and I’m supposed to be reflecting that in my actions and my thoughts and, of course, you fail. It’s almost intentional.”

The participant went on to say:

“You’re set up to fail because, of course, you have this perfect standard in God and in Jesus and everything and, of course, you fail at it. So, then you go through this cycle of trying to have yourself, your identity, be part of this perfection – this idea of perfection in God – and you fail drastically and then you feel horrible, guilty, and you doubt your salvation. So, then they tell you, ‘Well, you got to read your Bible. You got to pray more’ so you study more, and you do all these

things...it becomes this circle and it was just so frustrating for me that you had to go through that and there seemed to be no escape.”

Many participants resounded the loss of this meaning orientation cultivated in religion as intricately tied to their sense of identity, and the challenges associated with reconstructing this combinatory factor.

Regarding the loss of *meaning security* tied to identity, Skyler, a former Baptist Pastor, highlighted:

“There’s just stages, and I don’t know if it’s traditional grief stages...but you go from feeling smug, you go down to feeling depressed and sad, you feel angry that you’ve been deceived your entire life, then I look back to everything from you weren’t allowed to date these types of people, so you have a lot of second-guesses of going, ‘I wonder what this would’ve been like,’ and eventually it settles out with more time...I met with a lot of different pastors, just going, ‘I don’t know what’s going on here. This is very scary. Help me understand this...’”

For Skyler, like others, the transitional stage of leaving the religion, causes a disruption to the meaning-making system cultivated in the religion, and, thus, participants lose a sense of *meaning security* (i.e., existential security) bound in the religion that then challenges who they are and what they believe. Through meaning-making attempts, exiters are enabled to reconstruct meaning security and orientation in nonreligion; however, during this particular stage, self-concepts are diminished and roles in religion are lost, contributing to decreased well-being.

The loss of *meaning structure* linked to identity can prove challenging. Vanessa, former Baptist, shared her experience of the loss:

“...I felt a part of something. And so, it was nice to feel like no matter what was happening in my life, they were there for me in that sense of when I was struggling, it was usually always in a religious sense, whenever I was struggling with my sin...I could always rely on them to be there for me. Or I just felt it was like a safety net that I could go there on Sundays and it was just the day of rest and then I would spend all day there feeling the things that you’re supposed to feel, like when you sing songs and you are worshipping together and you all have a common goal and you feel a part of something larger than yourself. I lost that. And I didn’t realize that at the time that that’s what was happening, but since, it’s hard to have that and even though at the time you think one way and now obviously I don’t think or feel that way anymore, but yet I do mourn the loss of having that community and feeling that way because it was a great feeling.”

For some exiters, the religious meaning structure provided a sense of identity connected to “something larger than yourself”, which has potential to enhance self-concepts; thus, in exiting, participants experience a sense of disruption in their self-concepts and are called to reconstruct their identity tied to meaning structure. Important to note, some participants highlighted a distinction between the meaning structure that is lost versus the relationships and support more generally. That is, there is a specific meaning structure established in religion that many exiters find challenging to replace in

nonreligion and this is a result of the role loss in religion (i.e., religious member), reducing well-being. This notion is further exemplified in participants' accounts of their experiences before the exit. For instance, Fred, ex-Jehovah's Witnesses, shared features of the religious meaning structure tied to religious role membership:

“The schedule was three times a week. Evening times and on the weekends was religious ceremonies – meetings are what we called them...we had a Monday night meeting –which was an hour book study which we studied a Watchtower publication. Then Thursday nights, we had another meeting – which was actually two meetings in one night – and we would study different articles and stuff that were Bible-based. And then another one was called...Theocratic Ministry School and another one was service meeting, which we actually prepared to going out and talking to people about the Bible and learning techniques on how to essentially indoctrinate other people. Then Sunday was the Watchtower study...we'd study a portion of the Watchtower and then listen to a Bible-based talk for about 45 minutes and then an hour of Watchtower discussion. Then Saturday was a service day. You went out and talked to people about the Bible...”

Tina, an ex-Evangelical, echoed a similar meaning structure in religion tied to social identity:

“I was born and raised in the religion. So, it was kind of like the standard of...a lot of church events. Church was almost just about every day. Something was done every day and then I think the only days we had off were Tuesdays or

sometimes Saturdays, but sometimes we would still go to church then and so kind of a really strict background.”

In participants’ narrative accounts, the religious meaning structure did not vary greatly across the different fundamentalist religions. The primary characteristics were a great degree of time commitment and participation, a sense of community focused on a higher purpose, and honoring traditions and rituals. In nonreligion, the loss of these characteristics contributed to a mixed outcome on well-being – positive in that role loss improved self-concepts for most exiters and negative in not fully recovering meaning structure.

Ongoing strains and stressors

Within each factor, there are strains and stressors experienced amongst exiters versus solely gains and losses. For instance, Karen, a former Evangelical, residing in the first cluster (3-5 years out of religion) described her religious experience and religion in general as “poison”, even though the participant reported feeling overall increased well-being in leaving:

“I’m so much happier. I feel extremely — just like I can breathe. I feel liberated, but I have to say there is residual, almost like a rust of guilt there still. I still feel a little bit of that indoctrinated tug or twinge...It’s still this insidious poison inside of me...”

This perspective of experiencing religion as poison linked to identity can have some limitations on the meaning outcome and identity reconstruction process. That is, by

viewing religion as a prior negative experience, fully making sense of the experience is limited, because meaning-making attempts require, in part, that individuals engage in positive reappraisal of the stressful life event to achieve meaning-made (i.e., positive resolution). This perspective also influences identity reconstruction to the extent that it can delay self-concepts improvement, specifically when establishing a nonreligious identity outside of religion as primarily a negative experience.

Similarly, Fred, former Jehovah's Witnesses, shared, "I was unlucky...I was born into a cult and brainwashed." The participant reported distress around losses and the ongoing challenges of making sense of the exit in light of the harmful impact of the religious meaning system on well-being.

Rob, an ex-Evangelical talked about how, to achieve a positive resolution, he had to kill parts, and resurrect parts, of his former meaning orientation and identity:

"I think something I realized recently is that I'm going back and learning to love again, which is weird. Just makes sense, doing a lot of talk – listening to a lot of lectures about mythology...and so I'm learning to go back and see all the positives I can still take from it [religion]...there's a lot of good lessons in there, you can't throw them all away, and so I think the next part of healing after going out of religion and not everyone does this, is going back to the religion and resurrecting it in your own mind into something that's positive without having to keep the whole package...I'm trying to go back and resurrect all these positive

parts of my self-identity I had to kill when I walked away from it, and so going back to the rubbish bin and trying to find the good pieces and leave the rest.”

This further highlights how exiters’ meaning-making process varies based on the stage of the exit, as well as other factors, such as the degree to which the exiter is aware of particular stressors and strains, and the desire to reconcile stressors to achieve meaning-made (i.e., positive resolution).

Gains

Moving on to the gains exiters experience in nonreligion in this interrelationship, we see that, for most, the gains across specifically *meaning orientation* and *security* connected to identity reconstruction are significant, *meaning structure* less so. In regard to *meaning orientation* and *meaning security*, many participants reported feeling an increased sense of independence, personal morality, empathy, autonomy, critical thinking, the ability to engage in multiple perspectives, and freedom, all of which enhance self-concepts. Max, an ex-Evangelical, specifically spoke to the new freedom and enhanced critical thinking:

“I think it’s freed me from having fear of hell...I think because so much of it is based on fear and obedience....That was part of also my political transformation was questioning everything fundamentally like how our society is set up. So, I’m always more questioning – especially of leaders or authorities – and I think it’s made me less afraid to ask questions or to assume. I guess it’s like if something is traditionally done or done as a matter of “because we’ve always done it”...I’m

much more likely to question that...I think with that experience has made me...really hesitant to get involved in movements that have religious connotations attached to them where you're wanting to convince people of things and separate yourself from others.”

For some, critical thinking can take the form of increased skepticism and questioning after leaving religion. This might be informed, in part, by being prevented from questioning to such a degree in the religion, because of the perceived and actual social consequences of being ostracized and rejected, as well as discouraged from conveying doubts. Thus, many reported feeling a personal freedom (meaning security) along with enhanced critical thinking (meaning orientation) in being able to exercise these individual rights, contributing to improved self-concepts and increased well-being. In addition, Richard, a former Evangelical, like others, found that traveling and exposure to different cultures assisted in engaging in multiple perspectives, not typically experienced or encouraged in the religion, and receiving validation for a nonreligious identity, leading to improved self-concepts and increased well-being.

In terms of *meaning security*, exiters shared how intimately linked this new form of security is to establishing a new sense of identity. Steve, a former Jehovah's Witnesses, stated, “I would say the biggest thing I've gained is probably a sense of identity, and knowing who I am and being comfortable with who I am, has been huge.” He further explained:

“...I kind of feel braver as a result [of exiting], and so, I think that is a big part of my identity...and I do realize that because I’m going to die there are things that I’ve been scared to do or things that I have not done, because I thought they were socially weird. When I was in the church, there’s very like distinct roles for men and women, and if you showed any signs of not – like for a man not to be masculine, that was somehow weird...I don’t feel limited by a lot of social constraints about what it means to be a man, or what it means to be moral...I can finally be myself and I’m trying to figure out who that is...I think over the past few years, my focus has kind of shifted...from an outward trying to understand the universe and where I am and understand life in general. To, trying to figure out who I am, and that’s been nice...”

For exiters, reconstructing their identity (i.e., exploring who they are outside of the religion) assisted in grounding them in a new meaning security – that is, a security built on freedom, autonomy, and independence related to increased well-being.

Concluding Remarks on Identity and Meaning Reconstruction

This combination of the reconstruction process revealed some new information about the exiting process. In closely examining this pairwise combination, we more fully understand the religious meaning-making system, namely, through participants’ narratives of how intimately linked their sense of identity is to meaning reconstruction. Exiters frequently refer back to the religious meaning system to make sense of how their exit, across the reconstruction of security, orientation, and structure, was intricately

connected to a religious identity. Thus, in their reconstruction of identity, exiters were enabled to make sense of their exit across these sub-factors to achieve meaning-made – a positive resolution – and improve self-concepts related to increased well-being.

Social Relationships & Support and Meaning Reconstruction and Well-Being

When an exiter leaves the religion, there is a loss of meaning attached to the social network, the relationships, and supports embedded in the community. Specifically, there are losses, ongoing strains and stressors, and gains across the components of meaning reconstruction – orientation, security, and structure – linked to social support and relationships related to well-being.

Losses

Rob, an ex-Evangelical, explained the impact of losing a religious *meaning security* connected to the religious community:

“Fear – I mean, redefining my sense of mortality, being okay with there not being an eternity. I moved out here, so I wasn’t so much – I didn’t have what a lot of people have, which is where you have to let go of your entire community. I was already starting over, that’s probably what made it a little bit easier for me is that I didn’t have to – starting brand new with building a community, a friend group...Like I couldn’t imagine say if I actually had become a preacher and then deconverted ten years later. What would that be like? That’d be insane. I always wonder what happens to like a 50-year-old preacher that deconverts and he can’t tell anyone because that’s the only job skill he has.”

By the same token, Skyler, a former Baptist Pastor shared how the shift in *meaning orientation*, that is, losing a religious meaning orientation, impacted relations with the religious community:

“...it was more of having some serious conversations with family and letting them know I don’t want to lose this outside of we just know there’s things we can’t talk about because it will make people sad, and we don’t currently agree on it. I had friends of mine who wrote me letters, and we’re no longer friends on their side of things just because of their religious, I guess, intolerance...that they believe that they will be dragged down to the pits of hell and despair if they stay friends with me because that’s what the religion tells them to do is you stay away from the bad apples, or the people who walked out.”

In this way, participants felt that in moving away from the meaning orientation and security cultivated in the religion, it also distanced them from the religious community and in some cases, a full loss of some relationships. Others also spoke to their *meaning outcome* having a mixed resolution; that is, positive and negative. Tim, ex-Evangelical, specifically expressed how exiting the religious *meaning structure* and *orientation* – that is, no longer attending church and aligning with the religious ideological orientation meant – losing the social support embedded in the religious network:

“I think it’s mixed. I think it is positive, because of...that liberating feeling and understanding that I’m not being watched all the time, and that I don’t have to

worry about those demonic attacks...or God means for this to happen and that's why that happened. I can see things for how they are. Negatively...within church you have kind of that built-in community and that built-in networking... I've lost a lot of that community. I think that that has really hindered my ability to find a community and to be a part of one, because it was set up for me when I was kid. I didn't really have to do any work to be a part of something. Now it's like I'm on the outside. I have to find my way in. I don't have that built-in community network that my parents do because of their religious beliefs. That has definitely impacted me negatively.”

The participant, like others, felt that maintaining relations with religious members, including family and friends, was challenging because their meaning orientation had shifted and exiters no longer shared the religious ideology, which meant that many also lost the social support available to them through the religious community. Skyler, ex-Baptist Pastor, explained how the religious *meaning structure* is intricately linked to social relationships and support:

“...religion really has a market on relationships, and whether it's for the good or for the bad, but I used to tell people when I was leaving, I said, It's one of those things where we all believe in something a little out there, but the bigger the 'out there', the bigger the bond with the people, so because we all believe this kind of thing that maybe it's magical...then that creates a bigger bond versus when you're around analytically minded, science type of people, they just argue over studies

and the way that you implement certain things, and different theories and stuff. I think people like being around people with similar values, and it has a family effect to it...”

Taken together, the reconstruction of meaning security, orientation, and structure are integral components to social support and relationships, namely, in making sense of the exit in relation to the community left behind.

Gains

While the losses and reconstruction in this interrelationship can be challenging, exiters also reported significant gains in nonreligion. In particular, many exiters specifically spoke to accessing informational support in making sense of their exiting experience. Victoria, former Jehovah’s Witnesses, shared:

“...I went online, and I joined a bulletin board anonymously and somebody said on there, ‘You should really read this book by this leader who left in 1981’...I recognized the name, because I remember that leader who left. My dad told me about him. We weren’t allowed to read his book...I got the book and I read it. After that my eyes were completely opened. I was completely awake. I saw how they made decisions at the top and I was completely done and never going back. Then, after talking to people online, somebody talked about, ‘What if there’s not another world? What if there is not Armageddon?’ I never thought about the possibility that there wasn’t one, until I read that statement. I was like, ‘Oh, my God. That would completely change my life, if I didn’t live like God was going to

kill me.’ That turned everything around. All the beliefs that I was told not to do, I wanted to check out...”

Victoria went on to explain that because she was not allowed to vote or celebrate holidays, such as birthdays, she had to learn in nonreligion:

“I’m still...in that phase of...why weren’t we allowed to vote? What’s so bad about voting? I learned to vote. I celebrate all the holidays and my birthday and other people’s birthdays, even though I’m not quite sure how to do it. My friends and my family members who were never in the church, they send me guides and advice to help me through it...There is so much to our society I didn’t learn as a kid. I’m like relearning as an adult...I’m like happy as a five-year-old to celebrate my birthday. My boyfriend’s just like, ‘Birthdays? Who cares about that?’ I’m like, ‘I want a cake and I want candles. I want to wear the funny hat.’”

For many, in accessing informational support, a broader world had opened up to them in leaving the religious meaning orientation and structure and, for some, were tasked with learning how to integrate into secular life, yet it was primarily a positive experience. In accessing new information and engaging with nonreligious communities, exiters were enabled to reconstruct meaning orientation and were afforded forms of freedom related to meaning security. In terms of meaning security linked to community reconstruction, Karen, ex-Evangelical, resounded:

“I feel free to be myself around people, in general. I don’t feel like I’m being judged because I’m sinning or because I’m, you know, my sexuality...I feel like

when I meet new people — I feel like they're going to, hopefully, be as open-minded as I am about my life and about theirs, and just about how they view the world. It gives me hope.”

In addition, exiters received emotional support in their meaning reconstruction journey. Natalie, former Mormon, expressed:

“...people that are empowered to hold space and not that codependency – not that that doesn't exist – but I've found more within relationships and I think it took a while to really let those relationships develop organically because I was so used to being conditioned like, 'You're Mormon. You're Mormon. You guys got to be friends.' It's been a new experience. It's like an adult, mature relationship...I've found some deeper relationships...and being acknowledged and appreciated for my out of the box thinking...I don't have to filter who I should be friends with or feel guilty or shamed. It's [an] accepting community...to be appreciated to have ideas and think because in religion it's so shamed and shunned – what is it, critical thinking, you know? It's just so accepted.”

Exiters also experience validation and acceptance in their new meaning orientation byway of establishing new relationships and support (i.e., emotional and informational) in nonreligion, which contributes to increased well-being. Richard, former Pentecostal, echoed a similar story in specifically linking meaning security reconstruction to feeling more freedom in seeking social support (i.e., informational support) and relationships:

“...I want to explore as much of life as I can...I absorb constantly new information. I’ve got tons of podcasts that constantly expand my understanding of science and religion and what the newest technology stuff is going on. I listen to a lot of debates on YouTube or discussions just because now I know that there’s only a limited amount of time. I don’t have forever, and I want to experience as many cool things as I can, have healthy, good relationships with me and my friends, eat all the food, drink all the drinks, see the sunsets and jump in the rivers... I want to fill it up as much time as I have because I know that once I’m gone, everything that is me just goes back into the dirt or ashes or whatever the physics of it are. I’ll be what I was before I wasn’t alive – just more chaotic.”

This increased sense of autonomy and personal freedom (meaning security reconstruction) is achieved for many exiters through accessing new information and feeling supported in this new meaning endeavor. Further, exiters gained support (emotional and informational) in their meaning orientation reconstruction through secular-based organizations which cultivated a nonreligious meaning orientation (i.e., atheism). Sara, former Baptist stated:

“I think the biggest problem for a lot of people who leave the church is that...they don’t have the assumed built-in social system...my husband and I both realized – and...he had been an atheist for a few years already – but we both realized that we really didn’t have local friends. We didn’t have a local support system outside our families, and so we actively started seeking that out. We connected with [science-

based organization]...and [atheist organization] came to town; we went to that a few times. And we actively started building those relationships, so it wasn't always an every-Sunday thing, but at least we had friends who were like minded, and we could hang out with them and they became our support system...I think the social aspect was probably the biggest change. That and the emotional aspect. I didn't constantly feel guilty.”

In these narrative accounts, we can see that exiters experience a positive meaning outcome in forming new relationships attached to new supports in nonreligion; also, through talking about their experience with like-minded individuals. To provide another example, Cameron, former Seventh-Day Adventist, found it easier to make sense of his experience talking about his religious exit with his nonreligious father. This contributed to increased well-being due to the experienced relatedness perceived as meaningful to participants in the process. That is, in connecting with other exiters or nonreligious identities, it provided the supportive basis for meaning reconstruction linked to positive well-being.

Ongoing strains and stressors

There are strains and stressors that occur in this interrelationship that are worthy to note. For instance, Nicky, former Jehovah's Witnesses, like others, highlighted that although you're more free after leaving religion, there is still a long-term impact: “It's positive because I'm out. It's positive because I'm free; because I can have a life that I want but – like I said – that doesn't diminish the harm.”

Exiters reconstruct social relationships and support in nonreligion and make sense of their exiting experience to a satisfactory degree, but in making sense of the experience (i.e., undergoing meaning-making attempts) it also means that, sometimes, exiters confront, accept, and negotiate what occurred in the religious community, and at times this can cause distress, contributing to reduced well-being. Steve, also a former Jehovah's Witnesses, shared:

“I became a lot more sociable with people that aren't part of the religion...It's very difficult because this is a topic that ends up coming up a lot with people I meet and it's something that I can't stop thinking about. I think about it every hour, every day, about being raised this way and it's very difficult to be able to live. I try to stay really busy with meeting new people, activities, traveling, and making new friendships with people – you know always being willing to go out and talk with a friend or something...I actually started up a group of ex-Jehovah's Witnesses in [a nearby city] and we try to meet once a month or so...I kind of get a few people that reach out to me through that group and try to meet up with them and have that kind of kindred relationship or same experience. We kind of ask what we went through and understand each other a little bit.”

By developing and accessing emotional support – through shared experience and relatedness – exiters are able to not only make sense of their religious exit, but feel less socially isolated in the process, and better manage the perceived harmful effects of the religion left.

Additional strains and stressors occur for exiters who maintain relationships with those still in the religion. Tina, former Evangelical, reported how she avoided coming out as a nonbeliever to some family members, which contributed to relational strain; that is, in concealing her nonreligious meaning orientation from religious family members, participants are confronted with increased challenges in this interrelationship reconstruction. Further, part of making sense of the exiting experience is the freedom to openly explore a new meaning orientation connected to communities that validate and encourage such meaning exploration. Thus, in concealment, participants risk not achieving meaning-made connected to social relationships and support reconstruction, thereby contributing to a mixed outcome on well-being.

Rob, an ex-Evangelical, specifically spoke to the challenges of reconstructing *meaning structure* tied to relationships and support:

“...I lost a community, and it’s really hard to build one of those without something that everyone’s moving towards like religion. I have a community, but right now it’s kind of cobbled together between friends and neighbors and stuff like that...[but] I don’t have a community where everyone’s going towards one goal, and that is something that is very, I feel like, important for a lot of people to have, and it’s harder to make your way through life without it.”

He went on to say:

“...if you have financial troubles. If you are going through something emotional, they’re emotional support, and so the thing that’s kind of awkward and frustrating

is you don't have a group of people that you can be with just like this...the idea of confession is you can tell people what you are worried about and because you're already in the default of a sinful, bad person, you can say things that you're struggling with that you normally would not say in polite company, and so they work as free counselors practically...you lose...being part of an easy community of all the age groups which is really important to have....You need people to mentor you and it's important to have that, and so I had to go out and seek my own mentors in different areas. I have some different people I consider mentors now, but it's not something that's prepackaged like when you have religion.”

In this narrative, along with others', participants noted that the meaning structure is not fully recovered in nonreligion; however, the gains (i.e., social support and reconstructed meaning orientation and security) contributed to increased well-being. To be clear, while there is an experienced loss of working towards a common goal or higher purpose focused on the divine and the sacred in a “prepackaged” meaning structure common in religion, exiters gain relationships and support within nonreligious organizations, and/or in their personal nonreligious relationships (i.e., friends and/or partners) linked to meaning security and orientation reconstruction, which contributes to increased well-being.

Concluding Remarks on Social Relationships and Support and Meaning Reconstruction

This interrelationship on well-being sheds light on how meaning reconstruction (security, orientation, and structure) is entwined with the religious community (social

relationships and support). Namely, several new insights can be garnered from this combination. First, the reconstruction of meaning security and orientation is greatly connected to rebuilding community and relationships in nonreligion. That is, participants gain a sense of their new existential orientation and a sense of freedom through new relationships and being part of nonreligious organizations where they feel accepted. Next, although meaning structure is not necessarily replaced in nonreligion, exiters find a sense of community via their participation in nonreligious spaces linked to increased well-being. Lastly, online informational support specifically is potent in participants' making sense of their exiting experience, contributing to a safer exit in the transitional stages and, ultimately, assists in achieving a positive resolution in their meaning outcome.

Brief Description of Overview of Results

In the table below, I provide an overview of the primary findings in this study. The table summarizes key findings across the three factors and its interrelationships related to well-being. This overview of results is organized in such a way that highlights the primary gains, losses, and ongoing strains and stressors across each factor and its interrelationships, along with the main findings under meaning reconstruction and its conceptual explanation (i.e., full/partial replacement, meaning outcomes).

Table 5. Overview of Results

Reconstruction Factor/s and Well-Being	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gains • Improved • Full Replacement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Losses • Diminished • Partial Replacement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ongoing Strains/Stressors • Meaning outcomes
Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Gain new formal roles (i.e., occupational, spouse, parent). -Gain informal roles (i.e., friend, non-marriage partner). -Improved self-concepts through acquisition of formal & informal roles. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Loss of formal & informal roles in religion. -Diminished self-concepts via loss of informal & formal roles. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Feelings of guilt, fear, and shame. -Instances of trauma in religion had ongoing negative impact on self-concepts.
Social Relationships & Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Gain new relationships via partnerships, friendships, nonreligious groups, workplace, education. -Gain emotional, informational, and instrumental support. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Loss of relationships (friends and family) in religion. -Loss of emotional, instrumental, and informational support in religion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Relational maintenance with religious members (family and friends). -Formal excommunication (among exiters of Jehovah's Witnesses and LDS)
Meaning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Full replacement of meaning orientation. -Full replacement of meaning security. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Partial replacement of meaning structure. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Positive meaning outcome. -Mixed meaning outcome (positive and negative).
Identity and Social Relationships & Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Gain new social relationships, support, and roles through personal, educational, volunteer, and/or professional pursuits + Improved self-concepts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Loss of roles & status connected to religious membership + Diminished self-concepts. -Loss of emotional, informational, and instrumental support + roles in religion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Formal excommunication (among exiters of Jehovah's Witnesses and LDS) + Diminished self-concepts. -Diminished self-concepts + relational maintenance with religious members.
Identity and Meaning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Gain new meaning orientation, meaning security, roles, and improved self-concepts. in nonreligion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Loss of religious meaning orientation, security, structure, roles connected to religious community, and diminished self-concepts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Diminished self-concepts + mixed meaning outcomes (positive and negative). -Improved self-concepts + positive meaning outcome.
Social Relationships & Support and Meaning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Gain new meaning orientation and security, relationships, and support in nonreligion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Loss of religious meaning orientation, structure, and security tied to religious relationships & support. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Mixed meaning outcomes + relational maintenance with religious members.

Concluding Remarks: Emergent Findings

This qualitative research revealed some emergent findings that were outside the scope of investigation in the study. First, in the pairwise factor, *social support and relationships and identity reconstruction*, gendered issues emerged. That is, some female exiters described traditional gender roles as creating an identity-role conflict in connection to relationships. Participants highlighted how the traditional feminine role associated with traits of being submissive, sexually chaste, and a homemaker no longer aligned with their sense of identity; hence, performing this role contributed to diminished self-concepts and reduced well-being while in the religion.

In its reconstruction, Nicky, former Jehovah's Witnesses, explained:

“...I think being a queer person is a role that I wouldn't have had...it wouldn't have been actualized at all...I've been able to do what I want to do, what I love to do. So, that's working with community members and focusing on politics...I do that in academia, but I also do that in my work. So, that would not have been allowed [in religion]...where I'm thinking about social policy and policy change....being somebody's partner without being married to them, being able to live with them, and going out on a date with someone that's been divorced...I have the ability if I do get married...I could get divorced and that almost gives me comfort, which is a really weird thing to say, but it's like I've seen women stuck in really horrid relationships and be terribly abused because we're not allowed to leave [in religion].”

Natalie, an ex-Mormon, echoed a similar gendered trajectory in exiting religion:

“When I was in religion, I was a very good Mormon. Outside everything looked like it was awesome. I was the perfect wife. I was 125 pounds. I wore the skirts, the dresses. I never really wore a lot of makeup. I was still a strong woman, but I shielded it under the guise of submissive femininity...inside I was trembling with fear because I felt like this was all bullshit, but this is the best bet I have with the majority and it was working...now that I figured that out, I’m still the strong...powerful woman, but I don’t need to make that validate what the world or society or culture tells me. I get to write that role and I’m confident in my own appearance and what I want to choose to be in my own identity. I don’t let it be defined by hierarchy or patriarchal powers and cultures, even though we’re all susceptible...because it’s America and it’s very white and it’s still highly religious.”

Lastly, Diane, an ex-Evangelical, highlighted:

“I don’t feel like I have to fit predefined roles of feminism or what it is to be feminist or femininity because that was pretty big in the church, ‘This is what a woman is, and this is what a man is’ and how you behave and what your appropriate roles are. I also don’t feel a need to change anybody else because I wouldn’t have agreed with myself. You know if I met myself from then, we wouldn’t agree.”

These gendered narratives capture a complex identity-relationships reconstruction, with regard to exploring alternative relational arrangements, improving self-concepts, and pursuing educational and career roles that were not typically encouraged in the religion. It also helped develop an awareness of gender inequalities in a broader social context. Additionally, in terms of reconstruction of this interrelationship within a gendered context, female exiters and some men, reported having better sex outside of the religion, not feeling guilty in engaging in sexual and romantic relationships outside of marriage, and having more equitable relationships tied to a more authentic identity; all of which contributed to increased well-being. Lastly, gendered trajectories appear to play a role in becoming more aware of alternative identities connected to how participants form new relationships related to increased well-being.

Next, the methodological research design was one where the exiting process was captured across three specific *clusters* (3-5; 6-8; 9+ years out of religion), as well as the empirical exploration of before, during, and after *stages* of the exit. Participants' narratives across the three factors suggest that occupying a specific cluster and/or stage of the exiting process impacts, to varying degrees, the reconstruction of single and pairwise factors differently. For instance, throughout the analysis of the narratives, participants report that the during the exit (i.e., transitional stage) tends to be the most challenging as this stage requires the initial step in the reconstruction of the three factors and, usually, it is the stage where ongoing strains and stressors emerge from the losses and gains.

Further, some exiters in the study, who occupied the first cluster (i.e., 3-5 years out of religion), conveyed more distress in their narratives, specifically in the reconstruction of social relationships and support and identity (i.e., self-concepts), while others who occupied the late cluster (i.e., 9+ years out), expressed how in the early stages (i.e., beginning and during stages) it was challenging, but eventually they achieved a satisfactory reconstruction in the after exit. Taken together, reconstruction of factors linked to clusters and stages of the exiting process was revealed in exiters' narrative accounts. These gender-related and stage- and cluster- specific findings will be further explicated in the Discussion section.

Discussion

Contributions and previous research/theory

This qualitative research aimed at capturing the religious exiting process, conceived of as the reconstruction of identity, meaning, and social support and relationships related to well-being. The study focused on a subset of religious exiters – those who specifically left fundamentalist religions. Based on 24 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with religious exiters, there are several key findings bearing on the following *research question*: how do exiters of fundamentalist religions reconstruct identity, meaning, and social relationships and support related to well-being? This research question closely examines: (a) how each factor independently relates to well-being; (b) the interrelationships of the reconstruction factors on well-being.

This section concentrates on the topics that were central to the research questions, and the *emergent findings* previously discussed in the Results. I start this section with how each reconstruction factor's key findings relate to the literature and theoretical framework used in this study, and subsequently provide a global framework of the pairwise combinations in light of previous literature. Next, I discuss which factors of the reconstruction process were more impactful on well-being than others and conclude with this study's limitations. I begin with main findings in the *reconstruction of identity and well-being*.

In this reconstruction factor linked to well-being, the results demonstrate that exiters of fundamentalist religions experience a role loss (tied to religious membership) in

leaving the religious system and, in some cases, status loss associated with the role. In the reconstruction process, some exiters continue to experience difficulties acquiring new roles attached to a higher status, contributing to reduced well-being. These findings fit within the framework of the stress process model in that those who occupy a lower status in their social role have a higher likelihood of exposure to stressful life events and resultant role strains (Pearlin, 1989). Role loss entails also a loss in social status, because the exiter is no longer affiliated with the group membership status of the religion. However, role loss and status were mostly significant for those who occupied a higher status in the religion (i.e., pastors and pastor's wife).

Formal and informal role losses typically occur because of an identity-role conflict, wherein the exiter's identity no longer aligns with the expectations of the role. This finding supports the conceptualization of how identity and roles come together through understanding identity as a self-concept and roles as a set of behaviors and performances and, as such, a link between identity and roles exists to the extent that the *meaning* given to each is the same (Burke & Reitzes, 1981). That is to say, the meaning attached to identities is linked to one's role and what others in that particular role structure or system deem appropriate for that identity (Burke & Reitzes, 1981). Thus, prior to leaving the religious network many exiters reported experiencing an *identity-role conflict*, whereby the exiter felt that the meaning of their identity (self-concept) no longer aligned with the meaning of the role tied to religion.

To further grasp this particular reconstruction process, social identity and group belongingness are linked in the sense that an individual's conception of who one is, to a great degree, is composed of self-descriptions attached to characteristics of the social group to which one belongs (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Thus, when exiters leave the religious network, their self-concepts are compromised, contributing to reduced well-being. More specifically, exiters described feeling guilt, shame, and fear in exiting, also highlighted in previous research (Adam, 2009; Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016). While many reported experiencing these negative feelings in the transitional stage of the exit, some also experience this distress long after the exit and, thus, is part of their identity reconstruction, specifically, an effort to improve self-concepts linked to well-being. So, while exiters gain a new sense of identity attached to improved self-concepts, the growth pains of reconstructing a new social identity can prove challenging (Adam, 2009).

The role losses and role diminishment motivate the exiter to reconstruct this factor in nonreligion to improve self-concepts and increase well-being. The research results align with the literature in showing that exiters adopt a nonreligious identity and gain identity acceptance and validation in this new identity (Fazzino, 2014; Pasquale, 2007; Smith, 2011; Streib et al., 2009). This study specifically shows how some exiters do not feel fully comfortable taking on specific nonreligious identities, such as atheist, or, in some cases, the nonreligious identity serves a purpose for a particular stage in this reconstruction factor. The former, to some degree, aligns with research highlighting the stigma attached to certain nonreligious identities (Smith, 2011). Further, some

participants explore new, alternative ideologies linked to gaining new roles (e.g., polyamorous partner) in nonreligion. This supports, in part, Fazzino's (2014) work regarding exiters' identity changes in social and cognitive activities, specifically in gaining new information and accessing self-reflection in the deconversion process.

I had anticipated that many exiters would not take on an exiter role (defector, apostate, whistle-blower), as conceived by Bromley (1998); however, interestingly, those who specifically left Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormon faith, adopted a defector role, whereby these participants negotiated the exit with religious organizational authorities. This research also illuminates how this process occurs; that is, exiters of these particular religious groups were at risk of formal excommunication from family and friends in the community should they refuse to comply with the implications of the defector role in exiting the religion.

Self-concepts in this study were examined more broadly. Findings demonstrate that exiters experience improved self-concepts, specifically instances of increased *personal mastery*, generally associated with improved self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-worth in their identity reconstruction. This was mainly evident in exiters taking on new informal and formal roles that were tied to a more authentic sense of identity – one that held new meaning between a new identity (self-concepts) and new roles (Burke & Reitzes, 1981). Further, Coates (2013) highlights how some exiters of specifically new religious movements work to rediscover an authentic self to avoid an identity crisis. Taken together, the research results support some of the previous literature and theories

explored in this reconstruction factor, namely, in showing that while exiters experience role and status losses in exiting religion, they also acquire new roles in nonreligion, whereby individuals attempt to meaningfully link self-concepts and new roles to increase well-being.

How do the findings bear on the *reconstruction of social support and relationships and well-being* in light of the literature and theories in this area? In support of previous literature, the study found that the loss of social relationships and social support is common amongst exiters of fundamentalist religions (Berger, 2015; Davidman & Greil, 2007; Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016; Jacobs, 1989; Zuckerman, 2012). In addition, results show that social relationships cultivated in the religion are challenging to maintain after leaving and, therefore, these relationships are either terminated or diminished. Having noted this, exiters' sense of loss is a complicated matter. Some participants do not consider the concrete relational losses as *categorical* losses because, to them, those relationships have lost much of their previous significance; whereas, for others the losses were impactful to their well-being.

Exiters experience and respond to losses of social support by seeking out and joining nonreligious groups and forming new, replacement social relationships and sources of social support through educational, professional, and voluntary activities. These pathways to reconstructing relationships and support is supported in previous literature (Jacobs, 1989; Pasquale, 2007; Smith, 2011). In this research study, *online informational support*, in particular, assisted exiters in the transitional stages of the exit

by providing a safer space to transition out of the religion. Online informational support generally consisted of engagement in discussion groups with other exiters, as well as consuming recommended secular and nonreligious material on YouTube or other online sources. In support of previous literature, there is limited structured social support that is specifically tailored to assist exiters of fundamentalist religions (Zuckerman, 2012). Because of this lack of structured support, many exiters in this study reported a period of *social isolation* and, social isolation specifically, has been documented to contribute negatively to health outcomes (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010).

Some participants who specifically lost support from religious family members and the religious network struggled to find institutional support in nonreligion and even experienced homelessness in the transitional stages of the exit. Berger's (2015) research also found this to be the case in examining leavers of the Ultra-Orthodox Jewish religion, in specifically having access to and attaining social services. Further, this social support loss is also connected to the loss and diminishment of social capital embedded in the network left behind (Portes, 1998). However, research findings reveal that some exiters can recover and/or transfer the capital gained (i.e., cultural, social, and economic) from their time in the religious network to domains in nonreligion (Verter, 2003), but this primarily occurred for those who formerly occupied a higher status in the religion.

This research demonstrates that exiters' personal relationships losses were more significant on well-being than the relationships tied to religious membership. That is, the relationships and support tied to personal relationships versus those tied to religious

membership had a greater impact on well-being. Also, maintaining relationships with religious members versus incurring a full loss acted as a stressor for many participants in that those relationships were frequently freighted with reminders that their choice to exit was wrong, contributing to reduced well-being for exiters.

Moreover, for exiters of Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormonism, the social risk of being formally excommunicated has an even greater impact on this reconstruction factor, supporting previous research examining exiters of new religious movements and Ultra-Orthodox Judaism (Berger, 2015; Jacobs, 1989). Because this research explored both forms of relational losses (i.e., personal relationships and relationships tied to religious membership), it highlights an important distinction and insight in this field of study – that is, fundamentalist religions tend to have a “market on relationships” as one participant noted, in that even if exiters report overall positive well-being in leaving the religion, the loss and diminishment in this reconstruction factor continues to be impactful for many exiters.

Given this study took on a life-story approach in capturing the exiting process across specific stages – beginning, during, and after the exit – and across three clusters (3-5; 6-8; 9+ years out of religion) – the results show that participants have a challenging time in the initial stages of the exiting process to forge new relationships and support, but over time this reconstruction contributes to greater life satisfaction. Further, exiting fundamentalist religions eventually enhances well-being in specific ways: new secular relationships are no longer dependent on religious conformity; new secular relationships

involve a greater equality in emotional exchanges; and, exiters enjoy a qualitatively enhanced sense of autonomy and personal freedom connected to their new communities and partnerships.

This study also uniquely explores *meaning reconstruction on well-being*, and benefited from using the meaning-making model, as conceived by Park and Folkman (1997), as a conceptual framework for the religious exiting process. Namely, it provided a useful framework for the exiting process in terms of individuals leaving a global meaning framework (i.e., in religion) and experiencing a situational crisis (i.e., exiting the religion), thus, undergoing meaning-making attempts to achieve meaning-made (i.e., positive resolution). However, this study shows specific ways exiters undergo meaning-making attempts. That is to say, the results reveal that exiters reconstruct meaning through three distinct sub-components: *meaning security, orientation, and structure*.

Previous literature aligns with some of the study's findings related to how exiters reconstruct *meaning orientation*, specifically, regarding participants' reportage of increased empathy, critical thinking, and nonjudgmental attitudes; interest in social justice issues; an enhanced personal morality; and occupying a nonreligious or existential culture (e.g., atheism, agnosticism, skepticism) (Lee, 2015; Saroglou, 2014). This study revealed *how* exiters' nonreligious orientation shaped reconstructed views regarding social justice issues, critical thinking, empathy, nonjudgmental attitudes, and a personalized morality. That is to say, the narrative accounts demonstrate that exiters' path to a new meaning orientation is determined, in part, via the rejection of a religious

meaning orientation (i.e., religious doctrine or ideology, social control and regulation), and the new social networks and organizations typically available to them in nonreligion (i.e., secular-based, scientific-oriented organizations) (Pasquale, 2007).

Regarding the reconstruction of *meaning security*, findings support literature in the field showing that nonreligious identities generally pursue a sense of autonomy (Saroglou, 2014). This research makes a unique contribution in highlighting how in leaving a meaning-making system that places a great emotional emphasis on an external religious deity (Emmons, 2015; Park, 2011), and where social control tends to be high, specifically in fundamentalist religions, exiters, then, reconstruct meaning security by embracing a greater independence, autonomy, personal freedom, and liberation.

Lastly, in the reconstruction of *meaning structure*, literature demonstrates that religion cultivates a unique meaning-making system focused on the divine, the sacred, a higher purpose (Ivtzan et al., 2011; Silberman, 2005). Therefore, in leaving this meaning structure, many exiters reported that while they discovered new nonreligious social organizations and networks to be a part of, features were missing such as the level of social cohesion, commitment, and a sense of community that had a higher emotional significance. Park (2011) develops the concept of *implicit religion* which, like traditional religion, has the basic structural properties of myth (patterns of thinking), ritual (acting), transcendence (feeling), and commitment, but differs from explicit (i.e., traditional) religion in what, and to what extent, is sacred and moral. This study highlights that while exiters do not demonstrate a desire to revert back to the specific meaning structure

established in the fundamentalist religion, some report missing certain features of the religious meaning structure. This was evidenced by statements such as now desiring a structure that focuses on a “spiritual journey” or “spiritual progression.”

According to the meaning-making model, achieving meaning-made or a satisfactory meaning outcome leads to positive well-being (Park, 2010). Most of the participants achieved a positive resolution or meaning-made in their decision to leave the religion, as also highlighted in previous research (i.e., overall positive outcome) (Fazzino, 2014; Zuckerman, 2012). However, this research study captured not only the gains in nonreligion, but the inevitable losses and ongoing strains and stressors involved in the exiting process. While most exiters reported a positive resolution, participants also spoke to the negative aspects as well, such as: the emotional distress attached to the maintenance, diminishment, and loss of relationships/support in religion; the social challenges of navigating their new world given the significant losses; the limited social guidance in how to reconstruct meaning after leaving a unique meaning-making system; and the emotional management of traumatic events (e.g., level of social control, abuse) that occurred in the religion long after exiting.

Global Framework: Identity, Meaning, and Social Relationships/Support to Well-Being

This research examined each reconstruction factor on well-being, as well as their pairwise reconstructions on the health outcome: identity and social support and relationships; social support and relationships and meaning; identity and meaning. In the qualitative exploration of the interrelationships across the three factors, the results

illuminated deeper insights into the exiting process from fundamentalist religions.

Following the literature on identity and roles, in the *reconstruction of identity and social support and relationships*, role loss occurs for exiters, primarily due to identity-role conflict between the self-concept and role (Burke & Reitzes, 1981). Formal role loss is linked to the status of network membership connected to formal relationships and support in that network (Goode, 1960).

Fundamentalist religions generally require memberships that entail great levels of commitment and time, and it is expected that members' social relationships will be concentrated within the religious group (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010). In this way, members achieve a high level of social integration in the community – that is, the strong presence of a community and a significant quantity of social relationships (House, Umberson, & Landis, 1988). Although some exiters in the study did not necessarily regard the relationships to be of high quality, the level of social integration and quantity of relationships in the religious network is still significant to well-being. This was evident in participants' narratives regarding these losses, as well as the challenges of recovering the advantageous structural properties of social networks in nonreligion.

Further, family relationships in particular form social interactions that relate to social control – processes that regulate and manage behavior leading to conformity; thus, *formal withdrawal* from these relationships can be challenging, and *informal withdrawal* incites guilt and social pressures from others (Goode, 1960), which has an impact on well-being for exiters. Some participants manage relationships from religion, mostly

familial, and describe how these relationships are diminished because of the ideological divide, which also suppresses, to some extent, a new sense of identity connected to those relationships. The quality of those relationships, therefore, is diminished due to the *relational demands and conflict* and the *social regulation or control* (House, Umberson, & Landis, 1988), underlying the ideological divide, linked to reduced well-being for exiters.

The gains are improved self-concepts linked to new relationships that are described as more authentic, and which allow for the exploration and enactment of alternative ideologies and relational arrangements, as well as emotional support that involves a more equitable exchange. In addition, exiters attain new formal roles that provide new sources of capital (i.e., cultural, social, and economic) (Callero, 1994), specifically in the workplace, volunteer sector, and community organizations. Secular organizations, in particular, provide greater identity acceptance and validation in the formation of a new identity, contributing to greater well-being.

Secular-based organizations provide exiters with new informational and emotional support that assists in the *reconstruction of social support and relationships and meaning*. Research has documented that these secular community organizations offer a space for nonreligious identities and a sense of social support and community (Pasquale, 2007; Smith, 2011). However, previous research does not specifically explore how these organizations might offer exiters of strict religions guidance in navigating the new world (Zuckerman, 2012), specifically in the reconstruction of identity, meaning,

and social support and relationships. As also highlighted in previous research, exiters feel they do not have a sufficient (institutional) script in telling a deconversion narrative to navigate the exiting process (Davidman & Greil, 2007). Further, although research on secular communities and its impact on well-being is limited (Acevedo, Ellison, & Xiaohe, 2014), this study demonstrates that exiters find solace in certain secular-based organizations, namely, through informational and emotional support, improved self-concepts, acquisition of new relationships and meaning orientation, all of which are associated with increased well-being.

More specifically, exiters find informational and emotional support online and offline across nonreligious and secular-oriented communities and, in this way, gain a new *meaning orientation* linked to a nonreligious or “existential culture” (Lee, 2015). This study further reveals that the reconstructed orientation (i.e., adopting a nonreligious perspective) contributes to enhanced critical thinking, empathy, engagement in social justice issues, and a personal morality associated with increased well-being. In the *reconstruction of identity and meaning*, engaging in these communities (online and offline), as well as discovering a social relatedness with other exiters of strict religions, individuals improve self-concepts connected to their reconstruction of meaning security and orientation. That is, in adopting a nonreligious meaning orientation, exiters establish a personal freedom and greater sense of autonomy and independence linked to improved self-concepts and well-being.

While previous research has documented that nonreligious identities tend to exhibit skepticism and open-mindedness (Saroglou, 2014; Streib et al., 2009), this study adds to the literature in explaining how skepticism is, in part, due to the religious structure discouraging members from being skeptical and asking questions; thus, in their reconstruction, this emergent trait (i.e., skepticism) led to questioning nonreligious forms of authority and social structures and, to some degree, creates an ambivalence to fully participate in nonreligious organizations. While the trait of open-mindedness also emerged in this study, narrative accounts show that exiters are not open-minded about *all* matters. Some feel hesitant in engaging with religious individuals, especially those from a strict religious background.

Taken together, in the reconstruction process, exiters discover a new sense of identity tied to new roles and relationships and supports in nonreligion. These relationships, roles, and supports, in turn, provide an avenue for exiters to make sense of their exiting experience through a specific meaning-making process (i.e., security, orientation, and structure) to achieve a positive resolution (i.e., meaning-made), which all contribute to improved self-concepts and increased well-being.

Further, this study uniquely captures the exiting process across stages, as well as the ongoing strains and losses, to demonstrate that exiters experience hardships and a variety of stressors across the three reconstruction factors that contribute to reduced well-being or, in some cases, a mixed outcome on well-being. Both the basic stress process model (Pearlin, 1981; Pearlin, 1989) and the meaning-making model (Park & Folkman,

1997) provide a conceptual foundation for the mapping of the religious exiting process as a stressful life event connected to roles, social institutions, social relationships and support, and meaning and its impact on well-being. This research offers a unique view on an understudied socially disadvantaged position in society, exiters of fundamentalist religions; and empirically captures the gains, ongoing strains and stressors, and losses experienced amongst this social group, across three integral factors of social life. By studying well-being as an outcome, this research illuminates how these three aspects of social life – identity, meaning, and social support and relationships – contribute to well-being and, specifically, life satisfaction.

Concluding remarks: Losses, ongoing strains and stressors, and gains

While this research presented the explored gains, losses, and ongoing strains and stressors across each reconstruction factor – identity, meaning, social relationships and support – on well-being, several aspects of the reconstruction process were more impactful on well-being than others. First, this research demonstrates that exiters' personal relationships (i.e., familial, spousal) losses was more significant on well-being than the relationships specifically tied to religious membership. Generally, social relationships and support reconstruction can be more significant to well-being than identity and meaning reconstruction (as single factors) because the fundamentalist religions tend to cultivate strong, concentrated social ties. Therefore, when exiters choose to leave, the losses and ongoing strains and stressors have a greater impact on well-being and impact this reconstruction process in greater ways (e.g., formal excommunication).

Regarding ongoing strains and stressors, traumatic events originating in the religion tend to have a negative, ongoing impact on well-being in the reconstruction process; namely, in the reconstruction of identity (self-concepts) and social relationships. Additionally, the maintenance of social relationships with religious members tends to act as an ongoing stressor and contributes to reduced well-being for exiters; specifically, when examined as a pairwise reconstruction (i.e., identity and social relationships and support reconstruction) whereby exiters feel the pressure to conceal their nonreligious identity in order to maintain those relationships.

Lastly, regarding gains in identity and social relationships/support reconstruction, exiters tend to experience improved self-concepts, specifically personal mastery, in nonreligion, as well as more authentic social relationships as part of nonreligious organizations and personal relationships (i.e., nonreligious partnerships), which contribute to greater well-being. Further, most of the exiters in this study report a positive resolution in leaving religion (i.e., making sense of their exiting experience) related to increased well-being. When examined as a pairwise, identity and meaning reconstruction, the research highlights that as exiters make sense of their experience, their self-concepts are significantly improved. Thus, meaning reconstruction, specifically meaning orientation and security, and improved self-concepts, contributes greatly to increased well-being.

Primary emergent findings

Two specific areas in the data that raised new issues, which went beyond the original research questions are related to gender and the stages/clusters of the exiting process. First, there are gendered exit trajectories out of religion that are important to explore in future research. Although I did not explicitly ask about gender-related issues, they were apparent in the pairwise combination *identity and social relationships and support reconstruction*, and thus might have relevance elsewhere. While research has investigated gender, secularity, and nonreligion (Baker & Whitehead, 2016; Edgell, Frost, & Stewart, 2016), scholars have not specifically focused on gendered differences and trajectories in the religious exiting process.

The second emergent finding in this study are how the stages (i.e., before, during, after the exit) and three clusters (i.e., years out of religion) impact the reconstruction process for exiters. For instance, many participants reported that the transitional stage of the exit was particularly challenging in the reconstruction of identity (i.e., self-concepts) and social relationships and support, as well as in their meaning-making attempts to achieve meaning-made. In this way, it might be beneficial for researchers to more deeply investigate how stages and specific clustering in the reconstruction process differentially impact well-being. These two primary emergent findings have theoretical implications for the stress process model, specifically, insofar that social positions (i.e., gender status) and stages/clusters in the life course likely differentially impact well-being. That is to say, the findings support the theoretical orientation for this research, but also extends it to

consider gender roles and status, as well as stages and specific clustering of life events and stressors, in the exiting process.

Limitations

The limitations of this research are focused on several areas. First, interviewees' narrative accounts are retrospective, and life story recollections are subjectively constructed, likely to be selective, and likely to change over time in response to the needs of individuals, and the functions of these narratives in relation to their life-stage. Further, subjective assessments are biased because responses are related not only to the occurrence of an event, but also to other factors that affected its reporting (Meyer, 2003).

In a qualitative study of religious exiters, Zuckerman (2012) notes that participants tend to construct their narratives in a way that highlights a more positive outcome to reduce the tension associated with a complex process. That is to say, participants might not focus on the losses accrued and the ongoing strains and stressors experienced in the exiting process. However, in the present study, part two of the interview process includes probes that address any losses, as well as direct questions regarding impact on well-being, across the three factors; which addresses this limitation compared to previous qualitative work in the area.

I use a small, purposive sample, which is necessary for an in-depth study of processes, but my findings are not necessarily generalizable and representative of the larger population. However, the research has potential for transferability, specifically the applicability of the exiting process to other social contexts, which will be further

discussed in the Conclusion section. Finally, with a small sample, variable control is challenging. It is impossible to tease out which factors independently impact well-being. This noted, smaller-N qualitative studies have the strength of revealing a strong interrelatedness of variables like social support and relationships, identity, and meaning. Also, because the study is using a purposive sample it allows for the analysis of rich data and details of the mechanisms involved that cannot easily be detected in large surveys with standardized questions. Therefore, one of the strengths of this research could be to generate hypotheses that would be testable with quantitative methods.

A methodological issue that emerged during the fieldwork is that the coding of social support – emotional, informational, and instrumental – did not make an explicit distinction between the giving and/or receiving of these supports. There were also methodological difficulties in distinguishing the three elements of self-concepts (self-esteem, self-efficacy, and personal mastery), which is partly due to the breadth of topics covered in this research. Lastly, a notable methodological consideration is that the three elements of meaning reconstruction – orientation, security, and structure – that emerged from the data – went beyond the existing literature; although the meaning-making model provided a conceptual framework that allowed for this specific meaning pathway for religious exiters to emerge.

Conclusion

Implications

This study is of importance because the experience of religious disaffiliation has significant health and mental health consequences; social and policy implications for social and emotional support deficits within the fundamentalist religious congregations left behind; and the limited social support available to individuals after the exit. This research supports previous literature in the area; but offers deeper empirical insights into *how* exiters of strict religions reconstruct significant dimensions of social life, and some of the social complexities involved in this process related to well-being.

Further, this research of religious exiters makes original and significant contributions to the modest body of work on religious disaffiliation and mental health through a rich, qualitative study that explores the exiting experience from religion through a combination of a life-story approach and an innovative qualitative methodology, *Iterative Thematic Inquiry*. In addition, it adds practical knowledge and insight to both religious and secular practitioners and organizations regarding the exiting experience from fundamentalist religions. Lastly, the study's findings connect and build upon the primary theoretical framework of this research – Pearlin's stress process model.

Regarding the latter, this research uses the basic stress model framework, along with pertinent theoretical additions discussed in the Theory chapter, in the conceptualization of the religious exiting process. The stress model assisted in providing theoretical insights into the exiting process from fundamentalist religions as a stressful

life event associated with a variety of strains and stressors, some of which are ongoing and others temporary. Stress researchers might consider *how* alternative socially disadvantaged positions and roles, such as the ‘exiter’, who is embedded in social systems that often intersect (e.g., family and religion), *cope* with various stressors and strains throughout the life course, as a result of the exit.

In the stress process, it is assumed that systems of social stratification generate an unequal distribution of resources and opportunities and that those who occupy a lower status have a higher likelihood of exposure to stressful life events and resultant strains (Pearlin, 1989). In light of the research findings, future stress model arguments should consider the resources and opportunities that are accessible and/or limited for the socially disadvantaged position of the ‘exiter’. Further, because this study found social relationships and support to be more impactful on well-being, compared to the other two single factors on well-being, stress researchers might find it beneficial to explore more deeply how interpersonal relationships, embedded in social institutions and networks, also contribute to how exiters access new resources and opportunities.

In addition, although this study examined meaning reconstruction and findings provided rich theoretical and empirical developments into how specifically exiters of fundamentalist religions reconstruct meaning, stress researchers can further explore *why* and *how* certain meaning-making attempts are utilized after exiting particular social systems, and how relationships and intersecting social positions (e.g., minority sexual

identities; lower socioeconomic status) impact how exiters reconstruct meaning and, also, shape meaning destinations.

Moreover, a significant theoretical and methodological contribution is the study's potency for *transferability* to other social contexts. That is to say, the exiting process and its implications for entering into new life paths that involve new and reconstructed social processes, as well as stepping into and immersion in new social systems. Thus, although this particular research focuses on an understudied subgroup of exiters, individuals from fundamentalist religious groups; the conceptualization of the exiting process has wider social and policy implications.

Working from a naturalistic epistemological approach, *transferability*, in place of external validity, informs how the exiting process can be applied to other social contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Because the exiting process is conceptualized as the reconstruction of three integral aspects of social life – identity, meaning, and social support and relationships – on health outcomes, transferability allows for the application of the exiting process used in this study to several significant social domains. Such areas potentially include life events and transitions of exiting from long-term marriages and partnerships related to health, or experiencing employment loss (Wheaton, 1990). Additionally, life transitions in sexual orientation and support is of relevance (Needham & Austin, 2010). Further, exiting from fundamentalist religions has been compared to immigrants' life experiences in assimilating in a new social world (Berger, 2015).

The policy implications of this research are also worthy of mention. Because the exiting process is related to health outcomes (i.e., well-being and specifically life satisfaction), results illuminated how the losses and ongoing strains and stressors across the three factors not only inform the gains in the reconstruction process; but reveal how significant the losses and strains and stressors are on well-being. This particular research reaffirms the social challenges that religious exiters experience, once they leave and enter into adulthood in the secular world, linked to well-being (Berger, 2015; Van Twist, 2015). Correspondingly, many participants in this study reported that although they achieved a positive resolution in leaving the religion, it does not diminish some of the negative effects the religion had on well-being throughout stages of the life course.

Van Twist's (2015) research on children growing up in new religious movements – religious environments which also possess features of fundamentalist religions – draws attention to the health policy implications, social advocacy, and state intervention for children who have limited choice in being raised in these enclosed communities. Extending these policy implications, this current study also calls for clinical training of health professionals to better assist individuals who leave strict religions. In addition, the development of social structures that offer and tailor support-related services (e.g., education, health, economic assistance) to people who leave fundamentalist religions and family systems are of importance.

Future Research

This qualitative study informs promising future research directions in the sociological fields of religion, nonreligion, social justice and inequality, and health. Firstly, the topic of nonreligious parenting in how exiters reconstruct their identity and sense of meaning linked to the new role of nonreligious parent, as well as how they manage religious social relationships in relation to this new role, might be of interest to scholars in the area. Further, several participants in this study reported seeking therapy and counseling support related to the reconstruction of identity and social support in exiting the religion. Future research might benefit from a greater understanding of how secular forms of therapy can better assist religious exiters in their reconstruction process related to well-being.

While some research has noted the associated feelings of guilt and fear in leaving fundamentalist religions and its impact on well-being (Fenelon & Danielson, 2016), this study draws attention to the deeper exploration of *how* these negative emotions interact with self-concepts, also related to the specific reconstruction of meaning *security* and *orientation* for religious exiters, which calls for much promising work to be pursued in this emergent area. Additionally, participants in this study reported how relocation and the creation of physical distance aided them in their reconstruction process; therefore, studies should also investigate the qualitative facet of this specific reconstruction strategy and its implications for exiting and entering into new roles, relationships, and meaning-making related to well-being. This research further demonstrates the need for studies to

more closely examine specific fundamentalist religions and how their formal excommunication process, as observed in the LDS Church and Jehovah's Witnesses, impact social relationships, social support, and self-concepts for exiters.

While this study focused on exiters of fundamentalist religions, it is important to speculate whether this study's findings translates to the exiting experience of non-fundamentalist exiters. The conceptualization of the religious exiting process – reconstruction of identity, meaning, and social relationships and support on well-being – may be transferred to a different unit of analysis – exiters of non-fundamentalist religious groups. However, I would argue, in light of the results in this study, that given the characteristics of fundamentalist religions (absolutism, conformity, fanaticism) are different from more liberal religious settings, the reconstruction process will vary and differentially impact well-being. That is, I would suspect that the degree of reconstruction of the three factors and the severity of strains and stressors would be reduced, compared to exiting fundamentalist religions. Future researchers in the sociology of religion and nonreligion might be interested in this type of comparative analysis.

Instances of traumatic events, such as experiencing or witnessing sexual abuse in the religious group, played a critical role in exiters' motivation to leave the religion, and had an ongoing impact on well-being in the reconstruction process. In using the stress process model as applied to the life course (Pearlin, Schieman, Fazio, & Meersman, 2005), scholars in the sociology of religion and health might find it advantageous to explore how trauma occurring in the religion impacts the life course of exiters.

Additionally, although research has explored familial relationships and coming out as atheist (Zimmerman, Smith, Simonson, & Myers, 2015), this study highlights the intricate relationship between family and religion in the reconstruction process for exiters; therefore, future work should empirically capture the critical and intimate role of family relations in the religious exiting process related to well-being.

Research that focuses on other social factors that may contribute to the reconstruction process, such as the intersectional experiences of exiters, might be of valuable contribution. For instance, some participants in the study noted how their exit coincided with their coming out as gay in the religious community and to their religious family network, which had a significant impact on well-being. In addition, a qualitative research direction worthy of exploration is the reconstruction of social relationships and support of other disadvantaged social positions on well-being. This would potentially provide diverse perspectives at the intersection of social inequality and health in the context of social relationships and support and identity.

Concluding Remarks

It is well-established that the rate of religious disaffiliation has increased, and that the nonreligious currently account for nearly one quarter of the U.S. adult population (Pew Research, 2015). It is also known that individuals who have a stable religious or secular identity generally report greater well-being; however, those who *consider* leaving religion but stay, tend to experience poorer mental health over time, compared to those who are more consistent in their religious and nonreligious identities (May, 2017). This

research makes a unique contribution by honing in on a subset of religious disaffiliates or exiters of Christian fundamentalist religions, and empirically captures that while it is challenging in the initial stages of the exiting process for participants to cultivate new relationships and social support, acquire new roles and positions, and make sense of their exit, exiters manage to reconstruct these integral aspects of social life in nonreligion, which ultimately contributes to their greater well-being.

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Appendix A

Telephone Screening Questions

1. Demographic background

Name

Occupation

Gender

Sexual Orientation

Race/Ethnicity

Age

2. Screening questions

1. What was your former religion?
2. Did you leave the religion?
3. How long were you a part of the religion?
4. How long has it been since you left the religion?
5. Are you currently a part of any religious organization or group?
6. Where did you hear about this research?
7. Do you consider yourself a member (unofficial or official) of the secular organization?

If yes:

- a. How often do you attend activities in this secular group (in a given year)?
- b. How long have you participated in the secular group?

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

A. Part One Interview: open-ended question and life satisfaction scale

In the first part of the interview, I would like to understand what your religious exiting process has been like.

Could you share what leaving your religion was like?

- Let's start with what things were like before the exit?
- What were things like during the exit?
- What about after exiting religion?

[Participant has finished explaining "after" the exit]

People who leave a religion vary in their experiences after they leave. For example, some people feel very satisfied with life, some feel moderately satisfied, and some feel not very satisfied. I'm interested in your experience. Would you take this short questionnaire before we move into the next part of our interview?

Single-item Life Satisfaction Scale

"Thinking about your own life and personal circumstances, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole?"

Completely Dissatisfied 0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Completely Satisfied 10
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B. Part Two Interview: understanding predictors' influence on life satisfaction

- What can you tell me about the things that have affected your life satisfaction since you exited your previous religion?

Probes (if needed)

1. Identity

- How would you describe your identity (the way you view yourself, who you are) when you were inside and now outside of religion?
- What new positions or roles, if any, have you taken since leaving religion? Some examples include a new role or position within an occupational setting, as a volunteer, member in a community organization, a wife/husband/partner, parent, student.
 - Were there any positions or roles you had to leave as part of leaving religion? Some examples include choir member, employment, or volunteer position at the religious organization.
 - If so, how has that impacted your life?

2. Social relationships and support

- Are you part of any organizations currently? Are you part of any religious organizations?
 - If so, can you describe your experience at the organization(s) regarding new relationships and support? Support can be emotional, informational, or tangible help (instrumental).
 - Are there differences or similarities to when you were part of the religious group?
 - If no, have you formed new relationships outside of being part of an organization?
 - Social support can be in the form of emotional, informational, or tangible help (instrumental). Do you receive social support outside of a group and from whom?
- Some people say when they left their religion they also left their family, friends, and people they knew from the religion. What was your experience?
 - If so, how has that impacted your life?
- Were you ostracized or rejected from the religious group and/or any other relationships during your exiting process?
 - If so, how has that impacted your life?

3. Meaning

- How have you made sense of your experience in leaving religion?

- Would you describe your experience in leaving religion as having achieved a positive or negative resolution?
 - Could you go into this?
 - What would you say you gained from leaving religion?
 - What would you say, if anything, you lost?
 - Is there anything you learned from leaving religion?
 - Are there any insights gained from leaving religion?
4. Is there anything else you would like to share?
5. *Snowball sampling question (asked of participants recruited from secular organizations)*
- Do you know anyone else who might be interested in talking to me about these issues?
 - *If yes:* Are they affiliated with a secular-based organization?
 - *If unaffiliated:* Would you provide the contact information for the person/s you recommend?

Appendix C

Iterative Thematic Inquiry (ITI) Example: Identity Reconstruction and Well-Being

ITI has four basic phases which include (1) *Assessing initial beliefs as themes*: examines the researcher's preconceptions; (2) *Building new conceptions through data collection*: develops content of existing themes; (3) *Listing tentative themes*: produces a provisional statement of themes; (4) *Evaluating themes through coding*: ensures that the themes are appropriate.

I use *identity reconstruction and well-being* as a guiding example to describe the step-by-step process of ITI in greater detail. There are several components to identity reconstruction: roles (formal and informal) and self-concepts (self-efficacy, personal mastery, and self-esteem). In Step #1, I developed an extensive outline of preconceptions and its origins across the single reconstruction factor and its pairwise combinations (meaning and social support and relationships reconstruction) related to well-being. Regarding identity reconstruction, I initially organized its analytical components along losses, gains, and alterations/improvements. The *losses* included formal roles or positions in religion (e.g., employee, volunteer, choir member, missionary, pastor). Its *preconception origins* consisted of literature review, theory in the area, mock interviews with exiters, personal experience, and informal conversations with exiters.

In this analytical category, based on my preconceptions, I conceived the *interrelationships* of this reconstruction factor as connected to social support and

relationships in the religious community taking the form of strong social ties embedded in the religious network. Identity is also associated with meaning and a sense of purpose established in the religion. That is, the religious identity is linked to a sense of existential meaning and purpose in everyday life. The losses in this interrelationship factor would contribute to reduced well-being.

The *gains* included *formal roles or positions* in nonreligion (e.g., employee, volunteer, activist, spouse, parent). The preconception origins included literature review, theory in the area, mock interviews with exiters, and personal experience. *Informal roles or positions* (e.g., friend or non-marriage partner) gained in nonreligion were also considered in the preconceptions phase of ITI. Its origins included literature review, theory in the area, mock interviews, and personal experience. In addition, *new statuses* associated with new positions and roles in nonreligion also had preconception origins in literature review, theory in the area, mock interviews, and personal experience.

The interrelationships to well-being included reconstructed roles, positions, and status in nonreligion as connected to new forms of support and relationships, contributing to increased well-being. Social support included emotional, informational, and instrumental supports. Social relationships took on the form of new partnerships, friendships, participation in nonreligious organizations, and forged relationships in new educational and occupational settings. In addition, meaning is also potentially gained from new roles and social relationships and support, contributing to increased well-being.

I expected that in the cases where identity-role conflict is too great and the roles and positions in religion no longer enhance well-being, role loss might contribute to increased well-being. Or, perhaps, that it would produce a mixed outcome on well-being: role loss contributes to reduced well-being, but also reduces tension of identity-role conflict, contributing to increased well-being. Also, meaning may not be fully reconstructed in this interrelationship factor (identity and meaning reconstruction). That is, the acquisition of new roles or positions in nonreligion do not lead to meaning-made. Similarly, new roles or positions may not lead to stronger quality relationships and forms of support tied to meaning-made, thereby reducing overall well-being.

At this step in the process, *alterations and improvements* was conceived as an analytical category associated with self-concepts, a component of identity reconstruction. However, this category changes in Step #3 of ITI, and is further explained at that phase below. Its origins resided in literature review, theory, mock interviews, and personal experience. Regarding its interrelationships to well-being, I expected that if self-concepts are improved in nonreligion, there is a higher likelihood of meaning-made connected to new roles and acquisition of relationships and forms of social support, linked to increased well-being. After completing the preconceptions outline, I developed a first draft of the Results section using this outline as a guide.

In Step #2 of ITI, I use the methodological and reflective memos which were written after each interview to build new conceptions through data collection. I answered the following questions in each methodological memo based on the preconceptions phase

in Step #1: (1) What should I possibly add; (2) What should I possibly change; (3) What should I possibly drop? Here is an example of a response (1) Consider how instances of trauma in the religion (i.e., sexual abuse) impacts identity reconstruction related to well-being, namely, self-concepts; (2) Consider how concealing a nonreligious identity from family members in the religion impacts the interrelationship reconstruction of social relationships and support and identity related to well-being; (3) None. Subsequently, I revised the Results section (from Step #1) based on the analysis of my responses to the three questions in each methodological memo.

In Step #3 of ITI, I produced a provisional statement of themes, whereby I derived a coding system from the revised Results section from Step #2, and then applied it to the final phase. This involved six sets of codes: one for each of the three basic influences on well-being and three for the two-way combinations of those three. Under each of those six larger groupings I listed specific themes from my tentative conclusions. Regarding identity reconstruction and well-being, codes included gains, losses, and disruptions. Across gains, losses, and disruptions, the following codes were included: roles (informal and formal); status (high, low, neutral); self-concepts (diminished and improved); well-being (increased, decreased, mixed). To note, I included the sub-codes associated with status (high, low, neutral) and self-concepts (diminished and improved) at this step based on the revised Results section and analysis of the memos and reflections after each interview (Step #2). As previously mentioned, in this step, *alterations/improvements*

from Step #1 changed to *disruptions*. The code *disruptions* again changed in Step #4, which is further explicated in the section below.

In the last step of ITI, Step #4, I ensured that the themes were appropriate by using the codes generated in Step #3 to mark the corresponding segments of the interviews. I used this coding system to interpret how well the codes account for the key elements in each interview, as well as whether there are other reoccurring elements that I did not have in my second-phase summaries. As mentioned, at this step, the *disruptions* code changed to *ongoing strains and stressors*, which was more appropriate, given the theoretical model used in this study and what emerged during data analysis. Lastly, I rewrote the final Results section based on the evaluation from this step.