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RUNNING HEAD: BORN AGAIN

“Born Again:” Narrating the Mental Health Journeys of Religious Exiters

By

Fio Selwyn Haire

An Alternative Plan Paper Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

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In

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“Born Again:” Narrating the Mental Health Journeys of Religious Exiters

Fio Selwyn Haire

This alternative plan paper has been examined and approved by the following members of the student’s committee.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Religious exit—also known as disaffiliation, deconversion, or apostasy—is a growing phenomenon in the United States with significant individual and social consequences. In this review, I consult existing literature to clarify the relationship between the process of religious exit and the mental health of exiters I organize this literature using Ebaugh’s (1988) role-exit model to frame exiting religion as a multi-stage process of role-identity disruption, exit, anomie, and reestablishment. I situate each stage as characterized by changes in mental health, in alignment with psychological theories of the impact of self-construction and self-concept on mental health symptoms. The literature suggests that, beginning with tension between a religious system and the individual, exiters undergo a psychologically and emotionally fraught process of role-identity transformation typified by a sequence of pre-exit strains, a turning point at which exit occurs, immediate psychological and social aftermath, and a subsequent lifetime process of reconstruction. Using evidence from exiters’ narratives, I argue that the conflict inherent in the process of religious exit catalyzes psychological distress, but that exit itself provides a mechanism for role-identity reset that relieves many of the negative mental health effects associated with religious strain.

Understanding Religious Exit

Religious exit, put simply, is a voluntary exit from a religious belief system or community. Religious exit is an increasingly salient macrosocial phenomenon in the United States. The number of religious “nones” increased to 22.8% of American adults in 2015 (Pew Research 2014), 78% of whom were previously religiously affiliated (Lipka 2016). The reasons for religious exit’s recent growth in the U.S. are multifaceted. Individual disbelief in tenets of the former faith is a commonly cited reason, but the rise of religious conservatism in the last four

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decades also left many individuals feeling abandoned by a system they can no longer morally support (Vargas 2012). Brooks (2015:16) views religious disaffiliation as a “culturally induced state of existential vulnerability” that is the expected swan song of the United States’ religious hegemony. Religious exit’s rise can be partially linked to the U.S. social movement towards religious fundamentalism that was birthed in conservative Christian denominations, particularly the Southern Baptist Convention—which remains the largest Protestant denomination in the United States—during the 1980s (Parsons 2016). Reactions to the rightward political changes in this denomination and others (including Catholicism: Hoover 2021) have resulted in major membership losses during the past decade (Parsons 2016).

Other religious groups have also suffered membership losses due to political changes, media attention, and/or leadership controversies. For example, the Second Vatican Council in 1962, which loosened some of the restrictions for the Roman Catholic religious (nuns, monks, and priests), led to confusion about the role of religious orders and a mass exodus of nuns (Ebaugh 1988). In recent years, evidence of sexual abuse perpetrated and covered up by Roman Catholic leaders has led to public outrage, resulting in significant losses in both membership and capital (Hungerman 2013). Within the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints, the phenomenon of the “Mormon moment” in the 2000s, which was sparked by the political rise of Mormon politicians like Mitt Romney, cast a limelight on a religion that had previously received little outside scrutiny (Brooks 2015:9-11). As the religion’s leadership directed energy into a public relations campaign, individual Mormons were able to compare their personal experiences with the faith to that which was being promoted, which for many led to “disenchantment” and wholesale exit from the Latter-Day Saints.

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Behind the statistics lies a panoply of experiences, interactions, and emotions, many of which are laden for individual exiters with memories of distress, loss of resources, and trauma. Leaving a religious community typically involves transition in social supports (Nooney and Woodrum 2002), faith development (Adam 2008; Streib 2021), and, importantly, identity (Coates 2013). Each of these factors can be precursors to psychological distress (Wheaton 1990), and qualitative research is rich with narrative data illustrating mental health symptoms in those who exit religion ranging from depression and anxiety to suicidal ideation (e.g., Lee and Gubi 2019; Nica 2018). My aim in this piece is to lay the groundwork needed to clarify the relationship between the process of religious exit and mental health symptoms. To this end, this paper has two primary goals: to unify existing literature into a coherent whole under a model of leaving religion as a process of role-identity exit with impacts on the narrative construction of the self, and to suggest guideposts for mental health service providers by outlining the impacts of this process on the mental health of exiters.

Starting with an interactionist approach to religious role-identities and relying on retrospective narratives of exiters, I argue that religious exit can be viewed as an exit from a role-identity arising due to religious strain (Exline 2002) and that differing degrees of religious strain engender varying degrees of psychological distress. Beginning from strain, exit is commonly experienced as a progression, with temporal stages in which the strain increases, reaches an insoluble breaking point, and catalyzes a lifelong process of identity reconstruction. As reflected in their accounts, exiters, particularly those for whom their former religion comprised a “global system of meaning-making” (Park 2011), experience each of these stages viscerally. Undergoing this process markedly impacts their subjective mental health.

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In the following sections, I primarily review studies on those who left high-cost, high-control, high-commitment (hereafter the new acronym HC3, also called fundamentalist) Christian sects. My focus on this subset of religious groups is primarily due to a preponderance of HC3/fundamentalist Christian exit narratives in the literature. Additionally, the intense topography of role-identity development within HC3 religious groups provides a particularly stark picture of the mental health impacts of role-identity disruption and reconstruction that exiters face.

Review Process

Articles for this review were sourced by searching for peer-reviewed articles in Sociological Abstracts and the Atla Religion Database using the following search terms: “mental health” OR (“psychol*” AND (“distress” OR “symptom*” OR “health”)) AND (“apostate” OR “apostasy” OR “ex-Christ*” OR “ex-evangelical” OR “ex-religio*” OR “disaffiliat*” or “deconver*” OR (“religio*” AND (“exit” OR “leav*”). This search returned over 100 articles, books, and dissertations, 39 of which both used narrative approaches to understand religious exit and referenced the mental health or psychological distress of the exiter; all 39 are cited in this review.

Current literature is heavily skewed towards exit from Christian traditions. Of the studies describing narratives of religious exit that were utilized for this synthesis, almost half focused on exiters of HC3 Christian groups (Babinski 1995; Coates 2010; Collins 2016; Fazzino 2014; Gillette 2015; Gull 2022; Ineichen 2019; Lee and Gubi 2019; Loughheed 2015; Nica 2018; Smull 2002). The data are also geographically biased; most of these narratives came from the United States, (however, this paper also incorporates studies from Israel, the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Canada, and Australia). I have aimed in the following synthesis

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to be comprehensive in my coverage of the narrative literature; it is possible that I have missed one or more pertinent studies. Thus, consider that these studies do not comprise the comprehensive body of literature on the topic, but they do constitute a representative subset of available studies.

Religious exit has multitudinous synonyms in the literature (e.g., “defection,” Davidman and Greil 2017; “disaffiliation,” Fenelon and Danielson 2016; “deconversion,” Streib et al. 2009; “apostasy,” Adam 2008). I choose “religious exit” in this review both to limit focus to the process of leave-taking (as opposed to the place the leaver came from or where the leaver is going) and to highlight the agency of exiters in the leaving process. This leave-taking process is notably distinct in both substance and narrative form from other related types of religious transition (including conversion or denominational shift), so its impacts on exiters are treated as separate from related phenomena (Fazzino 2014).

Self-Disclosure

After leaving my own Christian fundamentalist sect seven years ago, I have been personally impacted by identity loss and redevelopment inherent in the exit process, and these losses impacted my own mental health. I grew up homeschooled in a fundamentalist evangelical household. Although my religious upbringing granted me some social privileges inherent in a Christian supremacist state, its strict doctrines, behavioral expectations, and misinformation left me ill-prepared for integration into a diverse and democratic society. Thus, my entrance into “mainstream” culture was fraught with confusion, existential crises, and depression.

My deeply personal experiences with this topic have the potential to color my understanding of other exiters’ mental health journeys. However, my experience is also of scientific benefit - it provided me with a launchpad that guided my topics for initial literature

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exploration, thereby opening avenues towards thorough, objective analysis of all applicable publications. As I embarked in this project, disclosing this bias in my viewpoint has helped me acknowledge that my positionality can influence how I read others' narratives, and I have kept this possibility at the forefront of my consciousness to actively guard against confirmation biases and more carefully consider experiences that are dissimilar to mine. I also provide this disclosure for transparency's sake; knowing my background allows you, the reader, to evaluate how bias may have affected my conclusions.

The Before Times: Religion of Origin

Understanding religious exit necessitates understanding sociologically what is exited—religion. Religions are comprehensive, multifaceted, semi-voluntary structures composed of communities, beliefs and/or practices, and social resources. Homophilous (same-faith) communities can be vital sources of physical, financial, and emotional support, and faith communities play a key role in supporting members in distress (Merino 2014). Unlike other voluntary communities, most religious communities provide an ideology to explain existential mysteries (a “plausibility structure,” Berger 1967), prescribed standards of behavior (Exline, 2002:184), and language that reinforces ideological norms (e.g., Van Eck Duymaer van Twist 2015:16-17). Altogether, these religious resources invite participants into a “global system of meaning making” that provides a cohesive frame for individuals' relationships, activities, and identities (Emmons 2005; Park 2011). Religious adherents tend to organize their activities in other social contexts, such as the workplace and family, in relation to this frame. Adherence to this frame and likelihood of same-faith associations are especially pronounced for members of high-cost, high-control, high-commitment religions (Burke and Reitzes 1991; Iannaccone 1992; Sepulvado et al. 2015; Stark and Bainbridge 1980).

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In support of the global system of meaning-making, religious communities offer relational structures composed of normative roles and identities (Mead 1934; Stryker 1980; Turner 1978). An institutionalized example of the role and identity structures within religious communities can be seen in the distinction of laity and clergy. Clergy are tasked with a “leader” role that involves disseminating religious information to the laity, enforcing religious rules, and providing spiritual counseling. Often, religious organizations will also issue formal role structures for laity, such as a worship team, the diaconate, evangelists, and leadership positions for voluntary service activities (Nica 2018; Ransom et al. 2020). Religious roles can also be informal; for example, fundamentalist religions tend to prescribe specific roles for different genders within family structures (Gull 2021), and implicit behavioral norms for all members (Iannaccone 1994; Ransom et al. 2020; Smull 2002).

These structures almost always create salient personal identities. In many cases, these identities become an orienting framework for other identities, even those as salient as gender (Gillette 2015:91-99; Kolysh 2017:4) or family (Ammerman 1987; Saroglou 2013:371; akin to a “role-person merger,” Turner 1978). For example, women in some religious communities may adhere to standards of modest dress (Bartkowski and Read 2003; Gull 2022), refrain from participation in the workforce (Colaner and Giles 2008), or eschew certain medical procedures to embody religious identity expectations (Glassman 2018). Religious families may dissociate from family members who leave the religion or who espouse other identities contrary to what the religion allows (e.g., LGBTQ+ identities; Bjork-James 2018). Parents in strict religious communities might prioritize Christian education for their children, follow biblical directives for corporal punishment, and threaten to disown children who act in ways contrary to the faith (Bindewald 2015; Grasmick, Bursik, and Kimpel 1991; Kolysh 2017).

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For some adherents, cohesive frame of religion is more akin to an airtight container. Some groups (e.g., the Latter-Day Saints, Hasidic Jewish communities, ethnically homogeneous Roman Catholic groups) serve as “quasi-ethnic” communities (Sherkat 2001). In these groups, religious community is likely to include same-faith family members and a degree of “encapsulation” from dissimilar “outsiders” (Collins 2016). This is especially true for HC3 religious groups, which create the ideal conditions for community-wide role-person mergers (Iannaccone 1994; Turner 1978). HC3 groups can have rigorous demands reinforcing their all-encompassing structure, for instance, educating members within the group (Itzhaki, Yablon, and Itzhaky 2020), discouraging contact with outside groups (Davidman and Greil 2007), and encouraging endogamy (Sandomirsky and Wilson 1990:1216). If the community bubble these demands create is disrupted, the social support it provides can diminish, disappear, or reverse to hostility (Betts and Hinsz 2013; Itzhaki et al. 2020).

On an individual level, members of many religious groups, but particularly HC3 groups, are not encouraged to compartmentalize their religious roles but rather to maintain the role across contexts, including work, intimate relationships, and leisure (Ammerman 1987). Emphasis on doctrinal purity or personal piety can create a religious role in which an individual fully embraces doctrines and applies them globally (Saroglou 2013). Application is continuously learned and practiced through devotional practices like prayer, acts of service, and scripture reading, and via education in sermons, homilies, and religious media. In addition, such religious systems typically disseminate a core set of clearly defined and delimited values (e.g., “truth,” “Christ’s love,” or “work ethic”) which individuals are encouraged to prioritize as motivators for action.

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Religious structures and the roles they provide also have implications for self-concept, as the internalization of religious prescriptions and behaviors create a “religious self.” Belief structures, for adherents of a variety of religions, become embedded in autobiographical memory, and they narrate their beliefs as part of their self-concepts (Tungjitcharoen and Berntsen 2021). In more controlling groups, self-concepts can be completely contained within the boundaries prescribed by the religion. A particular example comes from many Christian traditions: in much of Christian theology, “to foreground any other facet of the self, or to anchor identity in anything but baptism [i.e., salvation by Christ], could be considered a form of idolatry” (Bidwell 2008:3). Other religious traditions without this level of community control also contain belief systems with far-reaching implications for the self; for instance, in Buddhism, the presence of “self signals a mistaken understanding of reality” (Bidwell 2008:3). In either case, adherents are encouraged to subsume any personal concepts of self to the religious self, structuring even their very ideas of who they are in alignment with religious doctrines.

Exit’s Catalysts

If the structure provided by religion can be so all-encompassing, why do some people choose to leave it behind? A short answer is unbearable strain. Most phenomena that lead to an individual choosing to exit a religious system result from tension between the organization and the individual, whether cognitive, procedural, emotional, spiritual, or communal. These tensions can be summarized as “religious strain” (Exline et al. 2000; Exline 2002), which can include crushing doubt, negative perceptions of God, negative religious coping (i.e., using religious ideas in deleterious ways), and vicious disputes with others in the community (Exline et al. 2000; Exline 2002; Pargament 1997).

Religious strain is frequently associated with cognitive or emotional turmoil (i.e.,

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cognitive dissonance: Festinger 1957). For example, doubt can spring from one's "recognition of suffering and evil in the world;" as one becomes aware of difficult circumstances around them, they find those circumstances difficult to reconcile with their loving or peaceful conception of God (Galek et al. 2007:16). Doubt and religious questioning can amplify each other and culminate in a "crisis of faith" (Fisher 2017:359-360). Facing such crises often leads to acute psychological distress. Religious strain, including doubt (about the truth or validity of doctrine, the righteousness of the religious organization, or other misgivings), is explicitly linked to negative psychological symptoms, including depression, suicidality (Exline et al. 2000), and posttraumatic symptoms in clinical samples (Harris et al. 2008, although Abernathy et al. find mixed results regarding trauma symptoms, 2018).

Doubt, though not always inherently negative (Krause and Wulff 2004), is an insidious religious stressor, because in many Christian traditions, doubt is stigmatized or forbidden. Doubt is associated with negative coping behaviors, such as withdrawal from social supports, withdrawal from previously used positive coping skills, and guilt and shame over the doubt itself (Krauss and Wolff 2004). Negative religious coping behaviors like these are linked to increased psychological distress (Ano and Vasconcelles 2005; Pargament 1997). Guilt and shame can further lead to negative beliefs about self in relation to God (Uecker et al. 2016) and feelings of alienation from God (Exline et al. 2000), which are linked to depression and anxiety. When doubt begins to impact religious behavior, it can lead to interpersonal strain. For example, doubt can result in decreased church attendance, which is associated with increased anxiety as doubters fall short of the expectations of their religious "reference group." (Mannheimer and Hill 2015:1831). Falling short of those norms can lead to negative interpersonal interactions, which are also associated with psychological distress (Pearce, Little, and Perez 2003).

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Religious strain does not have to be resolved by exiting the religion; other options, like heterodoxy, increasing tolerance toward cognitive dissonance, acceptance of one's own imperfection, and switching denominations within the same tradition can often resolve doubts as well (Exline 2002:187-188; Fisher 2017:361; May 2018:217). In fact, many people choose to stay in religious communities despite serious doubts to retain community relationships (Sherkat 2001:1473; Streib 2021; Vargas 2012:212-213). However, some strains are too deeply rooted to resolve amicably, especially when they involve conflicts between religious expectations and a person's core values (Vargas 2012). In such situations, exit becomes not only a viable option, but a preferable one to the agony of religious strain.

One recently uncovered psychological mechanism for depression sheds light on why religious exit occurs under conditions of religious strain: the mechanism of *implicative dilemma* (Montesano, Feixas, Caspar, and Winter 2017). Implicative dilemma is a conflict model of understanding the relationship between negative self-perceptions and positively-viewed aspects of identity; specifically, an implicative dilemma is the condition of having a strongly embedded negative perception of a heretofore positively viewed, and still desirable, aspect of the self. The negative perception is not just any bad feeling or misgiving; the negative perception in an implicative dilemma is specifically the idea that the once-positive identity is out of alignment with the person's ideal self. If the negative perception makes the once-positive identity completely undesirable, the conflict between perception and identity would be simple to resolve. However, the once-positive identity in an implicative dilemma was positive for a reason—it typically contains components that the person involved in the dilemma still wants.

Thus, the core of an implicative dilemma is an intractable *implication* – that ridding oneself of the negative perception involves changing or shedding a desired aspect of identity

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(Montesano et al. 2017). An example of implicative dilemma can be seen in some marriages that end in divorce. For divorcees, their previous identity as “married person” had a strong negative association, for instance, “unhappy,” or “controlled,” or “bored,” none of which the person sees as part of their truest self. Thus, an implication arises: the way to remove “unhappy” or “controlled” or “bored” is to change, or remove, the identity of “married person.”

People experiencing religious strain (Exline 2002) are experiencing a near-textbook implicative dilemma. Religious strain is a condition in which a conflict exists between a person’s religious self and a negative association, perhaps that an espoused doctrine is inaccurate, or that the religious community is hypocritical, or that the religious body is propagating societal harm. For each of these negative perceptions, an implication arises: the only way to remove the negative association is to modify the religious identity. If the religious identity cannot be changed, it must be removed.

Implicative dilemmas are extremely important in depressive symptomology. Implicative dilemma is both “highly prevalent” in clinically depressed samples and is a “marker of vulnerability for depression” (Montesano et al. 2017:1-2). Additionally, depressed patients experiencing implicative dilemma tend to have more severe depressive symptoms than depressed patients without this type of internal conflict (Montesano et al. 2017:2). When an implicative dilemma is resolved, often through changing or exiting the desired identity, symptoms tend to improve. For people experiencing religious strain, the condition of implicative dilemma embedded in that strain makes them particularly vulnerable to negative and severe mental health symptoms, and this condition creates situations in which leaving their religion is one of their few pathways to relief.

Exit's Ramifications

As suggested, leaving a religion is a difficult exit that is not often made lightly; less than half of people who consider leaving their religion actually follow through (Vargas 2012:216-217). For instance, individuals coming from religious groups with high control over physical, psychological, and community resources find that the choice to leave their religion of origin is fraught with distress. Ex-fundamentalists can face loss of family (Ransom et al. 2020), formal support structures (Berger 2015), finances (Babinski 1995), associational roles (Nica 2018), reputation (Collins 2016), direction (Ormsbee 2020), and meaning (Coates 2010).

In addition to the loss of resources tied to the religious system, religious exiters often face narrative hijacking and opprobrium from their former communities. Most religious systems contain a degree of exclusivity; to maintain exclusivity, religions much distinguish their adherents from dissimilar outsiders. “Outsider-ness” typically lies along a continuum, but the closer one is to the “outside,” the less trust with which one is viewed within (Decoo 2022). Unfortunately for exiters of religions, outsiders are typically portrayed negatively. For instance, in HC3 Muslim traditions, non-adherents, especially those who leave, are seen “lost people” and “corruptive influences” to those still inside (Duderija 2010).

In Christian traditions, a prominent recent example of narrative hijacking comes from clergy and Christian influencer responses to the Christian deconstruction movement, a social movement of exodus from evangelical traditions, churches, and ways of thinking inspired by post-modernist, deconstructionist philosophy (Eaghl 2017; Hackett 2009). For instance, a popular recent piece in the periodical *Christianity Today*, tellingly titled “The Devil’s in the Details of Deconstruction,” attempts to educate would-be exvangelicals on the dangers of the movement for the church institution, and in doing so casts exiters as misinformed, disingenuous,

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or mere participants in cultural fads (Warren 2021). Catholic evangelist Robert Barron sees ex-Catholics similarly, and he frames them as willfully misled victims of a culture in decline (Hoover 2021). These types of responses stereotype religious exiters, rendering the world outside more hostile, and thus more stressful, to their exited selves, creating conditions that can exacerbate mental health symptoms.

CHAPTER TWO: RELIGIOUS EXIT AND MENTAL HEALTH

Those who alleviate their religious strain through exit face multitudinous challenges, but what does research show about the mental health of those who leave? Below, I synthesize primarily qualitative studies to reveal a mental health trajectory for exiters that parallels the process via which religious exit occurs.

The Numbers

The few available quantitative studies that compare the mental health of exiters to affiliates suggest that the loss of a religion can prove detrimental. Exiters of religion tend to rate themselves lower on subjective well-being than both consistent affiliates and those who have never been affiliated with religion, primarily due to reduced church attendance; once having been integrated into a church community, disintegration appears to be more painful than never having tasted the benefits (Fenelon and Danielsen 2016:49). Exiters from HC3 groups may have worse self-reported health than those who disaffiliated from other traditions (Scheitle and Adamczyk 2010). However, studies comparing “leavers” to “stayers” complicate the picture that associates religious exit with poor mental health. Those who experience tension with their religious system and decide to stay tend to experience more depressive symptoms than those who ultimately leave, potentially indicating that leaving one’s religion may have a “relieving” effect that releases the pressure built through chronic religious strain (May 2018).

Unfortunately, clear causal relationships are difficult to surmise because quantitative studies exploring the relationship between religious exit and mental health are scarce. Ideally, when evaluating the mental health impacts of a specific process, researchers would collect data from subjects longitudinally and from people in differing degrees of exit from their religion. Outside of the United States Portraits of American Life Study (PALS) data from 2003-2006

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which May (2018), Merino (2014), and Vargas (2012) analyze, there are virtually no probabilistic samples of exiters and affiliates that track both their religious affiliation and mental health over time.

The Stories

Fortunately, existing qualitative data add flesh to this sparse backbone. Currently, most studies investigating how religious exit takes place and its effects on exiters utilize retrospective narrative accounts of individuals. Narrative is an important tool in self and identity construction. However, narrative is not a flawless source of data, and it is reasonable to expect that narratives may be embellished, inaccurate, or biased (Fazzino 2014:262; Nica 2018:149; Payne 2013). What is stated in the present might be cleaner than what “really” occurred (Fazzino 2014; Nica 2018; Payne 2013), and usually comes with vested interests in justifying the narrator’s decisions (Pannofino and Cardano 2017:3). The self that is presented in narrative, unlike actions an outside party might observe, is a creative “cognitive achievement,” a product of the narrator that pulls often disparate actions, experiences, and identities together (Bruner 2004:692).

Besides the implications of narrative for the accuracy of what is narrated, self-narratives are subject to co-construction based on others’ responses to them, which can prompt narrators to consciously or unconsciously alter their stories to either align the self with or distance the self from the feedback received. Co-construction of self can occur intentionally, such as in the context of support groups where individuals are encouraged to share stories and receive affirmation, validation, or alternate story frameworks from peers with similar identities (Irvine 2000; Mason-Schrock 1996; Rothbaum 1988). Less intentional power dynamics and interactional stigma can also inform individuals’ self-narratives. For instance, individuals who receive a stigmatizing diagnosis from a provider often experience a need to rewrite their self-

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narratives to incorporate, justify, or push back against their diagnostic label (Saavedra et al. 2022). Pertinent for social researchers, the process of obtaining retrospective narrative accounts can be prone to researcher influence; co-construction of personal narratives can occur in an interview setting, and experiences an interviewer shares with participants can color the content of the narratives shared (McSkimming 2017; Ormsbee 2020).

However, narrative-centered methods can provide insight into the mental health of religious exiters. Mental health cannot exist separately from the narratives that individuals use to explain it. Moral philosophical approaches to mental health diagnostics emphasize that both standardized clinical expertise and analysis of patient narratives are crucial to accurately understand patient experience; clear pictures of individuals' mental health symptoms are both identified and constructed through the relationship between a practitioner and a client (Bergqvist 2020). Retrospective accounts allow for researchers to see a patient-centered snapshot of both the current mental health states of study participants and the participants' subjective comparison of the present with the past. Although the snapshots provided cannot be used as ordinal measures of mental health symptoms, they can reveal patterns of symptom severity and highlight biographical moments for practitioners and quantitative researchers to analyze in more detail. Specific to religious exit, as Pannofino and Cardano (2017:5) explain, religious exit narratives are themselves "the last step in the exit process," permitting a degree of observation of the emotions surrounding the exit process in real time.

Beyond serving as a methodological tool, narrative, from the perspective of participants, is the platform on which self and identity is built. Not only is narrative "the self's medium of being" (Frank 1995:53) but also "the self is best understood as a narrative in progress" (Irvine 2000:9). Why is narrative as a mechanism of self-construction relevant for research on mental

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health? Recent psychological research indicates that a consistent self-concept is paramount in protecting the individual against psychological distress. Major transitions or losses (such as religious exit) create threats to psychological homeostasis, that is, one's consistent mental frameworks about the nature of reality (Sedikides 2021). When realities are upended, the homeostasis is lost, and distress ensues. Alleviating psychological distress requires rebuilding a consistent reality, which most commonly involves the reconstruction of self-concept, which in turn requires creating or amending self-narratives (Sedikides 2021). In fact, narrative is so fundamental to alleviating psychological distress that mental health practitioners recognize autobiography as a fundamental tool in mental health recovery, particularly in talk therapy (Smorti et al. 2008).

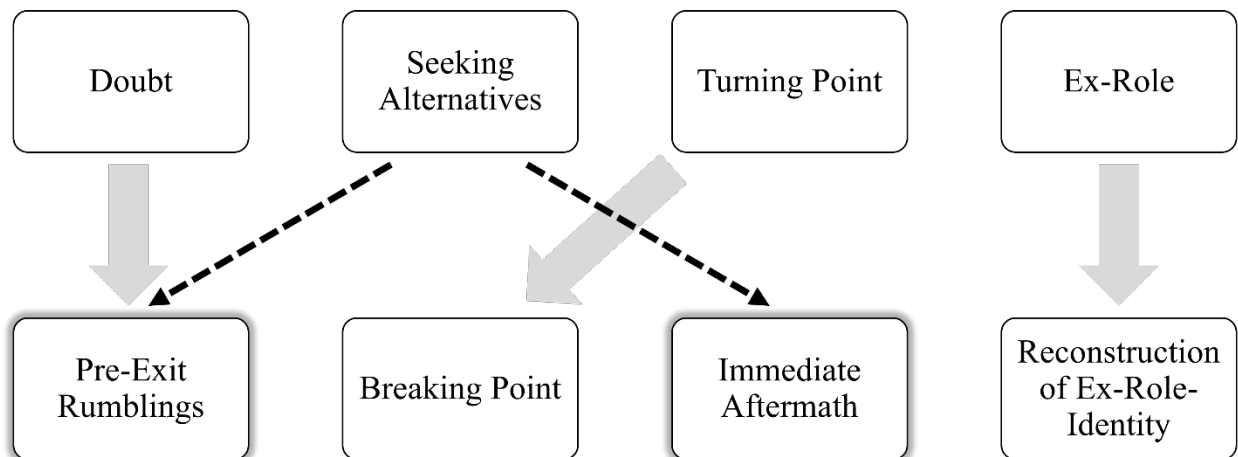
The Narrative Framework: A Process Model of Exit

Exiting a religion is rarely smooth, quick, or clean. Religious exiters tend to experience their exits as lengthy and tumultuous processes laden with loss, grief, and reinvention. Helen R. F. Ebaugh (1988) described this process as a multi-stage role exit comprised of “doubt,” “seeking alternatives,” a “turning point,” and adoption of an “ex-role.” Many studies on religious exit, including nearly half of the studies reviewed in this paper, have leveraged Ebaugh's model, or variations thereof, to explain how exit is experienced at the individual level. Her model has also been used to describe processes of religious role conflict (Enstedt, Larsson, and Mantsinen 2020), ex-religious experiences online (Starr, Waldo, and Kauffman 2019), and identity development relating to mental health (Amering and Schmolke 2009; Thoits 2013). However, no existing studies have used Ebaugh's model to frame mental health symptomology along the religious exit process.

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The narratives in this synthesis tend to follow Ebaugh’s four-stage format, with some notable exceptions. The primary exception is that exiters of HC3 religions are less likely to describe a “seeking alternatives” phase prior to the moment of exit. Instead, their isolation from external communities moves that stage of the process to post-exit, where they experience confusion, normlessness, and lack of anchoring as they grapple with the void that leaving their previous role entailed. Thus, the following analysis synthesizes the narratives into a modified version of the role-exit process. This modified process consists of “pre-exit rumblings” (which include but are not limited to doubt), a “breaking point,” “immediate aftermath,” and “role-identity reconstruction.” The reported mental health of exiters tends to track with these stages, worsening through the “breaking point,” stabilizing in “immediate aftermath,” and improving as exiters take on roles and identities that align with their new sense of self. The impacts are particularly pronounced for exiters of HC3 groups, and this impact is reflected in the narratives below.

Figure 1. Contextual Modification of Ebaugh’s (1988) Role Exit Process. The “seeking alternatives” stage is split in this modification between “pre-exit rumblings” and “immediate aftermath.” The “turning point” and “ex-role” stages have been renamed “breaking point” and “reconstruction of ex-role-identity,” respectively, to align with religious exiters’ narratives.



Pre-Exit Rumblings

Every exit narrative reviewed was characterized by a pre-exit period in which religious strain (Exline 2002) emerged and became increasingly overwhelming. Exiters have called this period a “betwixt and between” (Davidman and Greil 2007:209), a time of “terror” (Babinski 1995:137), characterized by “spiritually traumatic emotional distress” (Fazzino 2014:256) and “emotional suffering” (Streib et al. 2009:143-144).

Sometimes, the origin of the strain is straightforward, like a conflict in perspectives of a personal experience (Babinski 1995:186). Differences in perception can engender doubt, which can lead to retribution by members of the congregation who are striving to keep one’s deviant perceptions in line with accepted doctrine (Fazzino 2014:256-257; Loughheed 2015:104; Smull 2002:200). For example, one of Fazzino’s (2014:257) interviewees illustrated that individuals experiencing doubt were discussed in gossip-laden “prayer circles,” a means of community enforcement of religious norms.

Self-retribution is common as one tries and fails repeatedly to live up to the unreachable standards set forth by one’s religious tradition. An interviewee of Nica’s (2018) described a vicious cycle of impossible performance expectations in her former Christian sect:

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 (p. 106).

For HC3 religious groups, strain can also result from a breakdown in the “encapsulation” that shelters adherents from outside influences; all of Collins’ (2016:5, 7) interviewees pointed to

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college education and corresponding exposure to different worldviews as the first step in their exit processes. In some cases, the period of terror and doubt originates in deeply traumatic experiences (Nica 2018:67), community betrayal (Streib et al. 2009:200), and unkept religious promises (Nica 2018:106; Streib et al. 2009:215). Other times, the period's origins are initially cognitive, such as learning about evidence against the infallibility of one's religion, and acquire an emotional character as doubt ensues (Babinski 1995:138). Regardless of the origin of strain, the period of pre-exit rumblings tends to be prolonged (Lee and Gubi 2019:173-174) and emotionally difficult, awash with mental health symptoms ranging from anxiety and depression to panic.

As pre-exiters wrestle with religious strain, they often begin to experience disillusionment with their once-cherished religious role-identity (Nica 2018:61). Reflecting on role-identity disillusionment generated from observed hypocrisy in fellow religious members, one interviewee reasoned, "if this is what it means to be Southern Baptist or Christian, then, I don't think this is something I want to be" (Streib et al. 2009:120). Some pre-exiters experienced religious role conflict in relation to other identity-based roles, like gender, around which religion often prescribes impermeable boundaries (Gull 2022; Nica 2018:128-129).

Breaking Point

Faced with overwhelming cognitive and emotional distress, many exiters come to a "breaking point" at which their doubts, accumulated knowledge, or negative experiences make life within their religious tradition unbearable (Fazzino 2014:256). Many can point to a specific moment when their self-concept and the religious role they occupied became incompatible. They view that moment as a "breakthrough" (Babinski 1995:187), "the straw that broke the camel's back" (Babinski 1995:122), a time when "my spirit crashed" (Babinski 1995:110), or the "final

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crack” (Lee and Gubi 2019:175). One interviewee provided a striking visual metaphor – “it’s like you’re riding down a slope and you see ahead of you that the path splits into two and you have time, but you have to choose” (Davidman and Greil 2007:210). This metaphor highlights the agency of the exiter in choosing the correct path, but many exiters view the “decision” as less of a choice than an inevitability or an unstoppable “realization” that they are compelled to follow (Lee and Gubi 2019:174; Ormsbee 2020:305).

Sometimes concurrent events loosened the ties of religion and accelerated the “breaking point.” These events could be familial or organizational (Collins 2016:6; Loughed 2015:105). For one of Babinski’s (1995:110) interviewees, that event was formal censure by the religious organization. Experiencing this censure caused the interviewee to lose motivation to stay committed to the organization; the interviewee knew they would no longer receive support from their congregation. One of Streib et al.’s (2009:121) participants pointed to their parents’ divorce as cutting the last of their binding ties; without a stable family structure to reinforce religious views, they opened themselves to exploring alternatives. An interviewee of Brent’s (1994) experienced a traumatic sexual assault and subsequent pregnancy, of which she said, “I could not believe in a God who would make me have a child under these circumstances.” Her belief in a loving God like the one her religion described to her was shattered by her unbearable, dissonant circumstances.

A notable riff on the “breaking point” stage type is found in Ormsbee’s study of ex-Mormons (2020). Ormsbee found that for his interviewees, the breaking point was usually not a singular occurrence, but a series of “punctuating moments” (2020:303). Between these moments were periods of doubt, apathy, or disillusionment, similar to a depressive episode, creating a cycle (as opposed to a linear process) of pre-exit rumblings and breaking points prior to exit. One

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of Ormsbee's interviewees named several points at which his ties to the Mormon church loosened. In one moment, in which he gained access to more information about the founding of his religion, he notes that "it was almost as if I felt a physical tie—a string or something binding me to the church—snap," like the breaking points others cited in this review experienced. However, Ormsbee notes that the interviewee remained in Mormonism for years after this moment, critically introspecting and slowly adjusting his relationship to the Latter-Day Saints until each of the binding ties had dissolved (2020:303-304).

As the strain reaches that "breaking point," some exiters face agonizing corollary choices. Ineichen (2019) describes how one interviewee "had to choose between leaving his religion and retaining the love of his father" (p. 670). Two of Nica's (2018) interviewees poignantly captured the suicidal ideation that gave urgency to their moments of decision— "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" (p. 62-63); or, as one woman heartbreakingly said, "It was getting to the point where I either had to find something new or kill myself because it was just too much" (p. 97). For many who leave, their choices in resolving religious strain were limited to exiting religion or exiting life.

Being Born Again: Immediate Aftermath

For those who choose to leave, even in self-preservation, the immediate costs can be devastating. Like newborns, those who leave religion are thrust out of a familiar encapsulation into a wide and confusing world. Having exited not only a community but an identity and system of meaning, they often find themselves afloat without "organizational guidance" or "cultural scripts" (Davidman and Greil 2007:202; Goffman 1959). Some equated their exits with "jumping into the abyss" (Pannofino and Cardano 2017:8). They face existential anxiety about the void of

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meaning left by their exit (Smull 2002:7). An interviewee of Gillette (2015:77) reported terrifying anxiety and nightmares about mortality: “I developed a fear of death, I would lay in bed and right as I was falling asleep, I could feel it.... It felt like death and it was terrifying. And now what is my life? I have to make it worth something and oh my God, I'm gonna die.”

Difficult mental health symptoms and emotions often ensue; exiters reported grief, loss, regret, sadness, depression, anger, shame, dissociation, anxiety, and panic attacks (Gillette 2015:73; Lee and Gubi 2019:176-177; Nica 2018:64; Streib et al. 2009:140, 154). Many experience a diminished self-concept (Nica 2018:64). This manifests for some as a feeling of being “out of place” and “developmentally delayed” when they find that their plausibility structure was at odds with “secular” society (Coates 2010:306; Gillette 2015:84). In the brave, new, uncertain world, they are confronted with existential or moral dilemmas that they may not have been conscious of previously (Fazzino 2014:258). The questions of morality Ormsbee’s (2020:306) participants faced included reframing non-Mormons from “sinners” to fellow human beings and releasing internalized notions of moral superiority that led them to judge and condemn others’ actions.

Although religious communities have widely known scripts for how to enter, they rarely provide guidance on how to exit. Exiters are often left to reconstruct scripts, roles, and norms by “groping around in the darkness” (Nica 2018:90) within a world that now feels “pointless and meaningless” (Lee and Gubi 2019:178). Much of the meaninglessness and corresponding depression relates to community loss. Fazzino (2014) notes that many exiters are fully aware of the “stigmatization, alienation, and exclusion” that await them (p. 258), and that “disaffiliation often requires the severing of primary and secondary associations” (p. 259). Relationships are one of the domains most severely impacted by leaving religion. Besides losing the friendships

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and contacts built from religious attendance (Coates 2010:305; Nica 2018:136; Streib et al. 2009:129), exiters often find themselves losing connection with family (Coates 2010:304; Fazzino 2014:259; Gillette 2015:75; Nica 2018:73-75; Streib et al. 2009:129). Loss of connection can be emotional, as changes in life roles leave family unsure how to respond to their ex-religious relative (Gillette 2015:97). Often, the loss of family is physical, as exiters lose social capital that impacts their housing (Coates 2010:304; Fazzino 2014:259), finances (Nica 2018:75), and social standing (Nica 2018:60-62). Exiters are left feeling isolated (Nica 2018:74), rejected (Gillette 2015:99), and tainted (Nica 2018:74).

For HC3 exiters in particular, community disruptions are pronounced. Nica (2018) notes that “fundamentalist religions tend to have a ‘market on relationships’” and that some exiters will not have had any socially supportive contacts outside their faith of origin prior to exit (p. 138). Drastic rifts, like disownment (Gillette 2015:100) can occur, and the loss of support can lead to depression and suicidality (Nica 2018:75). This can be particularly difficult for women exiters, who may have been more insulated in the community and prevented from seeking tangible support (like employment) outside of the family (Gull 2022). Some exiters even returned to their religion and left again multiple times due to difficulties experienced in coping with relational loss (Nica 2018:75).

Learning to Walk: Role-Identity Reconstruction

Having experienced such profound disruptions, exiters face the question “who is the real me?” and engage in self-meaning-making activities to recreate stability (Gillette 2015:87). Leaving religion also leaves behind identity role models, reference groups, and community; in attempt to fill those voids, many exiters join secular voluntary associations, like martial arts clubs (Fazzino 2014:259) or polyamorous communities (Nica 2018:68), where they can exercise

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newfound autonomy to invest in self-understanding. Within new communities exist new roles, so some exiters will consult sources, like popular media, to learn the scripts for those roles (e.g., using the search terms “what does it mean to be an atheist?”) (Berger 2015:680; Fazzino 2014:259). Although some exiters find comfort and meaning in new labels and their associated roles, some are loath to adopt a non-religious label as part of their identity construction; labels in and of themselves are too closely associated with the exited community and can feel re-traumatizing to embrace (Nica 2018:66, 134).

All religious exiters must cope with the severe disruption in their expected life courses by rewriting their self-narratives (Davidman and Greil 2007:204). Part of this rewriting involves reframing the past to justify the present. Despite having exited their religious communities, exiters find that they are still heavily impacted by the doctrines and cultural patterns they learned from their years within (Babinski 1995:175; Collins 2016:11). This impact is often reframed as a hero’s journey—an ongoing overcoming of a negative experience—casting the exiter in the role of victor, hero, or survivor (Davidman and Greil 2007:204; Fazzino 2014:260; Streib et al. 2009:149). Integrating the self into the hero’s journey narrative can promote personal resilience. Within their new narratives, some reframe the past by channeling hatred toward the exited group (Smull 2002:215; Streib et al. 2009:162) while others seek to incorporate positively viewed aspects of the past, like their religion’s emphasis on social activism, into the present (Collins 2016:12; Ormsbee 2020:305).

In addition to reframing the past, exiters are challenged with both reimagining the present and creating alternative futures. They find they have the freedom to choose their own paths, but that the freedom can be frightening to claim (Gillette 2015:88) or laden with grief over the loss of a meaning system (Nica 2018:107). Newfound freedom of choice can be particularly

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emotionally challenging for women who have “internalized oppression” from their religious communities, especially regarding bodily autonomy in sex and reproduction (Gillette 2015:91-93; Gull 2022).

Was It Worth It? Relief and Ongoing Challenges

After the crippling strain, normlessness, and loss of community, what do religious exiters find on the other side? In a large majority of cases, exiters are rewarded with “relief, freedom, and self-acceptance” (Gillette 2015:78). Exiters speak of their leave-taking as an important step on the road to individuation (Streib et al. 2009:130). “Relief” is a term that exiters use in all the studies consulted for this review. That relief comes in the form of improved mental health (Gillette 2015:80; Nica 2018:90; Streib et al. 2009:140), self-actualization (Babinski 1995:188; Fazzino 2014:261; Nica 2018:135), and feelings of authenticity (Fazzino 2014:260-261; Nica 2018:147; Smull 2002:247). One of Nica’s (2018) interviewees vividly captured this feeling of relief as a rebirth:

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 [sic] 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 (p. 89-90).

However, the ongoing impacts of religious exit are not always so clear-cut. Like the necessary trauma of exiting the womb, exit leaves many individuals with freedom marked by emotional scars. Gillette (2015) notes that for her interviewees, “leaving [was] only slightly easier than staying” (p. 74) and that most had faced the unfortunate “necessity of leaving in order to continue existing” (p. 78). Some exiters leave with regrets over their lost relationships (Nica 2018:140; Streib et al. 2009:129), and a large number blame themselves for behaviors they

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engaged in while within religion that are no longer compatible with their identities (Coates 2010:307; Streib et al. 2009:157). Many whose negative or traumatic experiences within religion catalyzed their exit face ongoing emotional distress over those experiences (Nica 2018:67, 78, 154). Fazzino (2014:261) concludes that “while deconversion eventually resulted in being a net positive for participants, the initial transition required a much higher cost than an expected return.” One of Smull’s (2002) participants gives this analysis a personal note:

I think about it every once in a while, when I get depressed or things are not going right in my life, and I wonder if I made the right decision. But, it feels too good now compared to what I used to feel (p. 247).

CHAPTER THREE: DISCUSSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

By exiters' own reports, the exit process is a treacherous birth from a dark womb into an open, unmoored sky. This process of being "born again," like the birth of a new human being, is the birth of new self, a self that is narrated as truer to one's own being than the religious self. The dissolution and reconstruction of the self can be prolonged, and it tends to occur in four stages (pre-exit rumblings, breaking point, immediate aftermath, and role-identity reconstruction) that mark periods in the loss and re-establishment of role-identity resources (Ebaugh 1988).

This review is not the only writing to modify Ebaugh's model of role exit to pertain to a specific context (Amering and Schmolke 2009; Enstedt et al. 2020; Starr et al. 2019; Thoits 2013). However, this review is the first to show that, for religious exit, exiters' narratives show that each stage includes inherent mental health hazards. The types and severity of mental health symptoms vary across process stages, and, specific to the modification of this model, the fact that religious exiters often seek alternative roles *after* exit finds exiters in contexts where they are initially psychologically vulnerable, with few available resources upon which to reconstruct their self-concepts, the construction of which is important to alleviating psychological distress.

The few available quantitative studies corroborate the conclusion from narrative studies that religious exit can be a source of emotional agony, including anxiety (Gillette 2015), depression (Lee and Gubi 2019), post-traumatic stress (Streib et al. 2009), and suicidality (Nica 2018), but making it to the other side of exit can be a source of great relief (e.g., Babinski 1995; Fazzino 2014; Smull 2002). However, this brief synthesis of the literature shows that current studies' answer to the question "what are the mental health impacts of religious exit?" lacks both the specificity and objectivity needed to move these results from description to praxis.

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A major shortcoming of the above synthesis is the treatment of religious exit as a near-monolith, focused primarily on HC3 religious groups. Unfortunately, most literature focuses on a small number of religions, predominantly Abrahamic (i.e., Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and historical derivatives) and fundamentalist groups. It is probable that exiters of different religious paradigms (for example, East Asian-origin religions such as Hinduism) have exit processes that differ from their ex-Abrahamic counterparts, with corresponding differences in mental health effects. Additionally, only one of the studies consulted for this review (Kolysh 2017) considered the differential effects of race or sexuality on exiters' experiences. Only four (Gillette 2015; Gull 2022; Nica 2018; Smull 2002) considered gender as a significant variable. Their findings on women's experiences suggest that personal identity categories linked to structural discrimination, especially when that discrimination is perpetuated by religious institutions, have an impact on the types of experiences that exiters have both within their religion of origin and during role-identity reconstruction.

This lack of diversity in the studies may obscure that religious exit is experienced differently by former adherents of different religions, such that "exit" may not be a relevant unit of analysis for all who formerly identified with a religion. For instance, disbelief in religious tenets does not always result in disconnect from religious culture, particularly when that religious culture exists at the intersections of nationality, ethnicity, and multigenerational family (Manalang 2021; Vliek 2019). When these intersections are tightly woven, the types of exits narrated in this study are not always possible. For instance, Vliek (2019) expounds on narratives of people from Islamic backgrounds living in Europe. For Vliek's participants, leaving Islam was not an exit with respect to religion, it was a transformation experienced within multiple overlapping aspects of the self. The participants' self-narratives often indicated that although

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they had technically become “ex-Muslims,” religion was, for some, an irrelevant axis of identity transformation, and, for others, that the exit was not as clear cut as once being Muslim and now being secular. The relationship to the community of origin was inextricably bound to family, nationality, and ethnicity, which could not be “exited” even when the tenets of the faith were no longer espoused. More research is required to understand how navigating the rejection of faith while preserving these intersections impacts mental health.

One of the largest detriments to current literature is the lack of consistent longitudinal data tracking the religious affiliation and mental health of individuals across the life course. Data availability is a persistent issue in the sociology of religion. The Pew Research Center (2014) has released a few major reports from their data on religious affiliation, but these data are not linked to individuals. Even data like church membership is difficult to track, and issues with tracking were the source of a major controversy within the discipline over whether American Christianity has been on the rise or decline since the nation’s founding (Finke and Stark 2005; Olson 1999). Quantitative analyses have been hindered by this lack of data consistency.

However, quantitative analyses are paramount for applying sociological findings to mental health practice. Mental health psychology, like most scientific disciplines, relies on numerical evidence to understand the outcomes of both observable phenomena and applied interventions. Assessment tools like the PHQ-9 and GAD-7 are subjective, in the sense that clients internally assess their own symptom severity before reporting it on the assessment, but these tools are also quantitative, comparative, and evaluated by professionals using standardized criteria. Diagnosis of conditions like Major Depressive Disorder and Generalized Anxiety Disorder rely on those assessments’ metrics to determine symptom severity. The sociological study of religious exit and mental health is uniquely positioned to describe trends of mental

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health among exiters that can guide best treatment practices for formerly religious individuals suffering with diagnosable mental health disorders. For the study of religious exit and mental health in sociology to obtain utility and legitimacy among clinical mental health scholars, researchers must conduct studies in collaboration with clinical scholars that track symptoms using established diagnostic metrics. This will allow for comparison of exiters' mental health to diagnostic criteria for major disorders and comparison of symptoms among religious exiters and other related populations, permitting clinical professionals to recognize religious exit as a phenomenon with *measurable* impacts on the mental health of their clients.

Aside from longitudinal data, research towards best practices could be improved through qualitative studies that focus specifically on the mental health of exiters, potentially incorporating clinical assessment tools like those described above. Although all the narrative studies investigated touched on mental health, their main foci were primarily interactionist, including narrative construction (e.g., McSkimming 2017), identity development (e.g., Nica 2018), or creation of personal myth (e.g., Smull 2002). Study constructions geared more specifically to unearthing the particularities of exiters' mental health could provide more specificity to the outcomes exiters face and provide actionable recommendations for clinical interventions. Specifically, studies of religious exiters within clinical mental health settings could more accurately identify biographical moments to which exiters attribute their symptoms.

Some scholars in other disciplines, primarily social work, have begun to conduct just such studies. For example, a recent study on the mental health of cult survivors used narrative methods to identify biographical moments in which participants experienced trauma that deterred communicating needs, sexual development, formation of healthy family bonds, and personality development (Kern and Jungbauer 2022). Similarly, a social work study on exiters of the Latter-

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Day Saints revealed identity disruption and religious strain in exiters of that faith, with ramifications for social work practice, particularly in recognizing the lasting impacts of religious culture in the psyches of exiters (Jindra and Lee 2023). In keeping with the skew observed in literature on religious exit, both social work studies focused on exiters of HC3 religious groups.

Although sociology is not a clinical discipline, it can make important contributions to clinical practice through our discipline's emphasis on reflexive social processes applied on a larger scale. A focus on mental health in a sociological frame could identify society-wide phenomena that consistently lead to religious exit, and it can help clarify which phenomena tend to worsen or improve the mental health of exiters. Additionally, sociology provides important insights on the nature, trajectory, and social embeddedness of religion more generally, and can help make connections (or delineate differences) between the experiences of former HC3 group adherents and those from other religious contexts. These insights could broaden the applicability of other disciplines' clinical recommendations to larger populations.

Lastly, as the number of religious "nones" has continued to rise, the community resources available to religious exiters has begun to rise as well. In the last decade, ex-religious support groups have emerged, and online movements like the religious deconstruction movement have connected ex-religious people with one another as they exit (Clarke 2021). With more social support, religious exiters may land on softer padding as they are provided with opportunities for identity co-construction in groups of similar others (for non-religious exit examples, see Irvine 2000, Mason-Schrock 1996). The proliferation of online movements may also provide potential exiters with the opportunity to explore alternatives to their religion prior to exit, in alignment with Ebaugh's (1988) original role exit model.

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Sociology has the potential, with its a unique vantage point as a discipline that engages with interpersonal, local, and global social phenomena, to clarify, broaden, and specify the ways in which we understand the experiences of religious exiters. However, so much of this potential remains untapped as researchers focus narrowly on specific religions, specific intersections of experience, and specific methodologies. My hope is that this potential entices future researchers to take up the mantle and devote their intellects to broadening the study of this important population.

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**APPENDIX A: EXTENDED EPILOGUE - A NARRATIVE MEMO ON CAPSTONE
INTERRUPTION**

Authors' note: Where language switches from "we," to "I," just Fio is speaking. In other segments where "we" is used, multiple of us are contributing to the writing.

In the summer of 2022, we embarked on our greatest research journey to-date, which was to be the culmination of our master's program at Minnesota State University, Mankato. In many ways, it was a passion project, born of deeply personal experience but grounded in fully empirical methods, building on decades of research in religious exit, the narrative self, and identity co-construction. We interviewed 31 ex-Christian fundamentalists, evangelicals, and charismatics, who, despite differences in stories and current identities, shared a common history within a control-based religious structure and now lived their lives in opposition to the boxes it had placed them in. They told stories of discovering sexuality, redefining gender, and making room for aspects of self they never would have considered while still inside their faith communities. They told stories of trauma and religious abuse. They told stories of self-discovery and liberation. They told stories of ongoing challenge and intentional unlearning, attempting to undo, sometimes through addition and sometimes through subtraction of community ties, the often decades of implicit and explicit religious instruction they had embodied.

During that summer, we were also leaving a box, but it was a box we never knew existed – the constraints of the singular self. Any sociologist who has ever read Mead or Cooley or Goffman will have inferred the idea that, reflexively speaking, every one of us is multiple. There is the "I" and the "me." There is the self that is performed on the "front stage" and that which is performed in the "back stage." There are the myriad roles we play and myriad adjustments we make to our performances to appease the "generalized other." And, there are the identities we

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carry that relate to these roles. However, something nearly all my research participants could have told you is that there are some aspects of the self that are “real.” There is a core, a returning, a settled presence to discover through experimentation and experience. There is someone that you can introduce to others by your own name.

Perhaps, more keenly than others in some ways and less so in others, I am aware of Mason-Schrock’s supposition that, despite what most of us think, “the ‘true self’ is a powerful fiction” (1996:177).

In this paper, we disclosed the fact that we have struggled with our mental health in various ways both before and after the exit we made from our religion of origin. In truth, mental health challenge, or rather, a sense that “something is wrong” settled into our body long before any of us had access to the language of the psychological community. We have been in therapy for years, treating disorders ranging from depression to social anxiety to cyclothymia to post-traumatic stress disorder. We were still in therapy throughout the summer of data collection for our research project. We often reflected with our therapist on the impacts of our research on our mental health, and vice versa. We thought we understood the fabric of our mental health landscape. We thought we had dotted our i’s, crossed our t’s, signed our safety plans, checked our biases, and created healthy self-care routines that would enable us to complete our project without any major glitches caused by our internal realm.

And then someone else in our mind said hello.

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It's not quite that clear-cut; others besides me, Fio, had been in and out of this body throughout our lives, acting in the world supposedly seamlessly, completing tasks and exchanging short-term memories to keep this ruse of a self functioning for years at a time without too many major hiccups. Many of these others already knew of one another. All of them knew me. Some of them had already picked out names, and those names were not mine. They knew what they should look like, how old they were, and how they wanted to interact with the world around them. And those ideas were often different from my ideas about myself.

I had met the "first" brave five who made themselves known to me earlier in the year, much to my surprise, and had already identified aspects of their personality, moments when I "felt like them," or cues as to when they overtook my "normal" sense of self with something that felt familiar, yet distinct. What I was experiencing, within what the psychological community calls "identity disturbances," transcended the sociological notion of enmeshment between identities and roles. In some cases, I thought, if there ever was a complete role-person merger, I was experiencing one. One inner person had a persona that revolved entirely around having childlike fun. Others had names and inner-world appearances that felt like pure manifestations of the "assertive one," or the "shy one," or the "sad one." I thought my vivid imagination had finally run its course and anthropomorphized my emotions. But then, my "emotions" started to talk to me. I had to learn rather quickly that their voices were not just my imagination. The personas were semi-autonomous, and they would do and say things that I was aware of but over which I had no control. They had their own trains of thought that ran alongside my own, their own desires, own perspectives, and, importantly, their own memories. Each held, and still holds, fragmented bits of memories, from childhood through the present day, memories that I myself have only blurry images of or intellectualized stories about, but not the things themselves.

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This development of the self into selves escalated rapidly. Who was one had become six, and soon those six became twelve, then twenty, then fifty, then well over one hundred as more and more individuals came out of the proverbial woodwork to introduce themselves to the collective consciousness. Not everyone shared who they were, what they knew, or what their role was within our brain structure. But, most stayed around long enough to assure us that they were, in fact, real.

The idea of the “true self” may be no more than an elaborate containment strategy to maintain internal cohesion, and in some ways, I was experiencing a dissolution of my “true self” similar to what I imagine ego death must be like. But in other ways, the idea of the “true self” became increasingly more powerful with every part who espoused a separate identity. Instead of ego death, I was experiencing dozens of ego births, ego conflicts between disagreeing parts, and a resulting deep disturbance in my psyche.

Within a few months, we started therapeutic treatment for the poorly named Other Specified Dissociative Disorder, and soon after, for Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), a spectrum disorder of multiple identities (in the colloquial, not the sociological, sense) separated by dissociative amnesia with roots in severe childhood trauma.

Research that is deeply personal runs the risk of contributing to or accelerating the processing of one’s own lived experience. The ways in which participants in our research project shared their traumas with us resonated with the contours of our collective mind in ways that some of us knew, piecemeal, in locked memory storages, but which some of us could not recollect. Sometimes, one of us would be feeling something deeply, reliving a traumatic experience in the recesses of our mind, but those of us in executive control of our body were

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completely unaware of where the associated sudden bursts of strong emotions were coming from, or the events to which these emotions were linked.

The bursts of emotions were not infrequent. Most researchers would feel empathy after hearing the types of stories our participants shared, but our experience felt categorically different than empathy. There were cycles of emotion, fatigue, exhaustion, and renewal that somehow left us feeling a little more disconnected from our participants at each stage. Thus, we thought we were doing great work at maintaining emotional distance from our research. And, in truth, some of us were – our dissociative mechanisms built up since childhood that kept us from knowing of each other’s existence were doing exactly what they were trained to do – compartmentalize our emotional experiences from one another. So, while those of us in the conscious mind felt “fine,” several of us in the subconscious were reliving a terrifying past.

In February of 2023, the internal strain finally caught up to us. Physical exhaustion from the combination of paid labor and thesis writing intermingled with the mental exhaustion of constantly discovering “new” members of our system. Some of us perpetuated that exhaustion through a pathological need to categorize and catalog each other’s existences. DID-focused therapy started delving far too close to the deep pain that we were not conscious of over the summer. Trying to navigate our newly acknowledged existence as both multiple and amnesiac became increasingly overwhelming.

Neurobiologically, human beings maintain the psychological homeostasis that keeps us mentally well through a consistent, positive self-concept (Sedikides 2021). Transformations in life circumstances threaten one’s view of oneself, whether through threats to self-efficacy beliefs, reordering of relationships, or physical alterations that modify the embodied self. It takes

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stability in the self to maintain stability in the mind. And stability of self was the farthest possible thing from our experience.

It did not take long for us to psychologically collapse. We were hospitalized in an inpatient psychiatric unit for eleven days. By the time we had left the ward, we had made decisions to withdraw from coursework for the semester and cease working for pay until the upcoming summer. We tried multiple times to restart our research project, but each time, we were thwarted by a billowing, slowly-building distress that we could not fully identify. We gathered more of its shape each time it arose, but it still felt vague, like a muffled voice from within shouting “stop” from hundreds of miles away.

At some point, we decided to listen to that voice. It took us a while to conclude that we could not proceed with our research, but when we did, we felt nearly audible sighs of relief from a group within our system that holds most of our religious trauma. Finally, these previously invisible individuals had the breathing room they needed to simply exist. When we pivoted our capstone away from using our primary data towards polishing this literature review, we were able to balance getting to know ourselves and engaging in therapeutic work with our writing in ways that stopped sacrificing trauma-holding members of our system on the altar of our education. I would not say that this has created peace, but it has created the conditions for rest.

An astute reader of this story may have several questions at this point, besides questions about DID, which we are intentionally leaving for the reader to answer of their own accord, as this appendix is not intended as a vehicle for fetishization, nor are we experts in our disorder broadly. Perhaps the most relevant question in the context of a literature review of mental health narratives is “what story is this narrative telling me?” Those of you who have shopped for a used

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car may be wondering “what am I being sold?” A judicious researcher might be asking “what frame is being used in this narrative, and what power does it have?”

At the risk of pedantry, we will now disclose our motivations. Initially, some of us started this memo as a means of announcing our presence and involvement in both our previous project and the current one, which has culminated in our capstone for our master’s degree. Although we legally go by one name, this paper has multiple authors, and we feel that it is important that we are represented, and that our contributions are not obscured. Along these lines, we feel that it is important for the academic community to know that people with severe mental illnesses, including DID, can produce innovative sociological writings. We, each of us, are scholars too.

However, as we continued this memo, we realized we have the beginnings of valuable personal insights to provide on the intersection of trauma and the research process, and we decided to frame our experience in terms of the reflexivity of the embodied and the academic. Embodied experience, even that which is unknown to the mind, can be deeply creative, broadly generative, and a means of attunement to the empirical world. In the same breath, it can be the roots of pain, automatic reaction, and unexplored bias. There are times when embodied experience can and will overpower the researcher’s attempts to mitigate its effects, and these times are not always preventable. Despite this, these times can be important moments of reflection, re-centering, and redirection.

In the process of writing this stream-of-consciousness epilogue, we realized that there are many influences of our multiple selves that we may not be able to flush from our research writing – nor would we fully desire to. The self as multiple informs multiple perspectives, creative ideas, nuances, and turns of thought that are available in different ways to those of us whose lived experience is diffused across different regions of our physical brain. This epilogue’s

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eccentricity in writing style and flow is a direct manifestation of this multiplicity, and we celebrate all the ways in which it is expressed.

We intentionally chose not to give our narrative a clear-cut conclusion or satisfying ending, because this narrative is truly ongoing in multiple senses of the word. Since our choice to pivot to this paper, we have experienced disruptions on the mental healthcare side of our journey which were catalyzed by symptoms of our disorder itself. We have not learned everything about our multiple selves, and if we choose to, it would likely take us the rest of our lives. We likely have not yet met everyone who resides within this mind, and we definitely have not learned what memories we all carry.

We have also not ended our initial research for good. Many of us believe that our research, which largely aimed to amplify the voices of ex-Christians in framing their own self-narratives, is too important to let lie. There is so much work and so much writing we want to do, and so much more that the sociological community can learn from the stories of those who have left major American faith traditions within the past few decades. So that project, like our selves-narrative, is a work very much in progress.

Proceeding with that research may be tenuous for us, but we are aware now of a lens through which we engage with all our research – the lens of multiplicity. We are excited to uncover its methodological and analytical impacts, potentially opening pathways for new research around the subjectivity-objectivity dialectic, the researcher-participant dialectic and how power manifests in conversations between mentally multiple subjects, the ethics of multiplicity disclosure in research writing, and autoethnographic contributions to other types of qualitative studies. There is so much each of us could say about our perspectives on that summer of interviewing, the ways in which it impacted our stability, the ways in which some of us came to

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the forefront to conduct interviews and others receded into the background, and the potential impacts on our interviewees and the research itself of the shifts in who within the researcher was present at each stage. There are stories that we have to tell that are not being told in academic spaces that can bolster representation and empower other researchers like us to live into fragmentation as knowledge. The knowledge we carry in this body is painful, often obscured, but crucial, and we embrace how it will continue to inform our academics, our research, and our lives.

Sincerely,

The known members of the Nephelai System:

Fio, Adam, Aello, Aidan, Alexandra, Amelia, Amia, Ananke, Annie, Anya, Arsenic, Aspen, Aster, Asteria, Aubin, Aurora, Autumn, Bee, Breezy, Brownie, Calculus, Camber, Cass, Cecelia, Chione, Ciara, Clover, Colbie, Declan, Deedee, Destiny, Dim, Dustrose, Eileithya, Embeth, Emily-Madison, Enna, Enya, Erin, Evetskaya, Fethria, Forge, Gaven, Gavrielle, Gina, Gisele, Gita, Hero, Hunter, Immedia, Irina, Isolde, Jacob, Janus, Jessy, Jezebel, Jo, Johana, Junia, Juniper, Jupiter, Kalluto, Kathryn, Katie, Kaya, Killua, Koda, Kyna, L., Leslie, Liam, Lillian, Lilyanna Clementine, Loom, Lorelei, Louvia Jade, Lucy, Maddy, Madeline, Maelys, Maireen, Marina, Mattan, Mayson, Melody, Mickie, Minshon, Mireia, Mneme, Mnemosyne, Momo, Muriel, Niamo, Noë, Nola, Nomi, Nouvelle, Nuri, Océane, Olive, Ostara, Paxton, Petronike, Philamena, Philo, Reggie, Ritchie, Riv, Romilly, Rukia, Rumi, Rupert, Rye, Ryenne, Sabrina, Samantha, Sarai, Saturna, Seren, Shannon, Sheena, Shyla, Silhouette, Sincey, Siphon, Sirena, Sojo, Solveig, Sorcha, Tacy, Tegan, Thoraia, Tiernen, Tristen, Una, Usagi, Winter, Xiomara, Yuliya, Zeusa, and Zonia

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