

Copyright
by
Cameron A. Rollwitz
2024

“ONCE I FELT I HAD A CHOICE, I DIDN’T CHOOSE RELIGION:”
A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF MEANING
IN RELIGIOUS DONES

by

Cameron A. Rollwitz, B.A., B.S.

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of
The University of Houston-Clear Lake
In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements
For the Degree

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in Psychology

THE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON-CLEAR LAKE

MAY, 2024

“ONCE I FELT I HAD A CHOICE, I DIDN’T CHOOSE RELIGION”:

A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF MEANING

IN RELIGIOUS DONES

by

Cameron A. Rollwitz

APPROVED BY

Nicholas J. Shaman, PhD, Chair

Andrew J. Pegoda, PhD, Committee Member

Jennifer Arney-Cuevas, PhD. Committee Member

RECEIVED/APPROVED BY THE COLLEGE OF HUMAN SCIENCES AND
HUMANITIES

Shreerekha Subramanian, PhD, Associate Dean

Glenn Sanford, PhD, Dean

Dedication

For those who struggle with meaning and purpose in their lives.

Acknowledgements

I would like to take this time to thank my Advisor, Dr. Shaman, as without his help I would have had no idea how to navigate this thesis project. I'd also like to thank Dr. Pegoda, my undergrad mentor. Without their help I would not have continued to pursue this line of research. I'd also like to thank Dr. Arney-Cuevas, who first introduced me to qualitative research and instilled a love for it within me. I'd like to thank my parents for being supportive of my research endeavors, even if they may not have understood the reasons behind why I study this topic. I'd also like to thank Dr. Larson, who first introduced me to meaning as an academic study. Without his class, I would never have discovered my love for this area of study. Finally, I'd like to thank my wife, who has supported and encouraged me through this long and difficult process.

ABSTRACT

“ONCE I FELT I HAD A CHOICE, I DIDN’T CHOOSE RELIGION”: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF MEANING IN RELIGIOUS DONES

Cameron A. Rollwitz
University of Houston-Clear Lake, 2024

Thesis Chair: Dr. Nicholas J. Shaman

‘Religious dones’ are a significantly growing group of people who have left their religion (Streib, 2021). The current study examines the process individuals go through while leaving their religion and how it relates to their religious identity, community, and meaning system. Religious meaning systems are the ways in which religious things, events, and relationships connect mentally (Park, 2013). Fourteen participants between 18 and 54 Years-Old, all formerly Christian, and all with some college education were interviewed in a qualitative existential phenomenological study. Participants were asked eleven questions in a semi-structured interview. Transcripts of the interviews were divided into meaning units, with transformative analysis occurring using intentional analysis and empathetic dwelling to identify shifts in meaning that occurred. This analysis uncovered a cycle of meaning making in which individuals engage. The cycle begins with a major stressor which is processed by the individual’s meaning system. If

the stressor is processed by the meaning system, stability is achieved and the meaning system does not change. However, if the meaning system cannot process the stressor, this becomes a stressor itself and the cycle begins again. With each cycle, the person modifies their meaning system. This cycle can challenge the person's meaning system, identity, and/or community, leading to a person leaving religion. The participants who were interviewed not only challenged their meaning systems, but also their values and core beliefs. 'Religious donees' were unable to engage with this meaning cycle until moving into adulthood and into a career or college study. Once a stressor manifests in this period, the cognitive dissonance and trauma returns and overwhelms the individual, resulting in mental health struggles and a loss of identity, community, and meaning. With this model, further efforts can be made to develop a clinical framework to assist those transitioning between religious meaning systems. Further research can examine how the inability to engage with this meaning cycle may contribute to Complex PTSD.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures	x
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW	1
The Loss of Religious Identity.....	1
Identity Development.....	2
Religious De-Identification.....	4
Meaning Making.....	6
Meaning Making and Mental Health	7
Aims and Objectives	8
CHAPTER II: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS	9
Methodology	9
Population and Sample	9
Data Collection	10
Data Analysis	11
Results.....	12
Stressors	13
Moral Stressors	13
Cognitive Stressors	14
Social Stressors	15
Emotional Stressors	17
Assimilation or Affirmation Sub-Cycle.....	18
Exploration of Meaning System	20
Consistency or Reframing Possible	20
Stressor Processed.....	21
Accommodation Sub-Cycle	22
Not Consistent or Reframing Not Possible.....	23
Sense of Meaninglessness, Lack of Belonging, or Loss of Identity	25
Minor Deconstruction	26
Engagement with Assimilation/Affirmation.....	27
Adoption Sub-Cycle.....	28
Sense of Meaninglessness, Lack of Belonging, And Loss of Identity	30
Major Deconstruction	31
Reconstruction	32
Adoption of New Meaning System and Identity	34
Engagement with Assimilation/Affirmation Sub-Cycle.....	34
Mental Health Struggles Associated with Each Meaning Sub-Cycle.....	35
Assimilation/Affirmation Cycle.....	35

Accommodation Sub-Cycle	37
Adoption Sub-Cycle.....	39
Still Practicing and Discontinued Dones and the Meaning Cycle	40
CHAPTER III: DISCUSSION.....	42
Aims and Objectives	42
Identity Development & Religious Identity.....	43
Religious De-Identification.....	45
Meaning Making.....	46
Meaning Making and Mental Health	47
Applications	48
Clinical Psychology	48
Developmental Psychology	48
Meaning/Existential Psychology	49
Sociology	50
Cross Discipline.....	50
Clergy.....	51
Limitations and Future Directions	51
Conclusion	52
REFERENCES	54
APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS	58

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: A Model of Religious Leaving..... 5
Figure 2: Meaning Making Model as Applied to a Negative Situation..... 7
Figure 3: A Meaning Making Model..... 13
Figure 4: Assimilation/Affirmation Sub-Cycle 19
Figure 5: Accommodation Sub-Cycle 23
Figure 6: Adoption Sub-Cycle..... 30

CHAPTER I:
INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The Loss of Religious Identity

Religious dones are a significantly growing subsection of the equally rapidly growing group of religious nones (Streib, 2021). Religious nones are those who do not currently ascribe to a specific religion and are a near majority group within the United States (McLaughlin et al., 2020). Religious dones are those who have previously ascribed to a religion but have since left this religion in favor of no religion (Scharp & Beck, 2017). In any slice of the religious none category, roughly 20% will belong to the subsection of religious done (Mercadante, et al., 2021).

Narrowing the category of religious dones even further, the current categorization includes two subsections within the religions done subcategory: practicing done and discontinued done (McLaughlin et al, 2020). The still practicing dones comprise of roughly 32% of all religious dones within the United States (McLaughlin et al, 2020). These are individuals who, while having left their religion, still engage in religious activities such as attending worship on occasion or engaging in prayer (Exline et al, 2020). They also report significantly higher mental health struggles than those within the discontinued done category (McLaughlin et al, 2020). Discontinued dones make up roughly 68% of all religious dones within the United States (McLaughlin et al, 2020). These are individuals who have left their religion, and do not engage in any religious activities after leaving (McLaughlin et al, 2020). These individuals also report significantly lower instances of mental health struggles in relation to this process of leaving religion (McLaughlin et al, 2020). While there are differences in how each

subgroup engages with religious activities, both subgroups still experience the phenomenon of religious residue (Van Tongeren et al., 2021).

Religious residue is defined as the thoughts, cognitions, and behaviors that can be directly linked to previous religious thoughts, cognitions, and behaviors in individuals who have since left their religion and embarked on the de-identification process (Van Tongeren et al., 2021). Religious residue has been found to remain in both subgroups of religious donees. For example, religious donees have a shift in their moral foundations after de-identification, but they still align closely to individuals who ascribe to a religion (Van Tongeren et al., 2021). The presence of religious residue in religious donees suggests that some portions of the previous identity remain following the completion of the de-identification and re-identification process (Van Tongeren et al., 2021).

While research has explored the transition process and religious residue (Van Tongeren et al., 2023), it is still unclear how the strength of religious identity prior to de-identification and the individual's meaning making system connects with which subcategory an individual will enter after completing the transition away from a religion. A better understanding of the deidentification process can assist clinicians who have clients going through the process. This is especially important given the mental health struggles of the still practicing donees. Therefore, the current study explores the connection between strength of religious identity and meaning making as they can predict into which subcategory of religious donee an individual will move.

Identity Development

The identity development model put forth by Erikson and Bowlby highlights four fundamental areas of identity status, and the methods in which an individual may transition between these statuses (Heshmati & Rahiminejad, 2020). These statuses are diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement. Identity diffusion is characterized

by the existence or the lack of psychological crises, and low commitment to an identity. In essence, the individual is not concerned with exploring their identity and does not find it important. This status is most connected with maladaptive behaviors in individuals and higher mental health issues. Identity foreclosure is characterized by no psychological crises, and a high commitment to an identity. This status is when an individual takes the identity assigned to them socially, whether through their parents or the social environment in which they grew up. Identity moratorium is when an individual has experienced a psychological crisis and has low commitment to an identity. This status allows for the individual to actively experiment and explore their identity, trying out various identities to find what fits them. The final identity status is identity achievement. This status is characterized by a psychological crisis occurring, and a high level of commitment to an identity (Ysseldyk et al., 2010). This identity status typically occurs following identity moratorium.

Developmental psychology considers the development of personal identity to happen through the transition between adolescence and early adulthood. But the model could also be used to explore the process of re-identification after leaving religion. In essence, an individual may be in identity achievement or foreclosure regarding religion, but then experience a crisis of faith. Experiencing this crisis may cause a shift to religious identity moratorium.

Religious Identity and De-Identification

The relationship between religious identity and de-identification is not well understood. One theory of religious identity revolves around both when the identity encounters religious norms and how individuals resolve the conflict between these norms and identities (Louis et al, 2021). If individuals do not resolve this conflict, the likelihood of entering the religious de-identification and re-identification process increases. The first

strategy is engaging in normal religious activities and retaining a strong religious identity. This strategy is found to result in higher well-being overall. The second strategy is to remain within the religious identity, but to voice discontent with the religious norm. In essence, the individual attempts to change the norm to be in line with religious identity. This strategy results in higher identification, but lower well-being. The third and final strategy is to lower religious identity commitment and disengage from the norm. This is shown to result in the lowest amount of well-being overall. Given these strategies, it has been found that if the religious group does not respond in a way that is favorable to the individual raising the concern, then religious identification decreases.

Religious De-Identification

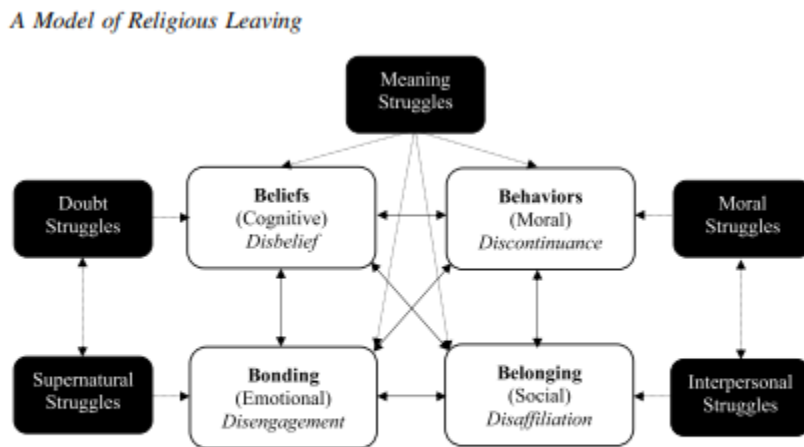
Religious de-identification and re-identification is a theory within the psychology of religion that outlines the specific process an individual engages in as they transition away from a religion (Van Tongeren et al., 2021). The theory comprises of four major dimensions through which the process occurs. When the process begins in one domain, it is likely the others will soon engage (Van Tongeren et al., 2021). Individuals engaging in the process of de-identification typically begin in one dimension and begin the process in the other dimensions (Stronge, et al., 2020).

The four major dimensions of religious de-identification are cognitive, moral, bonding, and belonging as shown in Figure 1 (Van Tongeren et al., 2021). The first dimension is cognitive; the shift to disbelief results when an individual is no longer able to reconcile doubts with the teachings of their faith and religious identity (Van Tongeren et al., 2021). The resulting jettison of these beliefs falls under the dimension of cognitive de-identification (Van Tongeren et al., 2021). The second dimension is moral; the shift in morals held and is illustrated in the discontinuance of moral behaviors that can be attributed to the previous religion (Van Tongeren et al., 2021). In essence, to resolve the

dissonance an individual will shift their moral foundations to more align with themselves (Van Tongeren et al., 2021). This can occur through a spiritual struggle, such as the scandals of the catholic church conflicting with the espoused morals of the church (Van Tongeren et al., 2021).

The third dimension is emotional; this shift is characterized by a breaking of bonds to the religion itself (Van Tongeren et al., 2021). This is illustrated in attending worship services less, no longer engaging in prayer, and no longer engaging with spiritual texts (Van Tongeren et al., 2021). Finally, the fourth dimension is social; this shift is characterized by the public disaffiliation with religion (Van Tongeren et al., 2021). This can be characterized by individuals no longer engaging or maintaining relationships with those who still openly ascribe to the religion that the individual is transitioning away from (Van Tongeren et al., 2021).

Figure 1:
A Model of Religious Leaving



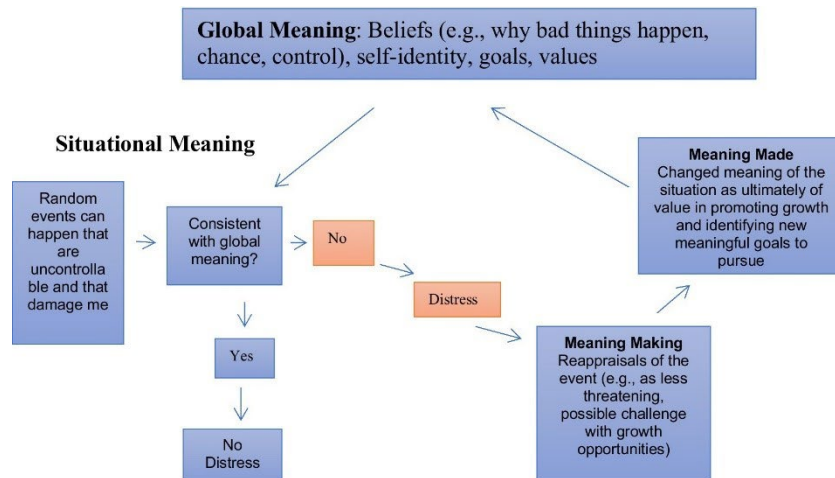
Note. Proposed interrelationship (solid lines) between the four dimensions of (non)religiousness and the potential relationships (dotted lines) with various religious and spiritual struggles.

From “Disbelief, disengagement, discontinuance, and disaffiliation: An integrative framework for the study of religious deidentification.” by Van Tongeren, D. R., & DeWall, C. N., 2021, *Psychology of religion and spirituality*. (<https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000434>). Copyright 2021 by D. R. Van Tongeren

Meaning Making

Meaning making is the process through which individuals engage with stressors in life that contradicts or challenges the framework or understanding of their global meaning (Park, 2022). This process is further described in Figure 2. Global meaning is the foundational beliefs, values and goals, and the sense of meaningfulness and individual holds. Meaning making is an inherently stressful process, as there is a direct violation of global meaning, and this violation itself is distressing. The methods in which individuals can resolve this violation is through the reframing of the stressor. In doing so, the global meaning is left unchanged. By engaging with this process, individuals can use their meaning systems to resolve and process the stressor experienced and reduce the distress experienced by the perceived violation of their global meaning. This process results in a meaning being made, whether through changing the understanding of the reason behind the stressor occurring or reframing the stressor to be less severe than initially understood. This method of meaning making has been shown to be particularly useful for those coping with traumatic experiences, and those that engage with this process and reframe events into a positive light, have been shown to exhibit fewer post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms and reporting a higher quality of life.

Figure 2:
Meaning Making Model as Applied to a Negative Situation



From “Meaning Making Following Trauma” by Park, C. L., 2022, *Frontiers in psychology*, 13, 844891-844891. (<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.844891>). Copyright 2022 by Crystal L. Park.

Meaning Making and Mental Health

Meaning making is essential to maintaining and developing good mental health (Park, 2013, Chapter 16). When threats to meaning are experienced, individuals must either adjust their meaning or adjust their perception and framing of the conflict or threat to their meaning (Park & Folkman, 1997). If neither of these options occur, then a sense of meaninglessness is experienced and typically results in a loss of sense of control, depression, anxiety, and additional stress (Exline & Rose, 2013, Chapter 17). Typically, an individual will re-frame the threat or conflict to fit within their current meaning rather than adjust their entire meaning (Park & Folkman, 1997).

Religion is often used as the core of meaning for many individuals, and in most cases helps to resolve the conflicts or threats to an individual’s meaning (Park, 2013,

Chapter 16). However, sometimes the threat to meaning is religion itself. The same two options exist: they must either adjust their meaning system or reframe the conflict to fit within their meaning system. But it is unclear how individuals resolve the threat to their meaning when the threat is the meaning itself. Little research has addressed this question, but the effects of this conflict have been explored. Significant psychological distress and discomfort is experienced during the process of adjusting meaning itself, and rarely is the shift in meaning a quick or easy endeavor (Park, 2013, Chapter 16). Specifically, it has been found that the stronger the religious belief and the more traumatic an event, the more negative of an impact there will be to an individual's overall well-being (Exline & Rose, 2013, Chapter 17). Given how meaning is a crucial aspect to overall mental well-being, when meaning is challenged, every other aspect of an individual's life can come into question and need to be re-evaluated.

Aims and Objectives

The primary aim of the current study is to explore the connection between strength of religious identity and meaning making as part of the process of de-identification and whether they predict the subcategory of religious done into which an individual will move – still practicing done or discontinued done. Additionally, it will explore how this de-identification process impacts the severity of mental health struggles associated with leaving a religion. The current study uses qualitative interviews with an existential phenomenological lens to provide a careful analysis of religious de-identification.

CHAPTER II: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Methodology

The study utilized semi-structured interviews with an interview protocol and interview guide. The interviews were conducted in a comfortable environment for the participants over Zoom and ran for seventeen minutes to two hours, depending on the participant. The average interview length was fifty-four minutes and twenty seconds. Interviews were digitally recorded to ensure accurate transcriptions and analysis. The interview questions were formatted to approach the research questions proposed through an existential phenomenological lens (Churchill, 2022). In using this research genre, the study aimed to get a clearer understanding of the demographic and how they experienced their daily lives during, and after the de-identification and re-identification process.

Population and Sample

The sample was selected from the population using purposeful, snowball sampling to ensure that there was an accurate representation of religious donees for the interview portion of the study (Churchill, 2022). Purposeful sampling was used to ensure that participants had experienced the phenomenon being investigated. Snowball sampling ensured that participants were able to be found who may have not previously been aware of the study. For three participants, the researcher recruited them directly from relationships established prior to study commencement. For the remaining eleven participants, no previous relationship existed. Participants knew the previous religious background of the researcher, and the intention behind the study. As a result, the interviewer's bias, reasons, and interests in the topic were reported during IRB submission and approvals. Participants were approached via email or postings on internet forums specifically for previously religious individuals. For presence of non-participants,

no other individuals were present aside from the interviewer and the participant. The study aimed to utilize twenty participants but was able to garner fourteen participants total across the United States and Canada. No participants approached refused participation in the study after reviewing the informed consent form. Participants were also asked to refer other potential participants to the study, with many additional participants joining the study through this method. Participant demographics ranged from 21-54 years of age, with ten participants identifying as White, one participant identifying as Black, one as Latinx, and one as Asian, and one as unspecified. Participant's previous religious affiliation broke down with two Catholic, six Baptist, one Lutheran, one Presbyterian, three Non-Denominational, and one Methodist. The study also included four male participants, one trans female, one trans male, and eight female participants. Participants sexual identity included one asexual, one bisexual, one pansexual, one homosexual, and ten heterosexual.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted using an interview protocol and interview guide. Interview questions can be found in Appendix A. Interview questions were developed through an initial pilot study and then refined in the context of the models being tested, and interviewee responses. The interview was semi-structured, which allowed for the researcher to adjust questions over the course of data collection and re-arrange the order of the questions to better fit with the responses of participants. Interviews were digitally recorded to ensure accurate transcription of the data. Interviews were conducted virtually to ensure that participants felt comfortable responding to interview questions as honestly and openly as possible. There were no repeat interviews. No field notes were made during or after the interview, and transcripts were not returned to participants for comment or correction. Interview questions, which can be found in the appendix, were in

relation to the connection between religious identity and the thoughts, cognitions, and behaviors that remain or have been removed as part of the de-identification and re-identification process of leaving religion. Questions such as “to what extent does having a religious foundation for your identity lessen or worsen these struggles?” And “In what ways did religion connect with your identity?” were used during the interview process.

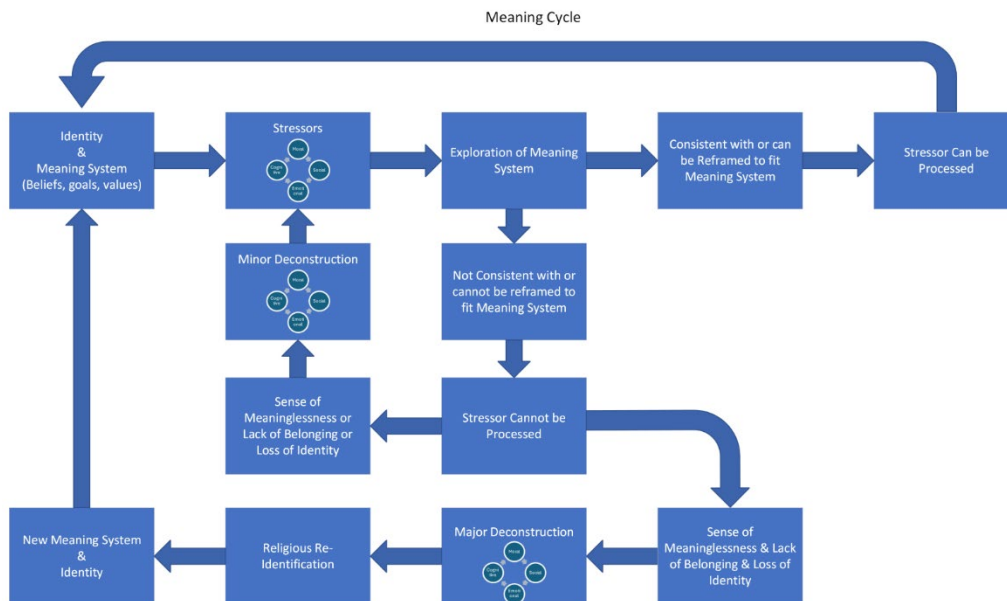
Data Analysis

Interview recordings were transcribed using Microsoft Word’s transcription feature, and then reviewed and edited for accuracy. The initial approach to the transcripts was to read through each transcript in its entirety and utilize an empathetic approach to the transcripts to begin breaking the transcripts into meaning units. (Churchill, 2022). Given the researcher’s lived experience with this process, the ability to empathize with the experiences of participants was reached within the first read through. The process of breaking transcripts into meaning units was done by hand, through printed versions of the transcripts. Only the researcher divided the data into these units. The intent was to first understand the phenomenon being described by participants, and then understand the conflict that arises between participant’s identities, and the emotions that arose as a result. From here, intentional analysis was utilized to identify the shifts between meaning units, and the emotional connections to these shifts with empathic dwelling (Churchill, 2022). After these shifts were identified, the researcher compared these shifts across participants to identify commonalities across participants to determine a structure or process in which participants were moving through in this shared lived experience. No themes found were identified prior to data collection. Participants were not asked to provide feedback on the findings. Saturation was determined to be met when three consecutive transcripts revealed no new meaning units and was achieved after fourteen interviews.

Results

Upon intentional and transformative analysis of meaning units, a clear emotional and cognitive process was found within the fourteen participants interviewed. This process was found to be cyclical in nature and had three distinct sub-cycles that combined into a broader cycle. This cycle was consistent across participants, with each participant engaging with all three sub-cycles at some point in their life journey. This cycle, the “Meaning Cycle”, takes the previous findings of Van Tongeren’s (2021) model of religious leaving and Park’s (2022) model of assimilation within the meaning making process, and expands on these models to include a theory of accommodation, a theory of adoption, and a secondary method of engaging with the assimilation model through affirmation. Each of these sub-cycles connects and guides the others, with participants going through assimilation/affirmation and accommodation regularly. Figure 3 includes the entirety of the cycle theory, with Figures 4, 5, and 6 highlighting the three sub-cycles within the broader cycle. But all engagements with these sub-cycles, start with some form of stressor arising.

Figure 3:
A Meaning Making Model



Stressors

Each individual begins in the cycle with an existing Identity and Meaning System. When a stressor arises, individuals will embark on the meaning cycle. Stressors can include moral conflicts, social conflicts, cognitive conflicts, and emotional conflicts. These stressors match onto Van Tongeren’s (2021) model of religious leaving.

Moral Stressors

Some participants had moral stressors that initiated the cycle. For example, one had survived a mass shooting and the response from family members, church members, and friends increased and aggravated the stress felt within the moral stress category. The participant, identifying as an African American female, highlighted that “..many church people gave me messages around the reason that I was struggling with depression or PTSD or anxiety...because I wasn’t spending enough time with God...and I felt very

judged and misunderstood.” This was further exacerbated when many friends and church members responded to a post made on Facebook with “...God had saved you from this shooting. And others told me that the reason this happened was God trying to get your attention because you had stopped going to church.” This stressor raised questions for the participant such as “Why would God have to rely on murder to get my attention? And it didn't make sense and I felt really isolated and alone.” The moral conflict of a loving God as the participant was raised to understand God to be, was in conflict with a God who would end the lives of innocent people just to get their attention and bring them back to their belief. With no way to resolve this stressor within their current meaning system, the participant was forced to change their meaning system.

Other moral stressors could include the death of a family member, or the prevalence of sickness, disease, and starvation in the world. Participants had a difficult time resolving the concept of a benevolent, omnipotent (or all powerful), omnipresent (or all present everywhere and everytime), omniscient (or all knowing), God as they were taught throughout childhood. Specifically, the conflict of a benevolent, omnipotent God allowing such moral conflicts to exist within the world.

Cognitive Stressors

Other participants had struggles with the logic of doctrines they felt conflicted with one another. This conflict in logic triggered cognitive stressors, in which cognitive dissonance was not able to be resolved, and discussions with clergy and further examination of the doctrines only increased questions and conflicts rather than resolve them. One participant, identifying as a white male aged 33 years, in particular had conflicts with this almost exclusively, with the main conflict being with ethical decision making and the duty of the created to obey their creator stating “if we created a general artificial intelligence, is there a moral obligation for that created thing to obey us? And

my answer was no. And if my answer to that question was no, then why do we have a moral obligation to obey God, and what that did was not only undercut it, [but it] became a question of, well, what do we do if there is no absolute?" The participant was desperate to maintain their meaning system as a result of this meaning system providing them the necessary stability to resolve previous meaning system conflicts they had had earlier in their life. The participant ended at the conclusion that created beings have no moral obligation to obey their creators, and then began to examine other doctrines.

Similarly, another participant, aged 54 and identifying as a white male, began a deep dive of apologetics in an effort to open their own church and found glaring conflicts with their understandings and were also unable to resolve them stating "they were comparing relative or comparative religions. So here's what's wrong with all the other religions and why we know they're wrong. Which was all from the perspective of the fundamental Baptist perspective. And I knew enough about those religions to realize they were not fairly representing them, which made me ask, why can't they tell the truth when they make these arguments?" This conflict of mischaracterizations of other religions and their beliefs, the assertion of being the only right religion, and dogma against other religions, increased the cognitive conflict the participant experienced, and raised questions of other aspects of the belief as a result.

Social Stressors

Participants also reported stressors in the social realm, whether it be ostracization through expressing their doubts publicly, or not feeling like they fit in as a result of a disability or behavior that is central to their identity or core values. Participants, especially those who identified as neurodivergent, reported significant stress in being required or forced to conform in ways that were uncomfortable or not possible given their disability. One participant, a 23 year old Asian female, explained how this increased the

strain between their mother and them stating “I threw myself into the church trying hard to like be what my parents wanted me to be, because also at the same time I could get the vibes from my mom that I was not good enough for her. I found out later it was because she wanted me to act more neurotypical” This combined with social stressors at school as well and being forced to conform or hide amongst other church members was unable to be resolved, leading to their entering the cycle and adjusting their meaning system.

Other participants reported that their queer identity led to a feeling of isolation within the church, even if they had not yet been open about their sexual identity. One participant, identifying as a trans woman and aged 28 years, stated “So at the time I thought I was a gay man and I kind of realized that and I kept going to church, but the writing was kind of on the wall...what I deserve is incompatible with Catholicism...I persistently felt like I wasn’t allowed to like people or allowed to get married or love or have sex or any of that and that was hard...” This deep sense of identity conflict compounded with the social ostracization compounded into a social stressor for the participant. Similarly, another participant, age 34 and identifying as a trans man, shared their experience of coming out about their sexual identity, and the repercussions they experienced after teaching Sunday school, stating “...the interfacing of my queerness with the church sort of had ramifications throughout the family that were fascinating. I’m the only person who has never been asked back to teach Sunday school a second year. And we know why that is...there is nothing particularly lady-like or femme about me and I think some people were real uncomfortable with that” Again, this social stressor led to engaging in the meaning cycle and changing their meaning and identity.

Racial identity also played a large factor in social stressors. Several participants that did not identify as white felt that this would present conflict with other religious members, and create a sense of isolation within the community. One participant, who

identified as an African American Female, stated that their experience in a white Christian school versus black church was radically different, “In school I would be told you know, we don’t allow black people at our house, but this was a Christian school and these were supposed to be Christian people, but they didn’t want me in their house because of my race, so that was another connection that I couldn’t make sense.”

Emotional Stressors

Emotional stressors were more difficult to place, as many of these stressors seemed to arise in tandem with the other stressors presented. This stressor is typically characterized regarding anger towards an event, resentment at treatment from religious individuals, or a sense of betrayal during the process of deconstruction. Participants largely reported that this was rarely the initial cause of their stress, but another dimension to it. These stressors seemed to be more of the driving force behind engaging with meaning sub-cycles, rather than the cause of this engagement. Emotional stressors will guide either up a sub-cycle or down a sub-cycle depending on an increase or decrease in emotional distress. As a result, these struggles were found to be reactionary, rather than causal to which sub-cycle an individual will engage with, as illustrated by a participant, identifying as a white female, saying, "I spent a lot of time stressed out and worried about what does God want me to do and not getting answers and feeling very stressed out by that." The drive for many participants was to resolve this emotional stressor, and a recognition that they could not resolve this emotional stressor without adjusting their meaning system or personal identity.

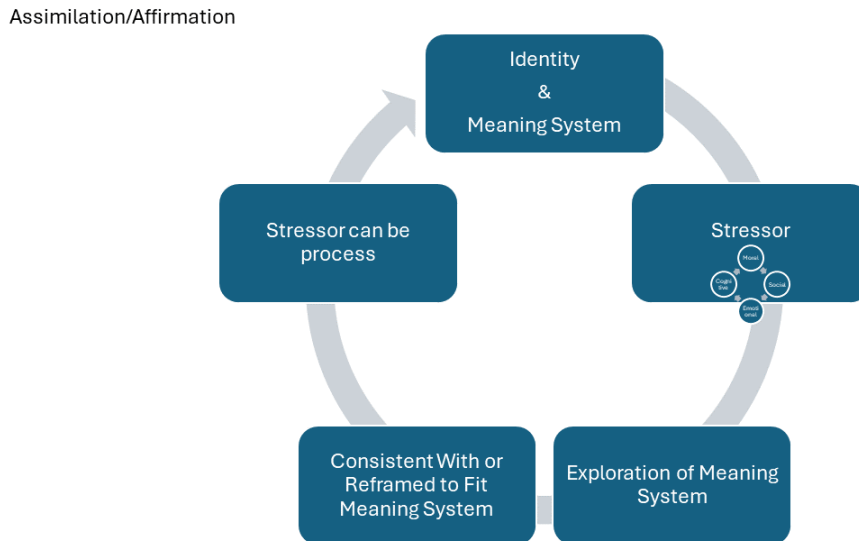
Similar to how individuals will do whatever is necessary to resolve physical pain, so did the participants engage with these sub-cycles to resolve their mental distress and pain. One participant, identifying as a trans woman, reported that changing their meaning system to resolve this became “... an addictive form of mental self harm.” and further

stated that “you can just stay paralyzed by a different kind of fear, but it feels really intellectually stimulating, so it’s incredibly addictive. Because it is a very potent source of stress and over engaging with it, I would argue is a form of self-harm...you’re basically in a complete dissociative state just dealing with that stress in its own way.” The resolution of emotional stressors was consistently the last stressor that was able to be processed and addressed across the participants interviewed. These stressors conflict with meaning, and result in a need to engage with either a portion, or the entirety of the meaning cycle.

Assimilation or Affirmation Sub-Cycle

Broadly, the first sub-cycle as shown in figure 4, the assimilation/affirmation cycle is congruent with Park’s (2022) model of meaning making. The difference found in this study is that there were both positive and negative methods of engaging with this cycle. A negative engagement with this sub-cycle resulted in increased mental health struggles later on, and a positive engagement resulted in the alleviation of mental health struggles. For this reason, the study labels the negative method of engaging with this sub-cycle as assimilation and the positive method of engaging with this sub-cycle as affirmation.

Figure 4:
Assimilation/Affirmation Sub-Cycle



The negative method is employed when an individual is prevented from reframing the stressor present to be consistent with their existing meaning system, thus forcing the inconsistency to be unresolved within their meaning system. Conversely, affirmation is the positive method of engaging with this sub-cycle. When an individual engages with this sub-cycle from this perspective, the stressor is able to be resolved through the meaning system and does not have conflicts with the overall meaning system being ignored. Instead of delaying the resolution of the stressor, the stressor is able to be resolved upon arising. This alleviates the cognitive dissonance and mental health struggles.

Exploration of Meaning System

Upon a stressor arising for participants, there was an immediate engagement with the meaning system currently held, and the guidelines it provided. This engagement could take the form of studying apologetics for religious meaning systems, listening to podcasts, consulting with authority figures within the meaning system, personal prayer or meditation, or engagement with others dealing with similar stressors. Participants highlighted these steps, with one participant, identifying as a white male, stating "...I openly questioned and this actually troubled the people around me...for me to be questioning was very very disturbing to them.." and another participant, identifying as a white female, highlighting "I remember specifically talking to my youth director at the time and being super honest and transparent about my doubts, and fears, and questions and getting really unsatisfactory answers from her. And that created almost a little bit of like a cat and mouse thing of like she gave me these answers that I was not happy with, so I kind of pulled away to start my questioning process, which made her want to reach out more and try harder and try new tactics to kind of pull me back in and I would continue to pull way or reject those. Which then in turn caused her to become pretty cold and punishing towards me." Participants were adamant that the exploration of the meaning system was always initially to affirm the existing meaning system, rather than disaffirm.

Consistency or Reframing Possible

This stage has the first branching pathway within the overall meaning cycle. The assimilation/affirmation sub-cycle was engaged with when participants were able to find an answer consistent with their meaning system, or reframe the stressor in a way that was congruent with the existing meaning system. This allowed the stressor to be processed and returned the participant to the existing meaning system and identity they had.

Participants highlighted how they engaged with this, with one participant, identifying as a white male, stating “I read a book while I was still a Christian, which helped me lose my fear of hell way before I lost my faith.” For the participants of this study, stressors rarely were able to be reframed or found to be consistent with their existing meaning system, resulting in the assimilation/affirmation process unable to be engaged with.

Stressor Processed

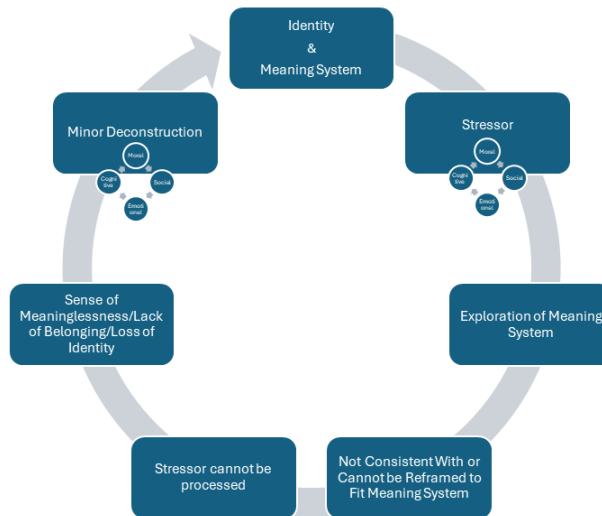
The final step of the assimilation/affirmation sub-cycle is the processing of the stressor. This is a final check of the stressor against the meaning system and the reframing or consistent nature of the stressor. If the stressor is congruent with an individual’s meaning system, then the participant returns to their original identity and meaning system until another stressor occurs. Participants reported a sense of calm and resolution of many of the anxieties and mental health struggles they were experiencing as a result of the stressor, and continued to move forward within their life journeys. For example, one participant, identifying as a white female, illustrated this stating, “It was a relief. It was exciting because also I’ve been feeling this tension of like being told, you know, you have to share the gospel. And seeing it bounce off a bunch of people and having friends who were gay and trans and just being like. Not wanting to hurt them, you know, like just. Like I was, I was sold out all in and I believe that. OK, there something, you know, this is good. There has to be something good here. This is supposed to be healthy for people at a fundamental level and being able to acknowledge that there were things wrong was, I think, a big relief in terms of probably the cognitive dissonance that had been building up over years.” However, if the stressor is still incongruent with an individual’s meaning system, the person begins the overall cycle again. Often the incongruence is itself an additional stressor. This leads to an engagement with the accommodation sub-cycle.

Accommodation Sub-Cycle

The accommodation sub-cycle is the first cycle to be engaged with when the meaning system is unable to resolve the stressor, be it through an inability to provide a satisfying answer to the stressor, a conflict arising from the meaning system itself, or the inability for this stressor to be reframed in a way that allows for the affirmation/assimilation sub-cycle to occur. In this sub-cycle, the study found a “minor deconstruction” must occur. In other words, the individual must adjust their meaning system to allow for this stressor to be processed. For example, one participant, aged 28 and identifying as a white female stated, “And so I was excited and ohh my goodness there is so many different Christian interpretations. There's so many different ways to be Christian and just feeling excited about that and feeling like a lot of really wonderful opportunities had opened up for me.” After the adjustment in the meaning system, the individual is then able to use the assimilation/affirmation sub-cycle to confirm this adjustment has allowed for the stressor to be processed and resolved. Should this fail an assimilation/affirmation sub-cycle check, then the individual will re-engage with the accommodation sub-cycle to continue adjusting their meaning system until an assimilation/affirmation sub-cycle check is completed positively.

Figure 5:
Accommodation Sub-Cycle

Accommodation



Not Consistent or Reframing Not Possible

If participants were unable to reframe the stressor or found the stressor to still be inconsistent with their current meaning system, the accommodation sub-cycle was the next step. The accommodation sub-cycle elevated the level of distress and mental health struggles participants experienced. Participants highlighted that this first step was largely the most difficult, as it required an acknowledgment at least that their meaning system may need to be adjusted. One participant, identifying as a white female, highlighted this stating, “I was just exhausted, and I was barely going. When I got to college and then I sort of dragged myself through it and then I was just freaking tired. When I got done and my husband had went to all the different churches and was just like, all of these are terrible. And that was when I went to therapy. Deconstruction began for me when my

pastor came out as gay, and I looked into it and kind of realized that I missed a bunch of stuff about the bible.”

Other participants supported this idea by sharing their first steps, with one participant, identifying as an African American female, stating “At first I was like well maybe God is punishing me because I stopped going to church and life is just like pretty awful. But I started noticing that there were people who live ‘worse lives’ who were prospering, or at least seemingly so. And so I just became very bitter and shut down.” and another participant, identifying as female, affirming the gravity of these steps stating “It was the perfect storm of seeing religious hypocrisy and leadership. There are a number of my friends who’ve been sexually molested by past pastors and youth pastors in the churches I attended, and then seeing the lack of accountability from the church and the school...so I married a preacher boy and I stayed in the church, but I could feel everything sort of crumbling inside, and it took me a long time to get out of that.” When participants found that they needed to adjust their meaning systems, significant distress was experienced. Several reported that the engagement with this process was out of a desperation to maintain their overall meaning system, not to reject it. One participant, identifying as female, stated that “I went to my therapist because I thought I had postpartum depression, but really I had religious trauma and grief and everything else. She said to me for the first five years, no matter what I said, she would always come back to: if it looks like trauma and it sounds like trauma, it’s probably trauma.”

Participants had a deep understanding of the social ramifications of engaging with this process, and how this could impact their lives going forward. Participants did not engage with the accommodation sub-cycle willingly or from a place of desire at first. Many participants reported resisting engaging with this sub-cycle for as long as possible, as illustrated by one participant, identifying as a white male, highlighting that “I was

desperate...I actually threw myself back into religion, and I went back to church and got back involved in bible study and I was determined I was going to repair my relationship with religion and it just didn't work." Once participants engaged with this understanding, they moved into one of these three places: a sense of meaninglessness, a loss of community, or a loss of identity.

Sense of Meaninglessness, Lack of Belonging, or Loss of Identity

The next step in the accommodation sub-cycle is feeling either loss of belonging to a community, or loss of personal identity. Many participants dealt with this, and many of the participants with queer identities felt the loss of identity piece most succinctly. One participant, identifying as a Latinx trans woman, described that "So first, deconstructing Catholicism gave me the space to then deal with deconstructing, like all transphobia and homophobia. But I did have to get rid of it first. And it was painful, but it was also possible to get rid of it first." This conflict of identities highlighted that at least some part of their meaning system had to change. In this regard, many participants adjusted their beliefs and moved to a more progressive line of Christianity or went to an open and affirming congregation.

Some participants felt that they no longer belonged in the church or did not have a place in the church and thus felt isolated. One participant, identifying as a gay male, stated "I kind of feel like I was an outlier in my group. I felt like my interpretations of the bible did not match with what they were telling me, so I didn't really feel super connected with the people." with another participant, identifying as a white female, also highlighting "I've never belonged to a group, but as soon as you stopped showing up, no one's ever called me or contacted me in any way, so that makes you wonder, well, how deep of an impact were you really ever making in that community?" These two pieces were similar but ultimately led to a loss of belonging within that community. For

participants with a meaning conflict, this was consistent with those in a cognitive or moral stressor category. One participant, identifying as a white male, stated that “...if you abandon the concept of there being an absolute, that I think is what ultimately was tying me most dearly to religion, if there isn’t an absolute to tell us what’s right and wrong, how do you base anything?” The participant was specific about how this change in what meaning should be directly conflicted with their meaning system, prompting them to explore new meanings or adjust parts of their existing meaning system. This process of exploration leads into minor deconstruction.

Minor Deconstruction

The minor deconstruction step is crucial to the accommodation sub-cycle. This is where participants adjusted a portion of their meaning system to be able to process the stressor. As mentioned previously, many participants initially shifted to a different brand of Christianity while still maintaining their affiliation with Christianity as a whole. One participant, a Latinx trans woman, specifically called this their “rebound religion” and highlighted that they did feel some resolution of the stressors they were experiencing stating “...I left the catholic church and started going to a methodist church...and it was a bit better for me in general. I would say they were socially actually very laid back. So it was known I was some kind of queer to all of them.” This highlights how the adjustment of the meaning system, rather than the entire meaning system, was somewhat successful in processing the stressor.

This step is also useful for those testing their meaning systems in new contexts. For example, one participant, a white female, stated “We tried several churches, and went to a church in the United Church of Christ denomination, and I was like, wow, I haven’t seen this. This is cool, like I can imagine raising kids here like this seems like a really fantastic place, this seems like a life giving place like this is great.” In which they

attempted multiple different churches and contexts to resolve their stressor. Once an individual has adjusted their meaning system in a way that may resolve the stressor, individuals then move back into the assimilation/affirmation sub-cycle as a final test of the adjustment within their meaning system.

Engagement with Assimilation/Affirmation

Engagement with the assimilation/affirmation sub-cycle, after engaging in affirmation, is the final check that participants went through to test if their adjustments were able to process the stressor presented. If this test of the adjustment fails, then failure to adjust becomes a new stressor, and individuals begin their way through the cycle again. Many participants highlighted that the changes and adjustments they made to their meaning system often had cascading effects into other stressors. For example, one participant, a white female, highlighted that “My earliest memories associated with religion are pretty much catastrophic anxiety. Waking up in the middle of the night and trying to talk to my parents about, like, I just feel so bad, I feel sinful, I feel afraid, and often not having the words for that experience...and around sixteen or seventeen I cracked. I finally was like no, I am doing everything exactly right. There are all these kinds of contradictory sentiments that get preached at you, like oh you’re saved by grace, but also you have to prove that you're saved by works. God loves you just the way you are, but you also have to prove that you’re saved. They’ll condemn you then condemn you for feeling condemned.”

Another participant, identifying as a white female, highlighted that this adjustment then impacted their social engagement stating “It was more watch your back, what you say, who you say anything to, this person, if you’re not careful, is going to be the one who’s going to turn you in because you had a bad attitude, or you didn’t kneel during prayer, you didn’t stand during the reading. It was a bunch of man-made rules to

identify that you were Christian, and you were a good Christian and that you were showing fruit.” In each case, the failure of the affirmation sub-cycle activated a stressor in a new category, typically including the emotional stressor component. After multiple attempts at resolving each of these compounding stressors, participants highlighted that all these stressor categories became activated, and triggered a testing of the central belief of their meaning systems: absolute, universal truths. In testing this, the culmination of each of these stressors led to the combined impact of a sense of meaninglessness, lack of belonging, and a loss of their identity. The study found that should the accommodation sub-cycle be engaged with enough times without a positive resolution in the affirmation sub-cycle, that the other three categories of stressor have likely been activated, leading to the individual needing to engage with the adoption sub-cycle.

Adoption Sub-Cycle

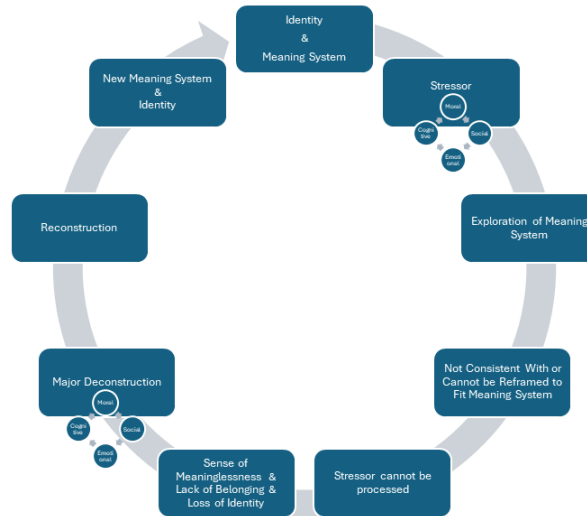
The adoption sub-cycle is likely the rarest, and most difficult sub-cycle to engage with. This sub-cycle requires a combined sense of meaninglessness, loss of community, and loss of identity. This is typically achieved when an individual has engaged with the accommodation process at length, and was unable to resolve the stressors. The study has found that typically participants engaged with this sub-cycle when the final value of absolute, universal truth was checked in the accommodation sub-cycle, and was found to be unsatisfactory within their meaning system. From here, individuals will undergo “major deconstruction”. Major deconstruction involves the rejection of the existing meaning system, community, and currently held identity, at once. For example, one participant, aged 28 and identifying as a white female stated, “And I was just like, I've been uncomfortable for a while and... I like stopped tithing, stopped listening, stopped everything and... Just decided I was done. So I was done with the church and I was done with realizing I didn't need Jesus, it was just a question of did I want him around and kind

of coming to this conclusion that I was just like. I don't. Like there's not enough good in the tradition to outweigh all the traps and the baggage. And then I think it was like literally Christmas Eve. When I told my husband, I don't think I'm a Christian anymore.” This is the most devastating sub-cycle to engage with for an individual’s mental health, but is necessary in order to resolve the mounting mental health struggles being experienced. The guiding value at this stage is the concept of relative, contextual truths rather than a singular all defining truth for all individuals, contexts, and backgrounds. The value is then adopted during the accommodation sub-cycle, and the value typically guides the individual through the process of major deconstruction, reconstruction, and the adoption of a new meaning system, meaning, or identity.

This sub-cycle is the most sensitive cycle however, as individuals may simply adopt another meaning system that espouses universal, absolute truths. This new meaning system may not resolve the underlying stressors, which can lead to another engagement with this sub-cycle at a later date. Should an individual complete this process and affirm their new meaning system and identity through the assimilation/affirmation sub-cycle, individuals typically continue to engage with the accommodation sub-cycle, and then checking the results of this sub-cycle with the assimilation/affirmation sub-cycle, to ensure that their meaning system is applicable in various contexts. Should there be another conflict, the accommodation sub-cycle is typically sufficient in addressing the new stressor and its contexts.

Figure 6:
Adoption Sub-Cycle

Adoption



Sense of Meaninglessness, Lack of Belonging, And Loss of Identity

Once the aggregation of these stressors led to the combined feelings of meaninglessness, lack of belonging, and a loss of identity, individuals then began to test one final value in their meaning system – absolute, universal truth. One participant, a white male, stressed that this was the final piece to fall, highlighting “I went to religion for the sense of meaning. I was searching for a framework to live my life by, and that was that I thought they were. It was religion in which I sought those answers. And you want to ask the question, what replaces religion? And the answer I came to is nothing. You don’t, I don’t, need an absolute.”, with other participants stating, “And that was part of the like accepting everything or nothing proposition that I feel is a necessary part of organized religion.” and “I felt a deep sense of loss. There’s just so many types of meaning, and they would call it religion, but I would call it meaning to explore. If there is

no meaning, then we create our own meaning, so what might that look like?.” The combined effects of this test, as well as the mounting distress of each category of stressor being activated, shifted these individuals into major deconstruction. This combination typically occurred once within each participant’s life as of the time of interviewing.

Major Deconstruction

Major deconstruction occurs when an individual drastically changes their existing meaning system, community, and identity from their lives. Participants reported that the effects of this were incredibly devastating for their overall mental health, while also feeling relieved in some areas. One participant, a white male, highlighted “It [religion] was the rebar in the concrete that was the foundation of my ethics and philosophy. It was unseen yet essential. So the structure of it, and the removal of it was incredibly disruptive.” and another, a white female, “When I was a Christian I was so busy blunting my feelings, burying my feelings. Trying to shove what was happening into some kind of narrative framework about how I was learning something and was making everything better. And I didn’t have to.” Another participant, a white male, stated “I don’t recall a lot of stress. It was, ‘I’m on a journey, let’s see what’s going to come next’ and this is something I’m discovering is fairly unusual and I’m on a lot of ex-Christian groups. I’m pretty sure that the people who were fine with it, like me, don’t tend to go to those communities that much because they’re not looking for support.” This contrast highlights that the level of distress versus relief varied across participants.

Participants also reported a lack of trust in others, in groups, and in other meaning systems. They also indicated a lack of trust in themselves with questions raised such as “what if I’m wrong again?” “How could I have been so blind?” “Why did it take me so long to just let this go and leave?”. Overall, there was a grieving process for the previous meaning system and identity as well. Participants indicated that the loss of this was not an

easy or flippant decision made, but rather one agonized over for months, if not years. One participant, an African American female, summarized the experience stating “You know, it’s gone through lots of iterations. I would say about eight or nine years. It wasn’t until the pandemic that I got to where I am now.” After grieving this loss, participants then began to look to rebuild and move forward. They recognized the need for some sort of meaning at the very least. This led participants to the reconstruction step of the adoption cycle.

Reconstruction

The reconstruction step of the adoption cycle is crucial, and a highly sensitive time for an individual following major deconstruction. One participant, a female, highlighted that when deconstructing they would have preferred to simply move into the next high control environment that presented itself, stating “The meaning informs the boundaries. The thing I wanted most was a sense of like I have a different storyline. If I could just follow that, and I’m so glad that didn’t happen because I think I would have just got sucked into like a cult or some other like easy narrative. I had to go through all the things to realize like ok, this is a life, this is what a life is. It’s good and it’s bad. And all of those things had to happen, even if it was painful. And that is what gives it the meaning.” Participants recognized the sensitive nature of the undertaking and were exceedingly cautious in the meaning systems they explored and identities they tested out. One participant, a Latinx trans woman, stated that “it was really instrumental in shaping who I am, but then also, all the pieces of it had to be re-arranged around a new sense of self.” Participants typically looked to others in their lives who had similar experiences with major deconstruction and consulted them for resources and guidance through the process. Others found the need to reconstruct a community first, to have the space to openly explore without judgment. Some participants found this within more progressive

denominations within Christianity stating “And I felt like my favorite moments from the progressive United Church of Christ church I was going to in California, where I could have these amazing conversation with older people who were very much not conservative, which was to me a new experience.”

Other participants connected deeply with the queer community, and explored their queer identity and what it had to offer them stating “maybe you just need a core group of people who are ok with you, and love you in the sense of they don’t need you to be anything else and can just take you where you’re at, and that can actually be very important.” Other participants had highlighted that they had to reframe how they felt about community in general to move forward, with one participant stating “I have a distrust of authority, I have a distrust of collective thinking. I’m so aware of the power that can be abused. I have five friends, and we’re not a friend group. These are my different friends in different spheres and we’ve built trust over time.”

Each participant however still had one core value that propelled and guided them through the reconstruction process, such as one participant, a white male, stating “I reject the idea that Christianity has like a copyright on the golden rule, but like because they don't. And that's not the only place it has come up in religion around the world, despite the many, many pastors who preach that it is just straight misinformation. But like the golden rule, is great. That what that is, we don't talk about like a useful heuristic for, for navigating situations. That's a great one. And so I think that when I was evaluating myself, it wasn't even necessarily like I want to be like Christ. It's more along the lines of like that Christ personifies.”

Adoption of New Meaning System and Identity

Once participants had spent a significant amount of time exploring new meaning systems, they began to select an identity and meaning system that they perceived to fit within their remaining values. One participant, a female, stated that “The way I was raised, and they were evangelical, was like we were locked in a room in a basement and we were like, this is what Christianity is. But then we finally, like, wandered out or got out. And you realize you're in a mansion, in a neighborhood full of mansions. In a world full of mansions. There's just so many types of meaning,” Highlighting that participants explored multiple meaning systems to ensure an informed decision on the meaning system and identity they wanted to adopt. Upon the adoption of this new identity and meaning system, participants then took steps to test these in practice, such as “The moment I realized that I don't have to have it figured out right now, and I don't have to have my known purpose, I can just. Figure it out as I go, and that's ok? That was such a huge relief for me. I thought it would be the opposite, but it was such a huge relief.” as indicated by one participant.

Engagement with Assimilation/Affirmation Sub-Cycle

Once the new meaning system and identity were selected, and put into place, individuals then moved into the assimilation/affirmation sub-cycle once again. This check was to ensure that the stressors leading up to major deconstruction are now able to be processed within the newly adopted meaning system and identity. Each stressor is isolated, and tested within its own category, due to the rejection of absolute and universal truth. One participant, a white male, highlighted that in this step “I very much cherry picked what I believe, who I am, who I'm supposed to be, and decided which parts I want to keep and which parts I want to throw away.” This step is evidence that individuals are more likely to reject a portion of the meaning system than previously, and are more

willing to move into the accommodation sub-cycle should a portion of the new meaning system fail the assimilation/affirmation check.

One participant, an African American female, remarked that their meaning system had “...gone through lots of iterations, but I think. The most important thing that I have taken from it is that. Me being alive and happy is purpose that it doesn't, I don't have to be this thing. I don't have to be in this position, or be in this world? Being me should be enough, and that's purpose. It's taken me forever to get here. It's been beneficial because what it's done for me is I've been like, you know what? It's good enough for me to just be alive and be happy and pursue the things that feed my energy.” This example highlights that participants were aware that this cycle will continue for years to come. Another participant, a white male, highlighted that “I spent the better part of twenty years, I mean I'm still picking apart some of them. I'll spend the rest of my life going through them.” In this regard, it seems that some individuals find the process of engaging with the accommodation cycle after major deconstruction to be a rewarding experience, rather than a highly distressing and uncomfortable portion of their lives.

Mental Health Struggles Associated with Each Meaning Sub-Cycle Assimilation/Affirmation Cycle

Mental health struggles were found to be tied to the meaning cycle, and specifically several mental health struggles were unique to each sub-cycle, with several also being prevalent across all sub-cycles. In particular, Complex PTSD, or C-PTSD as reported by several participants, was found to be associated with the assimilation process. This is likely due to the inability to engage with the other sub-cycles, and rather being forced to engage only with the assimilation/affirmation sub-cycle. For example, all of the study participants were unable to engage with other sub-cycles until they had left for college, or started a career. The removal of the individual from the authority of their

parents or home church environment allowed for engagement with other sub-cycles. As a result of being forced to assimilate stressors in a manner that was not consistent with their meaning system, participants simply delayed the resolution of the stressor until a later date. This consistent delaying of processing stressors is consistent with the understanding of C-PTSD: small, sustained, micro-traumas over an extended period of time (Cloitre et al., 2019).

When participants were able to break from this sub-cycle, the built-up stressors came back to the forefront, and needed to be dealt with all at once. One participant, a white female, highlighted that “And I have memories of being around probably, I think I was about six or seven, and I would try to talk to my mom about this before I would go to sleep like she was like tucking me in to put me to bed or something. And I tried to talk to her about something, something about this feeling, and she was trying to reassure me that, I was saved and I didn't have to be afraid of condemnation or death or like, you know, anything scary that could happen in life because, oh, you know, God is on your side. God will protect you.” Rather than being able to properly engage with the other portions of the meaning cycle, the participant was required to find a way to assimilate these feelings.

Another participant, an African American female, highlighted “... After the shooting. Many church people gave me messages around the reason that I was still struggling with depression or PTSD or anxiety. My mom even told me you're not spending enough alone time with God. I felt very...judged and misunderstood in the way that I was dealing with this trauma from folks in the church, so I completely shut down.” For these participants, the understanding within their initial meaning system growing up was that struggle validates the meaning system, and therefore the meaning system cannot be adjusted to accommodate the stressor. For example, one participant, a white female,

highlighted that “...just the level of thought policing that you have to do. And then it makes it even worse, because if you tell yourself, don't think about this, you think about it more. So it's just exhausting. So there's just an utter level of complete exhaustion inflicted by a fundamentalist theology. Letting go of it is... It'd be really hard. It'd be hard for me to compare it to anything else.” This suppression of thought and inability to engage results in increased anxiety and depression. But these kinds of struggles are not permitted within their initial meaning system which causes more conflicts. One participant, a white male, highlighted that “...It's, I mean, I have so much more confidence now also like. It gave me the permission to admit that I have an anxiety disorder or something's wrong and see a doctor because before that I always just thought that, you know, I had self esteem issues and the devil was trying to bring me down. And I just had to stand up and then I realized like after I left the faith that. I need help so.” These mounting struggles could not be appropriately addressed until the ability to engage with the accommodation sub-cycle.

Accommodation Sub-Cycle

The accommodation sub-cycle continues the mental health struggles of anxiety and depression but is also the opportunity to relieve these struggles that may have built up through the assimilation sub-cycle. Participants identified that even engaging with this sub-cycle resulted in deep anxiety or relief. For anxiety, this was due to the first step of questioning a meaning system in their entire lives. One participant highlighted that “... That anxiety and that paralysis that I felt the concept of religion offered. There is literally people telling you I will make your life better. Just join and believe and your life will improve. A hell of an offer for a desperate person.” and another highlighting “...I've been listening to the church and also some progressive Christian podcasts. And I was just feeling this anxiety in my chest every time I went to go listen and I caught myself putting it off like ‘ohh I'm not going to listen to it today, I'm going to do it another day.’ And it

was because I was afraid it wasn't gonna work. I was afraid it wasn't good enough.” There is a deep fear that the engagement with the accommodation sub-cycle won't resolve the stressor or will fail in some way. Because of this fear, engaging with this sub-cycle is delayed.

However, once engaging with the process, all of the participants reported some feeling of relief. Several participants highlight “... And I believe that. OK, there's something, you know, this is good. There has to be something good here. This is supposed to be healthy for people at a fundamental level and being able to acknowledge that there were things wrong was, I think, a big relief in terms of probably the cognitive dissonance that had been building up over years.” and “... It was more of...a sense of relief and like, why did I even believe this in the first place?” and “... And now I feel like probably in the last two years, I feel like I'm more peaceful, less anxious, even from like growing up, I was always so anxious, so fearful. I don't feel that way anymore. I feel more settled. I feel more settled in myself. I feel happier.”

There was a prevalent undercurrent of depression struggles throughout the participants lives. And there was a relative lack of understanding of what they were feeling, or how to express it. One participant, a white female, highlighted “.. I am able to look back now and identify that I have struggled with anxiety and depression since I was about 11 years old. And felt like that was not a topic that could be addressed or discussed in my household. It's not a topic that I got any support from the church with. It's not something I received any education on until my senior year of college.” another highlighted “... I didn't know how depressed I was, but I didn't want to die or think I was about to die yet, but I couldn't imagine living like that. Just there was no possibility. It was hopeless.” Depression was not necessarily relieved during this cycle, but it provided

the space to recognize the struggle and the permission needed to seek mental health care.

Adoption Sub-Cycle

Engagement with this sub-cycle has potentially the most devastating levels of mental health struggles. Many participants reported significant stress, anxiety, depression, grief, mourning, and suicidal ideation. However, once engaging with this cycle and working through these emotions with the space provided initially by the accommodation sub-cycle, participants were able to alleviate a significant amount of these struggles. One participant, identifying as female, highlighted “... I feel this deep sense of I'm in exactly where, Just the spot where I need to be. I don't know if I'll be here forever, but for now I'm exactly right. I've never had that sense growing up in Christian colleges, in my marriage, like all of this feels right. And I think it only feels right now because I had to leave all those things and, like, make choices based on like my own values. I had to figure out my values and then make choices.” and another highlighted “... I was just talking to my psychiatrist yesterday about suicidal ideation, depression, anxiety...[I had these and was] not even in puberty yet, and feeling like there's no point to living, feeling like. Worrying about what's going to happen in. Five years, 10 years. Not feeling like there's any point to anything.” and another highlighting “... The big part that made me leave religion was when I was about 15 years old and I was having, like, very severe depression and anxiety. And it got to the point where I was like, extremely suicidal. And my dad said, you better not kill yourself because that's a sin and you're going to go to hell and committing suicide is just disrespecting the life that God gave you. And that was just like, the worst possible thing you could have said, as you can imagine.”

The significant loss of an identity, a sense of community, and a personal identity has deep psychological ramifications for individuals, leaving them ultimately with a sense of loss and purposelessness. If individuals are unable to find a new sense of meaning, these struggles may persist for significant amounts of time. Many participants highlighted that the engagement with this process is either ongoing, or lasted for many years as highlighted by one participant stating “...Now looking back, I would say this happened like 15 to 20 years ago from the very beginning, but like probably the last 10 years, I've just been out. So now with the benefit of hindsight and critical distance. I would say it was a slow, crumbling that began with, like, religious hypocrisy.” and another stating “... it took me roughly 20 years before I finished this transition out. I mean, I stopped being a Christian within five years, but after that it claimed the idea of religion and God for many years after that. And I feel it's all part of that same process just, you know, different states.” The relief felt however, was not necessarily immediate but did come with one participant highlighting “...The moment I realized that I don't have to have it figured out right now, I don't have to have my known purpose. I can just. Figure it out as I go, and that's OK. That was such a huge relief for me. It was. I thought it'd be the opposite, but it was such a huge relief.”

Still Practicing and Discontinued Dones and the Meaning Cycle

In re-visiting the distinctions of the terms still-practicing done and discontinued done, the study found that these terms were largely inadequate in describing different types of religious dones. Participants seemed to move in and out of these categories, with some leaving initially seemingly in a discontinued done state until a new stressor arose and prompted an engagement with the meaning cycle once again, and behaviors more consistent with still practicing dones was seen. The results of this study indicate that religious dones are more so on a spectrum of done and can move between the two poles

of still practicing or discontinued as needed throughout their lives. Where an individual will fall on the scale seems to be largely driven by their personal values. One participant who would previously have been identified as a discontinued done was driven by their core values to return to support groups and other means to assist those going through the transition into religious done and continued to explore their own meaning system as a result. This participant highlighted “... I'm on a journey. Let's see what's going to come next. So again, this is something that I'm discovering is fairly unusual and I'm on a lot of the ex-Christian subreddits and now on the discord. A lot of people have been really upset about that, and it's probably some sample bias here because I'm pretty sure that the people who were fine with it like me don't tend to go to those communities that much because they're not looking for support. The reason I'm there is because it occurred to me, I might be able to help other people, because I've been there. So that's why I show up.”

CHAPTER III:

DISCUSSION

Aims and Objectives

The primary aim of the study was to explore the connection between strength of religious identity and meaning making as part of the process of de-identification and whether they predict the subcategory of religious done into which an individual will move. The study found that there were deeper connections in the process of meaning making and identity, and that individuals will not remain in one category of religious done depending on the strength of this identity or connection with their religious meaning system. Specifically, the study found that predicting which category based on this strength of identity was more a predictor of the depth of engagement with the meaning cycle rather than the category of religious done. Because of this, the study finds that the current categories of religious dones to be insufficient in describing the participants.

The second aim of the study was to explore how the de-identification process impacts the severity of mental health struggles associated with leaving a religion. The study found that mental health struggles were connected to leaving a religion, but more broadly were associated with the stressors challenging existing meaning systems that arose from within the meaning system. Depending on the stressor, the mental health struggles associated with this process were either reduced or expanded. In reducing the mental health struggles, individuals needed to be able to successfully process the stressor as a result of either reframing the conflict within the meaning system, adjusting a value in the meaning system, or by changing their meaning system as a whole. However, mental health struggles were expanded as individuals moved further down the meaning cycle and its sub-cycles. Each sub-cycle had overlapping mental health struggles, but also their own unique mental health struggles as well. In essence, the de-identification process as found

in the study is both the method of resolving mental health struggles, and in increasing mental health struggles.

Identity Development & Religious Identity

In reviewing the identity development stages as espoused by Erikson and expanded upon by Hashmati and Rahiminejad (2020), the study provides a more nuanced understanding to how the development of identity is connected to the development of meaning systems and how meaning systems inform identity. Hashmati and Rahiminejad's (2020) work on maladjustment following identity development is also complemented with these findings, and further explores how meaning may be an underpinning for the development of identity. Specifically, each stage of identity development can be connected to a specific method of engaging with the meaning cycle. Identity diffusion can be expanded to include low commitment to an identity, but also a high commitment to the meaning system provided to the individual through social groups or family units. Because of this, individuals should be engaging with the assimilation process of the meaning cycle in attempting to fit any stressor to identity or meaning within their existing meaning system.

In identity foreclosure, individuals have accepted the identity provided to them, and the study finds that there is likely an acceptance of the meaning system provided to them as well. Individuals have both a high commitment to their identity, and the meaning system provided. In this regard, individuals are likely engaging with the affirmation side of the meaning cycle, in which they are able to successfully reframe stressors to be consistent with their identity and their meaning system in a method that is satisfying overall. In identity moratorium, or when there is a psychological crises combined with low commitment to identity, this can be further understood as low commitment to identity and low commitment to a meaning system.

Essentially, individuals are unable to resolve stressors through the assimilation/affirmation sub-cycle, and thus must engage with the accommodation sub-cycle, and if needed, the adoption sub-cycle to move to high identity and meaning system commitment. In doing so, individuals will then land in the identity achievement status. This would be characterized by high identity commitment, and with the findings of this study, high meaning system commitment. Individuals in this status have engaged with the deepest levels of the meaning cycle to develop their identity in tandem with their meaning cycle, and are able to engage in all segments of the meaning cycle and find a positive result in these checks. The study finds that identities inform meaning systems, and vice versa, suggesting that one cannot be adjusted without adjusting the other in some form. In the understanding of religious identity, the study provides a further expansion on the development, adjustment, and maintenance of religious identities as informed by meaning system conflicts and adjustments from these conflicts. The study broadens the understanding of how individuals with a religious identity resolve conflicts with their meaning and identity in religious environments due to religious norms. Specifically, the study provides an understanding of why an individual would enter religious de-identification when the conflicts of these norms with personally held meaning is unable to be resolved. In each strategy of maintaining religious identity, there is an effort to retain the religious identity, and if unsuccessful, a new strategy is attempted, similar to the method of engaging with the meaning cycle. For the first strategy, retaining a strong identity and continuing to engage with normal religious activity (Louis et al., 2021), this can be further understood using the lens of engagement with the assimilation/affirmation sub-cycle. Individuals do not change their meaning or identity but find ways to either reframe the stressor or ignore it. In the second strategy, maintaining the identity but voicing discontent with religious norms, individuals are

engaging with the accommodation sub-cycle in that they are attempting to find a way to either change the norm, or adjust the meaning of the norm to resolve the conflict with the norm. In the third strategy, lowering religious identity and disengaging from the norm, individuals are engaging with the accommodation sub-cycle, and if disruptive enough, the adoption sub-cycle. Individuals are adjusting their identity and distancing from the religious identity, and thus also adjusting and distancing themselves from a religious meaning system.

Religious De-Identification

In religious de-identification, the study found significant expansion on each dimension of de-identification, but also found connection to meaning making and meaning system exploration. Each dimension of de-identification, cognitive, moral, emotional, and social (Van Tongeren et al., 2021), is a specific stressor in relation to meaning. In cognitive stressors for example, the result is an adjustment of beliefs, as in the accommodation sub-cycle, and necessitates adjustments of identity as a result. Because of this adjustment of both identity and meaning, the study finds that there is more than just de-identification with a belief, but rather a deconstruction of the identity and the belief in tandem. Because of this, the study finds that deconstruction is the overall method being engaged with, rather than just de-identification. In meaning conflicts, if the adjustment is able to be completed only in the assimilation/affirmation sub-cycle, then de-identification would be the process that is occurring. When these conflicts necessitate a deeper adjustment, then deconstruction of both meaning and identity is required. In this regard, the study recommends using deconstruction in place of de-identification given the interrelation of identity and meaning systems as a whole.

Meaning Making

Building on the initial work of Park (2022) and Van Tongeren (2021), the study provides a more nuanced explanation of the ways in which individuals engage with their meaning systems while de-identifying. Specifically, the study expands on existing models of the psychological process of meaning making and provides three distinct and interconnected cycles in which individuals engage with and adjust their meaning system in response to stressors. Each cycle services a distinct purpose to either resolve a stressor, or check an adjustment made in another cycle to ensure the stressor is resolving. The assimilation/affirmation cycle is a check for the accommodation cycle, and the accommodation and assimilation/affirmation cycles are checks for the adoption cycle of the meaning cycle.

The study also works to improve our understanding of the values of religious donees, and how these values are adjusted or removed through the engagement with this cycle. This connects the religious residue phenomenon as outlined by Van Tongeren (2021), specifically in how these previously religious values guide formerly religious individuals through adjusting and changing their meaning systems.

Similarly, this study also compliments Park's (2022) work on how meaning systems are used to resolve stress and significant stressors in life events, particularly when the stressor arises from within the meaning system itself. The study expands on this model by providing a description of the method used by individuals as they adjust their meaning system as a whole, rather than adjusting portions of it. It also explores what an individual will do when the conflicting stressor arises from the meaning system itself.

The study also expands upon Steger's (2012) work on making meaning in life, and provides a guide on how individuals engage in this pursuit. Specifically, in providing a model individuals engage with in 'Reactive' meaning making, or meaning making that

occurs when there is psychological disfunction or distress experienced. The study provides a basis to answer the question raised by Steger on what this process looks like, and the dimensions that would cause reactive meaning making.

Meaning Making and Mental Health

Meaning making and mental health are intricately connected, as engaging with the process of meaning making requires some sort of disruption to mental health. As stressors arise, specific mental health burdens increase, as highlighted in Ramler's (2023) work on how religious trauma is expressed. The results of this study could be used in clinical practice to better assist clients going through a deconstruction process to better understand the process they are engaging with, potential mental health struggles that may arise, and what next steps are in how to engage with the process.

The study expands on the work of Downie's (2022) on the areas of shame and religious trauma, and how they connect with mental health struggles that result from these phenomena. Specifically, the study identifies mechanisms in which these mental health struggles result from conflicts in meaning, and the struggles associated with adjusting meaning and identity as a result of engaging with the meaning cycle and its sub-cycles. For example, religious trauma would persist as a result of continued engagement with only the assimilation sub-cycle of the meaning system, delaying psychological distress of meaning conflicts, rather than resolving them through deeper engagement within the meaning cycle through the accommodation, and if needed, adoption sub-cycles.

Still Practicing and Discontinued Dones

In connection with the categorization of Still Practicing and Discontinued Dones, similar to how the field has measures for religiosity, so should we have a scale for measures of religious exiting and disengagement. Participants engaged with the spiritual

or religious when they needed to in a specific context and left it when not needed in other contexts. This engagement is consistent with a core value of relative, contextual truths. In light of this, the study suggests the need for further research for the development of a better term for religious donees. Several participants indicated frustration with the term, as it does not accurately represent how they feel or engage with religion and spirituality daily.

Applications

Clinical Psychology

The results of the study suggest there is a potentially significant application in the clinical psychology realm in the potential to develop or improve existing clinical frameworks. Given the nature of stressors needing to be reframed, this meaning-making model presented could complement cognitive behavioral therapy well. Future research may also look to identify other areas that the model may apply to within clinical psychology such as further connecting symptoms to steps on the cycle, exploration of how this cycle may further the understanding and differentiation of Complex PTSD from PTSD, and identifying predictors of when an individual will engage with this cycle. Further exploration of the connection of shame and exploration of religious trauma can also be explored. Clinical psychologists may look to employ this model when engaging with those questioning their meaning systems and core values, and how this may help them in this endeavor.

Developmental Psychology

Developmental psychology would also benefit from these findings in further explaining the underlying struggles that are faced along the human development life cycle. In applying this model to the developmental life cycle, research could be conducted expanding our understanding of the struggles experienced by children and

adolescents as they move through development and begin to craft their initial schemas in meaning, identity, and community. This model can also potentially be applied in the development of meaning systems overall. Further research into how meaning systems are initially crafted would be beneficial to the furthering of our understanding of meaning.

Meaning/Existential Psychology

This model is most influential in the field of meaning psychology. It addresses several questions presented by the First Congress on the Construction of Personal Meaning in 2014 (Park, 2017). The first question being “Is it possible or desirable to propose an integrative theory of human meaning?” The model proposed by the current study is a continuation of developing an integrative theory of human meaning. In further developing this model across disciplines, a holistic and integrative theory could emerge. Another question posed was “What is the dialogical relationship between global meaning and situational meanings, and the processes by which each might change or evolve?” The model proposed in this study provides a direct answer to this question, highlighting three unique cycles within the broader meaning cycle, and how each sub-cycle relates to each other and the ways in which individuals move and develop their meanings and meaning systems over time. A final question answered is “how does meaning relate to the various virtues or strengths envisioned by positive psychology or by different world religions and/or ethical frameworks?” The proposed model is established based on all meaning systems being equitable, whether founded on a world religion, ethical framework, or scientific framework. The theory places the discernment of which virtues or strengths, as envisioned in positive psychology, are useful for an individual on the individual. Individuals engage with this theory to determine which values are important to them, which values need to be adjusted, and which values need to be discarded. Participants

within this study borrowed virtues from many different meaning frameworks, rather than one single framework.

Sociology

The results of this study also have broader sociological implications, and directly contradict the understanding of the rational choice framework (Kiser & Hechter, 1998), specifically in relation to religion. In integrating this model into the study of the sociology of religion, the understanding of level of religiosity as based on a measure of utility in response to uncertain environments or environmental stressors has a glaring gap. The model suggests moving beyond rational choice and could provide a new framework of how individuals engage with religion as a meaning system over their lifespan. The results of this study provide support for the critiques of Bourdieu on rational choice theory, by providing the underlying mechanism in which individuals make decisions: their meaning systems (Hayes, 2020). If individuals are guided by their meaning systems rather than rational choices, this theory could explain seemingly irrational decisions of individuals within social movements. Further research into this theory and its implications in social movements both globally and locally would further benefit the field of sociology. The study is also consistent with Durkheim's findings of anomie suicide and the resulting loss of meaningfulness leading to extreme psychological distress directed either inward or outward (Durkheim, 2002).

Cross Discipline

The findings of this study recommend an interdisciplinary approach to further exploring the process of religious deconstruction. Clinical, developmental, social, cognitive, and meaning psychology researchers would benefit from also partnering with sociologists to understand not just the individual impact of people engaging with the meaning-making cycle, but also the broader social and cultural impacts of large numbers

of individuals engaging with the cycle as seen in recent demographic shifts of those identifying as religious. In this way, recommendations can be made for religious leaders, social leaders, and governments on ways to address and support those going through this transition process.

Clergy

The results of this study have applications for clergy as well, in engaging with religious members who may be questioning their meaning system and engaging with the proposed cycles of meaning. In understanding the proposed meaning-making cycle, clergy may be better equipped to understand the struggles individuals are facing and should directly engage with the questions and doubts presented by providing the space to question. Should this space not be provided, the study has found the devastating psychological effects of not being able to engage with this cycle. Engaging with this cycle does not necessarily mean an individual will leave their faith altogether, and if clergy engage with this process openly, many current religious ones may feel safe to return to the church and meaning system they once held dear.

Limitations and Future Directions

Limitations of the study include reliance on oral histories from participants, the focus on western society, the potential bias of the researcher, and potential lack of diversity in the sample. For the reliance on oral histories from participants, memory is widely understood to be highly fallible (Loftus, 2019), especially given extensive time between the event and the recall of the memory. This fallibility is further increased when recalling traumatic events. As a result, the data collected through interviews could result in flawed data that may not be accurate through memory recall. Further research should conduct a longitudinal study to understand the transition as individuals are going through the deconstruction and reconstruction process. This will ensure that the data is collected

concurrently with the transitions individuals may experience. The focus on Western religions was another limitation. Given that western society is a highly individualist culture, the loss of religion may be more impactful than those in a collectivist society. Future research should look to expand the sample globally.

The researchers' potential bias in having experienced religious deconstruction and reconstruction could also impact the study. The researcher may not be aware of biases that exist and therefore may not be able to be corrected or adjusted for in data collection and analysis. Future research may benefit from researchers who have not gone through this process and are able to study the phenomenon through an outside perspective. Future research would also likely benefit from developing methodology to examine this phenomenon from a quantitative lens. Given the sample selection methods, it is possible that a lack of diversity may occur through both racial, gender, and socio-economic statuses. The small sample size could have also led to difficulty ensuring a truly diverse sample, and thus generalizability. Future research may benefit from an increased sample size, with multiple researchers conducting interviews to ensure that a more diverse sample is able to be selected.

Conclusion

In summary, the study provides a cohesive model that describes the process of de-identification from religion. Individuals go through a generalizable process in which they change and alter their religious meaning systems over time to resolve stressors that arise in their lives. The meaning cycle consists of three distinct yet interrelated sub-cycles: assimilation/affirmation, accommodation, and adoption. Individuals engage with the assimilation/affirmation sub-cycle to either reframe a stressor to be consistent with their meaning system or ignore the stressor to their meaning system using an answer that may be unsatisfying, but further exploration is not permitted by authority figures in their social

group. In the accommodation sub-cycle, individuals were unable to resolve the stressor through reframing, or are permitted to explore the conflict more deeply and will adjust their meaning system to accommodate the stressor. Individuals then check the accommodation in the assimilation/affirmation sub-cycle to ensure the stressor is able to be processed. In the adoption sub-cycles, individuals have engaged with the accommodation sub-cycle to the extent that their original meaning system is no longer able to adequately hold these adjustments, and thus reject their meaning system and identity in favor of finding a new one. Once a new meaning system has been found, individuals then use the accommodation and assimilation/affirmation sub-cycles to ensure that stressors are able to be processed. In each of these sub-cycles, specific mental health challenges have been found to be present, with significant overlap between the sub-cycles. Mental health struggles increase as individuals dive deeper into the meaning cycle until an acceptable adjustment or new meaning system is found. After this, individuals are able to resolve the building mental health struggles through satisfying processing of the previously mounting stressors in the context of their adjustments or new meaning system.

REFERENCES

- Churchill, S. D. (2022). Essentials of existential phenomenological research. American Psychological Association.
- Cloitre, M., Hyland, P., Bisson, J. I., Brewin, C. R., Roberts, N. P., Karatzias, T., & Shevlin, M. (2019). ICD-11 Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Complex Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in the United States: A Population-Based Study. *Journal of traumatic stress*, 32(6), 833-842. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.22454>
- Downie, A. (2022). Christian Shame and Religious Trauma. *Religions* (Basel, Switzerland), 13(10), 925. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13100925>
- Durkheim, E., Simpson, G., & Spaulding, J. A. (2002). *Suicide : a study in sociology* (2nd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203994320>
- Exline, J. J., Van Tongeren, D. R., Bradley, D. F., Wilt, J. A., Stauner, N., Pargament, K. I., & DeWall, C. N. (2020). Pulling away from religion: Religious/spiritual struggles and religious disengagement among college students. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000375>
- Hayes, A. S. (2020). The Behavioral Economics of Pierre Bourdieu. *Sociological theory*, 38(1), 16-35. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0735275120902170>
- Heshmati, R., & Rahiminejad, A. (2020). Investigation of Maladjustment Based on Identity Status: Foreclosure, Identity Diffusion, Moratorium and Identity Achievement. *Journal of Research & Health*, 225–232. <https://doi.org/10.32598/jrh.10.4.1419.1>

- Kiser, E., & Hechter, M. (1998). The debate on historical sociology : Rational choice theory and its critics : Symposium on historical sociology and rational choice theory. *The American journal of sociology*, 104(3), 785-816.
- Loftus, E. F. (2019). Eyewitness testimony. *Applied cognitive psychology*, 33(4), 498-503. <https://doi.org/10.1002/acp.3542>
- Louis, W. R., Cila, J., Townshend, E., Chonu, G. K., & Lalonde, R. N. (2021). Religious norms, norm conflict, and religious identification. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000428>
- McLaughlin, A. T., Van Tongeren, D. R., Teahan, K., Davis, D. E., Rice, K. G., & DeWall, C. N. (2020). Who are the religious “dones?”: A cross-cultural latent profile analysis of formerly religious individuals.. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000376>
- Mercadante, L. (2020). Spiritual Struggles of Nones and “Spiritual but Not Religious” (SBNRs). *Religions*, 11(10), 513. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11100513>
- Exline, J. J., & Rose, E., (2013) Religious and Spiritual Struggles In Paloutzian, R. F., & Park, C. L. (2013). *Handbook of the psychology of religion and spirituality* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.
- Park, C. L. (2013) Religious and Meaning In Paloutzian, R. F., & Park, C. L. (2013). *Handbook of the psychology of religion and spirituality* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.
- Paloutzian, R. F., & Park, C. L. (2013). *Handbook of the psychology of religion and spirituality* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.

- Park, C. L. (2005). Religion as a Meaning-Making Framework in Coping with Life Stress. *Journal of social issues*, 61(4), 707-729. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2005.00428.x>
- Park, C. L. (2017). Distinctions to Promote an Integrated Perspective on Meaning: Global Meaning and Meaning-Making Processes. *Journal of constructivist psychology*, 30(1), 14-19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10720537.2015.1119082>
- Park, C. L. (2022). Meaning Making Following Trauma. *Frontiers in psychology*, 13, 844891-844891. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.844891>
- Park, C. L., & Folkman, S. (1997). Meaning in the Context of Stress and Coping. *Review of General Psychology*, 1(2), 115–144. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.1.2.115>
- Ramler, M. E. (2023). When God Hurts: The Rhetoric of Religious Trauma as Epistemic Pain. *Rhetoric Society quarterly*, 53(2), 202-216. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2022.2129755>
- Scharp, K. M., & Beck, A. L. (2017). “Losing my religion.” *Narrative Inquiry*, 27(1), 132–148. <https://doi.org/10.1075/ni.27.1.07sch>
- Steger, M. F. (2012). Making Meaning in Life. *Psychological inquiry*, 23(4), 381-385. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1047840X.2012.720832>
- Streib, H. (2021). Leaving religion: deconversion. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 40, 139–144. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2020.09.007>
- Stronge, S., Bulbulia, J., Davis, D. E., & Sibley, C. G. (2020). Religion and the Development of Character: Personality Changes Before and After Religious

- Conversion and Deconversion. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 12(5), 194855062094238. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550620942381>
- Van Tongeren, D. R., & DeWall, C. N. (2021). Disbelief, disengagement, discontinuance, and disaffiliation: An integrative framework for the study of religious deidentification. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000434>
- Van Tongeren, D. R., DeWall, C. N., Chen, Z., Sibley, C. G., & Bulbulia, J. (2020). Religious residue: Cross-cultural evidence that religious psychology and behavior persist following deidentification. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000288>
- Van Tongeren, D. R., DeWall, C. N., Hardy, S. A., & Schwadel, P. (2021). Religious Identity and Morality: Evidence for Religious Residue and Decay in Moral Foundations. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 014616722097081. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167220970814>
- Van Tongeren, D., DeWall, N., & Van Cappellen, P. (2023). A Sheep in Wolf's Clothing? Toward an Understanding of the Religious Dones. *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 152(1), 98–119. <https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0001269>
- Ysseldyk, R., Matheson, K., & Anisman, H. (2010). Religiosity as Identity: Toward an Understanding of Religion From a Social Identity Perspective. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 14(1), 60–71. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868309349693>

APPENDIX A:
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- I. What has been your experience with religion?
- II. What caused you to step outside of the religion you ascribed to?
- III. In what ways did religion connect with your identity?
- IV. Was religion a cornerstone for your identities outside of worship? If so, how was it fundamental in your identity?
- V. Did you find a sense of belonging within your religious community?
 - a. If not within the religious community, where did you find a sense of belonging?
- VI. Have you found a sense of belonging after leaving your religious community, and if so, where and how long did it take to achieve this again?
- VII. In what ways has your identity changed as a result of leaving your religion?
- VIII. How did the loss of your identity impact the distress experienced during this transition?
- IX. Did you experience any mental health struggles during this transition, and after the transition? What were those struggles?
- X. How much did having a religious foundation for your identity lessen or worsen these struggles?
- XI. What behaviors and thought patterns still remain from when you ascribed to that religion?