

“UNRAVELLING”
EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCE AND MEANING OF
SPIRITUAL DECONSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experience and meaning of spiritual deconstruction for post-evangelicals or fundamentalist Christians, what influenced this experience and how this experience impacted their lives (identity, faith, family, community etc.). Although there have been studies on disaffiliation and deconversion, there had been no phenomenological studies on the experience of deconstruction for former dedicated post-evangelicals. Six adults who experienced spiritual deconstruction were interviewed. Through Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), five main themes were identified: *Spiritual Devotion, Internalizing and Conforming, The Unraveling, Leaving: Attempt at Reform and Loss* and *Finding a New Way*. These themes revealed the complex experience of unravelling one's faith. Findings provide a valuable contribution to the limited literature on spiritual deconstruction, meaning and identity . Understanding this experience will aid future mental health practitioners and people process what is a significant and often times difficult life transition. Implications for theory and practice are also discussed.

Keywords: Deconstruction, Disaffiliation, Deconversion, Faith Shift, evangelical, fundamentalist, spiritual identity

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DEDICATION

To all of the spiritual wanderers out there who are asking the tough questions—this is for you.

And the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.

Anaïs Nin

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

A phenomenon known as “deconstruction” in former fundamentalist and evangelical circles is a socio-religious movement that is growing exponentially and in need of academic research. Deconstruction is the process of re-evaluating or shedding one’s religious belief systems and has diverse outcomes. Kathy Escobar (2014) has labeled this experience, “Faith Shift” in her book *Faith Shift: Finding Your Way Forward When Everything You Believe is Coming Apart*. Furthermore, an American psychologist, Dr. Winell (Heacock, 2020), has developed the term Religious Trauma Syndrome (RTS), which focuses on the trauma people face when they attempt to leave or deconstruct from a fundamentalist faith. Dr. Winell argued that when people suffer from leaving fundamentalist religions, their experience may be similar to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (5th ed.; DSM–5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). RTS affects the cognitive, affective, functional, physical, and social aspects of a person (Winell, 1993). RTS is not an official DSM-5 mental health disorder and there are no peer-reviewed articles on this topic. However, there is research that connects negative religious coping to declining mental health that precipitates the need for mental health practitioners to be religiously and spiritually informed. An informed mental health practitioner who is incorporating assessment of spirituality and religion in their psychotherapeutic practices (Pargament et al., 2003) is especially important for clients who are going through the deconstruction process.

Purpose and Research Question

This research aimed to understand the understudied lived experience and meaning of those undergoing deconstruction related to their evangelical or fundamentalist Christian beliefs. This phenomenon is complex, private and identity-shifting for the individual. To understand the

meaning and experience of deconstruction, the predominant focus must be on participants' voices in the research; therefore, I employed a phenomenological methodology. Phenomenology seeks to understand the meanings and essence of a specific experience for a person or persons (Hays & Singh, 2012). Phenomenology seeks to view the phenomenon with naivete, allowing the experience of others to guide insight and reveal commonalities in a particular phenomenon. Deconstruction is complex and there is a distinct gap in the literature. This study will deepen the understanding of why a person begins the process of deconstruction, the experience and meaning of deconstruction and how this impacted their life. Examining the personal stories of the participants and the overarching impact of religious change will add to an understanding for counselling practitioners and the public alike. This study will aid future mental health practitioners and people experiencing this phenomenon to process or make sense of this significant life transition. The study was guided by the following research questions: What influenced the experience of spiritual deconstruction for post-evangelical and post-fundamentalist Christians? What is the lived experience and interpretation of deconstruction to post-evangelicals or post-fundamentalists? How has this experience impacted their life (i.e., faith, family, community, identity or work)?

Researcher Interest

I was raised with diverse religious experiences, beginning with a Catholic background and transitioning to a very small (30-60 people) non-denominational, neo-charismatic (Poloma, 1997) evangelical church for most of my childhood. My experience in the non-denominational church impacted my worldview: my interpretation of God, the world and my place in it. My religious upbringing ultimately stimulated a spiritual journey that directed me toward a ministry vocation.

My deconstruction journey began when I enrolled in a Master of Arts program in theological studies. In the religious tradition I was raised in, the beliefs taught to me included a literal, inerrant interpretation of the Bible, faith healing, the existence of demonic oppression, the need for salvation from a literal hell, and the ability to experience the Holy Spirit. Moreover, my master's program taught me that the Holy Bible is a complex text. When I learned that one version of the Bible does not exist, and rather, there are multiple versions of manuscripts with different possible words and interpretations, I was led to hold the Bible's authority and inerrancy with less certainty. The Bible was no longer a magical text—but rather a gritty, earthy, human text that incorporates human interpretation with possible divine inspiration.

During the next 15 years, I experienced an intellectual and spiritual process of questioning, doubting and unlearning the beliefs I had based my life upon. I began learning about psychological and medical reasons for experiences that others might attribute to demons or the presence of the Holy Spirit (e.g., the body's response to releasing trauma). I also started realizing that other spiritual philosophies experienced similar phenomenon (e.g., speaking in tongues) that I had attributed to Christianity and my worldview began to expand. Over the years I found other people who had experienced similar realizations, mostly authors and speakers who were no longer accepted into the evangelical framework and some who chose to leave. These authors shared podcasts, and fans of these podcasts started groups on social media. I joined some of these groups and realized that there were thousands of people who were also experiencing deconstruction. In these social media platforms, people share their confusion, frustration and questions.

Assumptions and Biases

In my search, I came across many former, dedicated, post-born again evangelicals who were also struggling with a sense of spiritual estrangement. There is an erroneous thought that these former evangelicals were not true Christians. I argue that for some, it was their dedication and their commitment to their faith that eventually led them out of evangelical Christianity. Although their shifts in beliefs have led to relief in some ways, there was also increased isolation, depression, loss of identity, confusion, doubt and struggling to come to terms with their present belief or non-belief systems. The individuals I came across are struggling to know who to turn to in their time of what they self-label religious or spiritual “deconstruction.” They were taking time to look critically at their belief system and “deconstructed” what no longer aligned with their spiritual identity.

Drawing from my own experience, deconstruction can be liberating; however the process is frightening and uncomfortable, leaving people feeling vulnerable and isolated. Shifting out of these belief systems can be distressing to one’s mental and emotional state. Furthermore, people may experience a sense of estrangement in their family, church or communities. There is a great personal sense of loss. People experiencing deconstruction are shifting outside of their mainstream religious faith and expanding beyond their fundamentalist belief systems. Issues such as LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transexual, queer) acceptance, women’s rights and feminism and care for the oppressed and refugees are relevant issues, especially in the United States with the polarization created partly by the Trump Administration (J. M. Smith, 2011). This dichotomy has created further doubt in people’s religious belief systems. People are realizing they no longer fit within the tribe of evangelicalism and may wander spiritually, seeking more inclusive spiritual communities or leaving their faith altogether.

It appears this phenomenon is growing across North America and some are even naming this “The Next Reformation” (Raschke, 2004). Statistics reveal that church attendance is in decline and many are in a state of “spiritual limbo” (Escobar, 2014; Hiemstra & Stiller, 2016). This trend has implications for mental health practitioners. Not only are people grappling with their spiritual identity; they are also undergoing the psychological impact of leaving their faith and ministries. Many mental health practitioners may feel uncomfortable incorporating religious or spiritual beliefs in their practice because of their own disconnection to spiritual issues. I argue that mental health practitioners do not need to be experts in the theology of their clients. They are invited to understand the intense cognitive and emotional distress one can experience when transitioning out of their fundamentalist beliefs and community and be willing to have genuine, caring conversations about spiritual and religious issues. Mental health practitioners also need to be able to help those people affected reconstruct another worldview.

For this research, I took both an emic view, as I have the lived experience of deconstruction, and the etic view of a detached observer (Olive, 2014). I have been attentive to my own journey of deconstruction and my interest in psychology has led me to want to understand and research this phenomenon more deeply. I am interested in helping those going through deconstruction understand their experience and educate mental health practitioners who are unaware of the impact this transition can have on their clients. To do this, I gathered rich data to understand this phenomenon.

For clarity, I have provided definitions below for a number of terms used in this thesis.

Definitions of Key Terms

Atheist: Atheist is a term to describe someone who does not believe in a supernatural God or divinity (Silver et al., 2014).

Agnostic: The term agnostic is used for individuals who cannot confirm nor deny that there is a God. They remain open to the possibility (Silver et al., 2014).

Apostate: An apostate is the formal term for someone who has deconverted from their religion (Adam, 2009). It can also be known as a renunciation of religious faith (Uecker et al., 2007). The use of disaffiliate and deconverted are more current (M. P. Wagstaff, 2015).

Emergent/Emerging Church: The emerging church is a postmodern response to conservative protestants denominations that are now suspicious of right or correct belief and focus more on authentic community and interpersonal relationships (Bielo, 2012).

Deconstructed Post or Neo-Evangelical: Similar to the emerging church, these terms describe evangelical Christians who are currently going through or have gone through a process of deconstruction. They tend to have a more open, inclusive perspective of the Bible, embrace mystery, and no longer feel constrained by conservative Christian doctrines.

Deconstruction: Deconstruction is a term that is roughly connected to postmodern deconstructionist theology (Michener, 2016). The word deconstruction is originally associated with the philosopher Jacques Derrida (Michener, 2016), however, his work did not originally refer to religion, but rather his method of literary and philosophical criticism (Canale, 2006). Some writers have drawn from Derrida's work to converse about deconstruction in a religious context (Michener, 2016) although this is not the norm as most post-evangelicals are not familiar with Derrida's work. Very few qualitative studies have been done on the deconstruction experience specifically, therefore I foresee the language may change over time. Initially, I considered the terms "transition, unravel, evolve, broaden, shift, change, and progress;" however, the online post-evangelical community seem to have a preference for the word "deconstruction" to describe the process of changing their religious belief systems and moving from Christian

conservative ways of thinking to more progressive and liberal understandings of their faith.

Those deconstructing may also become atheists or agnostics and continue to cope with indoctrination and how this has affected their lives.

Deconversion: Deconversion describes a person who becomes an apostate. Deconversion is the departing of a belief system.

Disaffiliation: Disaffiliation is the act of no longer being connected or affiliated with a religious institution or denomination. The person who previously belonged to a particular church, denomination, or faith disengages or no longer identifies as part of that group or faith (Thiessen & Wilkins-Laflamme, 2017).

Liberal Christian: Liberal Christians tend to be more nuanced in their faith; they do not require certainty. They are more comfortable with mystery and recognize the complexity of Christian life and scripture. Liberal Christians tend to be more hopeful and are more adaptive to culture (Weaver et al., 1998).

Religious and Spiritual: The word religious relates to a specific system of beliefs and “organized practice of worship, ritual, or belonging to a sect of individuals” and spiritual connects more with the inner experience of meaning, connectedness and wholeness (Eliason et al., 2010, para. 3). To avoid confusion, I use the word spiritual and religious synonymously as an inclusive term relating to the search and understanding of the sacred (Hill & Pargament, 2008), one’s experience of religion (that of being religious), which often includes the sacred experience of the divine, transcendence, self, community, theology, the meaning and purpose of life, and the impact of morality on one’s life. Deconstruction impacts both one’s religious and spiritual identity.

The following chapter includes the literature review discussing topics of evangelicalism,

emerging Christians, the nones, deconstruction, disaffiliation and deconversion, types of non-belief, well-being and spiritual coping, meaning-making, identity theory, and existentialism.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Little research exists on the phenomenological experience of spiritual deconstruction therefore in this research I sought to address this gap and explored the lived experience and meaning of those deconstructing from their evangelical or fundamentalist beliefs. The experience of deconstruction is impacting thousands of people (if not millions) around the world, and there is confusion surrounding the experience, especially for evangelical Christians. Many assume that deconstruction is simply walking away from one's faith. However, as some independent researchers reveal, it is much more complex (*The Deconstruction Network – Because Nobody Should Have To Deconstruct Alone*, n.d.). Deconstruction may possibly be a process, or a stage, towards deconversion and disaffiliation, however, not all those who deconstruct, will de-convert or disaffiliate. Experiencing deconstruction profoundly impacts a person's life and identity. This research is an important addition, especially for mental health practitioners who may encounter an individual deconstructing.

This literature review begins by placing itself in the context of the belief systems of evangelicalism, fundamentalism and the movement of emerging Christians to understand the context of deconstruction. I will also describe the phenomenon of deconstruction and discuss research studies on disaffiliation and deconversion and types of non-belief. Spiritual and religious deconstruction is a complex experience that often impacts one's well-being; therefore I discuss issues connected to well-being and spiritual coping, specifically negative spiritual coping. Lastly, I nest my study in the theories of meaning-making, identity theory and existentialism.

For this review, some of my earlier search terms on Google Scholar, Psych Info, Eric (Ovid) and USearch (university specific search engine) were *deconstruction, evangelical, leaving*

religion and doubt and religion. However, there were very few studies that surfaced and no studies using the term *deconstruction*. As I continued my search, I came across studies that used the words *disaffiliate* and *apostate* to share deconversion narratives. I had never come across this language before and found it unrelatable. Most individuals I have spoken with have never used those terms for leaving their tradition or religion. Other terms I came across in my search were *religious nones*, *deconversion* and *religious exiters*. I investigated the articles I found using these search words and would then search the reference lists to broaden my search.

I found that the language in the literature reveals a partiality for religious individuals and comes across as a negative connotation for those who are “not religious.” Interestingly, within psychology, Taves et al. (2018) “advocate[s] a shift from “religions” to “worldviews” and define worldviews in terms of the human ability to ask and reflect on “big questions” (BQs; e.g., what exists? How should we live?)” (p. 207). Murphy (2017) also advocated that “all worldviews should be understood as being different manifestations of the same, incredibly broad, psychological processes” (p. 7). This shift in language is an attempt to shift to an inclusive language for all worldviews. Although I do not prefer the terms *disaffiliate* or *apostate*, I have used the terms the studies referenced for consistency. As more studies on changes in faith surface, I hope to see the language evolve to what the dominant group would be comfortable identifying themselves with, rather than being labeled.

Evangelicalism

To understand deconstruction in the context of post-evangelicals, it is important to include an understanding of the worldview of evangelicals, fundamentalists and Pentecostals and those who are attempting to reform it (Emerging Christians). Evangelicalism is an umbrella term within the monotheistic religion of Christianity. Evangelicalism is multid denominational (e.g.,

Baptist, Pentecostalism) that has evolved over several hundred years. Evangelicalism is a Christian movement that was birthed from the Great Awakening, a revivalist movement from 1725 to the 1760s (Hill & Pargament, 2008). Evangelicalism claims it is the “True Religion” (Noll, 2003) and stresses a conversion experience, typically expressed as a new birth or being “born again,” which is emotional and life changing (Weaver et al., 1998). Conversion includes repentance and acceptance of Christ’s forgiveness and salvation.

People who identify as evangelical place a high value on holiness and sexual purity (Reimer & Wilkinson, 2015). They believe in a constant battle between good and evil, sin and holiness, life and death. The Bible is an inerrant, infallible authority (Weaver et al., 1998) directing a Christian’s life. The Bible is considered relevant to modern lives and evangelicals are expected to live according to its morality. Central to their belief system is the doctrine of substitutionary atonement (Jesus dying on the cross in the place of humanity to take on the sins of the world; Weaver et al., 1998). Their key concern is to spread the good news of Jesus Christ (evangelism) so they may have salvation and eternal life (Robbins, 2004; Weaver et al., 1998). Those who are not saved are believed to be damned to eternal suffering in hell.

Fundamentalism

Evangelicals can also be known as fundamentalists, in the sense that there are certain fundamental beliefs one must be believed to be a true Christian. Brent (1994) explained that “Fundamentalism has been described as a movement within Protestant Christianity that arose around the turn of the century to defend the fundamental beliefs of Christianity against secular influences” (par. 3). Fundamentalist Christians are typically conservative and often have a separatist approach; they believe it is important to separate themselves from the world and not be formed by secular culture (Robbins, 2004). Belief systems will vary; but, generally there is a

belief in biblical inerrancy, literalism, creationism and moralism. Assurance of salvation is preferred, and fundamentalists tend to be threatened by views that do not match their own (Weaver et al., 1998). They tend to be dualistic and “black and white” thinkers; they believe in objective truth and feel the need to defend this truth (Stone, 2013).

Fundamentalists also tend to be more pessimistic at the state of the world (Weaver et al., 1998). Threats of war, violence and terrorism are interpreted as the apocalypse; the end of the world (Strozier et al., 2010). Their ideology can be referred to as an absolutist hermeneutic (McSkimming, 2017). Christian fundamentalism has also been known for its anti-feminist views (Gillette, 2016). Mainly based on a few scriptures, women are expected to be submissive to men and are not allowed to be pastors or have authority over men. The rejection of other viewpoints, the insular nature of the institutions and belief system, along with the threat of eternal damnation, make it difficult for people to leave, or even consider the possibility.

Pentecostal/Neo-Charismatic Christian

Also stemming from the Great Awakening, Pentecostal or neo-charismatic Christians experience the “baptism of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1:4-5) through which they claim to endow holiness and power from God, as well as the “gifts of the Holy Spirit” (Robbins, 2004) such as the word of wisdom, word of knowledge, increased faith, gifts of healing, gifts of miracles, prophecy, discernment of spirits, speaking in tongues and interpretation of tongues (1 Corinthians 12:8-10). Pentecostal services are known to have altar calls that are a religious expression of devotion. During an altar call, a pastor or speaker at a church or religious gathering encourages parishioners to go to the front of the church (the altar) to publicly affirm the teaching, make a commitment to Jesus, or respond to a particular call to action such as repentance (Kidd, 2017). Many Pentecostals and charismatics believe in the End Times where Jesus will eventually

rapture believers into heaven (The Rapture), following the judgement of humanity and the ushering in of a new age (Gillette, 2016).

Emerging Christians

A postmodern movement has emerged over the past 20 years as a critique to conservative evangelicalism and fundamentalism (Bielo, 2012; Burge & Djupe, 2015; Moody & Reed, 2017). The emerging church is a complex movement that does not have any one definition (Moody & Reed, 2017). Author Brian McLaren has been a leader in this development with a focus on relativism (recognizing the subjective interpretation of the bible), inclusivism (inclusive of outsiders), mission (interacting with others outside of their community to dismantle us versus them thinking) and discussion (constant dialogue and conversation) (Burge & Djupe, 2015).

Burge and Djupe (2015) reported that emerging churches tend to be more liberal in relation to women and gay clergy; they are “less dogmatic, more open, and more questioning of denominations....more likely to disagree with an inerrant view of the bible and less likely to agree that there are moral absolutes or there is just one way to get to heaven” (para. 32). Moody (2017) suggested that millennials (those born between 1981 and 1994/6; NW et al., n.d.) may “feel a particularly strong affinity for Emerging Christian stories of disillusionment, disaffiliation, deconstruction, and deconversion” (para. 7). Emerging Christianity can be seen as a “religious movement with a deconstructive orientation” (Moody & Reed, 2017, para. 12). In other words, emerging Christians do not de-convert from Christianity. They are rather disillusioned with different expressions of being Christian, namely evangelical Christianity and aim to reform and deconstruct unhelpful beliefs and doctrines in a search for authenticity and connection (Moody & Reed, 2017).

The Nones

The previous section described the context of the evangelical belief system and those attempting to reform it. Understanding those who leave religion or claim to be unaffiliated is less understood (Gillette, 2016). The next section describes those who may leave or deconstruct their religion; the nones, deconstruction, disaffiliation and deconversion and types of unbelievers. Canada's leading religion is Christianity, however protestants are losing more attendees each year (Government of Canada, 2013). Churches have been impacted and many seminaries have suffered financial strain and closed down (Seltzer, 2016). Church attendance has been consistently decreasing (Hiemstra & Stiller, 2016) and those who are religiously unaffiliated have been increasing in Canada. Wilkins-Laflamme explains that "between 1985 and 2010 the rate of individuals declaring no religion in the Canadian General Social Surveys went from 10.5% to 23.8%, an increase of 126.7% over 25 years (Wilkins-Laflamme, 2015, para. 2)." According to Statistics Canada, those reporting no religious affiliation, also known as the "nones" (Thiessen & Wilkins-Laflamme, 2017, para. 1) have risen 16.5% from 2001-2011 (Government of Canada, 2013).

The nones are not one homogenized group of people. They are a mixture of people who have no particular religion including atheists and agnostics (Hackett et al., 2015); those who are believers who no longer attend church, liminal nones (those who cycle to affiliated to unaffiliated and back again) (Wilkins-Laflamme, 2015), and those who are unaffiliated that have a mix of religious beliefs and practices (Hackett et al., 2015). Studies reveal that globally, nones tend to be younger adults (especially males) with higher education, fewer children and/or have children later in life, come from non-affiliated families and are politically liberal (Baker &

Smith, 2009; Hackett et al., 2015). Hackett et al. (2015) projected that the unaffiliated in North America will increase from 59 million in 2010 to 111 million in 2050.

Deconstruction

The concept of deconstruction derives from various philosophical and hermeneutical ideas including Derrida, Heidegger, Husserl and the inauguration of postmodern thought. Most evangelicals believe that the post-modern worldview is “incompatible with orthodox Christianity” (“Not Your Father’s Seminary,” 2005, para. 10) mainly due to the lack of absolute truth. Nevertheless, many seminaries have “entered a period of deep reflection” and self-criticism, recognizing human fallibility in response to what others consider a threat (“Not Your Father’s Seminary,” 2005, para. 25). The term deconstruction seems to have evolved mainly from the meaning of the word “deconstruct” as most deconstructing Christians are not familiar with Jacques Derrida’s work. The word deconstruct means “to break down into constituent parts; dissect; dismantle” (*Deconstruct / Definition of Deconstruct at Dictionary.Com*, n.d.). The online deconstructing community prefer to use this term for the process of questioning and/or shedding foundational evangelical beliefs (Drysdale, n.d.).

Canale (2006) applied the word deconstruction to “focusing on the deconstruction of Christian teachings that were constructed through the centuries by way of dogmatic or systematic theological thinking” (p. 95). Most evangelical Christians would be threatened by this experience, however Canale (2006) cautioned against connecting deconstruction with deconstructivism as it is not necessarily an attempt to rescind the faith, but to adopt a “critical reading of interpretive and systematic traditions” (p. 105). As an evangelical, he believed it is necessary to look deeply at their own thinking (Canale, 2006). This can be particularly difficult and problematic when one is immersed in a religious belief system. Canale proposed that

deconstruction need not be adverse, but rather a conceivable development toward new theology (Canale, 2006). Canale claimed that “deconstruction is necessary to open a way through the maze of philosophical and theological interpretations facing theologians at the beginning of the twenty-first century” (Canale, 2006, p. 106). He explicated that most hermeneutics are drawn from intuition and a particular philosophy rather than revelations of scripture (Canale, 2006). For example, many Christians do not realize they bring their own interpretations of scripture (or the interpretations of their tradition) to the original biblical context the biblical author did not intend. It is often these subjective philosophies and interpretations of God and scripture that many people deconstruct from their belief systems.

Deconstruction is unlike disaffiliation and deconversion in that it is the *experience* and *process* of changing core tenants of one’s faith. The person deconstructing may leave evangelicalism (disaffiliate), continue practicing as a Christian (remain affiliated with evangelicalism), de-convert (de-convert from faith to secularity), switch to another Christian denomination or religious expression (religious switching), go from attending to not attending religious services (liminal) or become a practicing or non-practicing atheist or agnostic (Mrdjenovich, 2019). Every person who deconstructs experiences a different outcome. Importantly, deconstruction is inclusive of all these phenomena, but cannot be reduced to deconversion or disaffiliation. Perhaps deconstruction is better explained as a possible stage for some in the experience of deconversion and disaffiliation. This study attempts to address the gap of reporting on the experience (one’s thoughts and emotions) and meaning of deconstruction for individuals.

Disaffiliation and Deconversion

Many people who deconstruct their belief system may ultimately disaffiliate from their

tradition. Most existing studies on disaffiliation and religious nones are broad, and group together those belonging to Catholicism (Bullivant, 2016), Protestantism and Mormonism (Bahr & Albrecht, 1989; Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016; Thiessen & Wilkins-Laflamme, 2017).

Disaffiliation has been studied in the fields of sociology, religion and anthropology with a focus on well-being (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016), political factors (Vargas, 2012), socialization (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016) and adolescent development (Regnerus & Uecker, 2006). Similar to the literature on the nones, disaffiliates tend to be younger, male, unmarried, economically successful, educated with educated parents and also experience “family instability in childhood” (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016, p. 10).

In the qualitative study on disbelievers in the United States, Vargas (2012) noted that political factors and skepticism in the supernatural were leading factors in leaving religion while life stressors and socio-economic characteristics were not. Vargas explained that 60% of the “stayers” (in religion) in his study may be “liminars” who switch between being non-religious and back to religion again (p. 213). Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme (2017) analyzed 24 semi-structured interviews and demographic data in their mixed methods approach on disaffiliates among Canadian Albertans. The participants of this study were from Roman Catholic, mainline protestant, conservative protestant and Mormon traditions. The participants were exposed to religion from their families; however, their devotion and commitment were mixed. They found that 23 of the 24 participants disaffiliated as a teen or young adult; twelve continued to practice some aspects of their religious belief while ten did not. Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme (2017) found that disaffiliation was a gradual experience with multiple influences. Parents giving their children the freedom of choice to attend or not attend church, intellectual disagreements between science and faith, increasing doubts with exposure to other religions, incongruent experiences of

church teachings, the need to think for oneself, social influences that did not encourage church attendance and major life transitions such as moving, attending university, experiencing a divorce, losing a close family member and exclusivity in religious groups were significant factors in disaffiliation (Thiessen & Wilkins-Laflamme, 2017).

Fazzino (2014), a sociologist, interviewed 20 individuals who formerly identified as evangelical between 18 and 46 years of age using a phenomenological–hermeneutical approach to understand religious exiting of evangelical Christians. She described deconversion as both a “dynamic, multi-stage experience of transformative change marked by both liberation *from* and opposition *against* religion and a repertoire of symbolic meaning that supports a rapidly growing secular culture” (p. 250). Those who de-convert do not switch denominations nor do they plan to re-convert (Fazzino, 2014). The participants in her study identified as atheists and agnostics, or “spiritual but not religious” (Fazzino, 2014, p. 254). Throughout their “deconversion narratives,” Fazzino found that her participants deconversion stories “emphasized negative cognitive, social, and emotional experiences with religion, difficulties in rejecting faith, movement away from religious belief and participation and personal transformations” (p. 255).

Her participants experienced intellectual discrepancies that created “spiritually traumatic emotional distress that became the foundation for spiritual doubt” (Fazzino, 2014, p. 255). Many of these discrepancies were between science and theology (creationism) and their experience with higher education. Those who identified as agnostics in her study struggled with the hypocrisy, rejection and gender norms that decreased their faith in the authenticity of Christianity (Fazzino, 2014). Her study revealed three stages of deconversion: pre-deconversion (“spiritual doubt and emotional distress that evoked the reevaluation of religious beliefs”), cognitive deconversion (“movement from belief to non-belief”), and post-deconversion (“personal

transformation” and “paradigmatic transitions” (p. 261). After deconversion, “new existential and social issues emerged that participants needed to resolve. Reconciling these issues was a necessary part of identity transformation and paradigmatic restructuring” (p. 258). “The exiters” restructured their identity through “social and cognitive activities” (p. 258). These activities included reading about atheism, agnosticism, science and self-reflection. One participant even began to see good in themselves despite earlier conditioning and another gained their voice, confidence and felt empowered (Fazzino, 2014). Although some participants struggled, most participants reported “a dominant emotional transformation; deconversion was eventually a liberating experience” (Fazzino, 2014, p. 260).

In her dissertation on Americans deconverting from their faith to atheism, Phillips (2015) explained that those (n=35, mainly Caucasian men) who had deconverted had experienced physical, emotional or sexual abuse by parents or religious leaders. Some of these participants, “became more religious for a period of time, and then rejected their belief” (p. 24). Many of the participants experienced an absent father or being kicked out of their home. Others were gender non-conforming or LGBTQ+ and many experienced being shamed or being a shameful sinner. Others experienced anxiety surrounding the fear of hell and guilt over doubting one’s beliefs. Phillips (2015) explained that many going through the “deconversion process” experienced depression “before, during and/or after deconversion” (p. 56). Anxiety was also experienced, especially in “self-identifying as an atheist” (p. 58). One particular participant explained that it was similar to coming out as a gay man; it was “scary” (p. 58). Many of them were afraid of being judged for their non-belief.

Phillips (2015) reported that the participants experienced cognitive dissonance which led to “avoidance techniques” (p. 65). These avoidance techniques were altruistic and self-

sacrificing—they would focus on others to avoid their negative emotions. Many also avoided using the term atheist to identify themselves, but rather claimed they were “not religious, agnostic, or humanist” to avoid discrimination or upsetting family (p. 78). Others used addiction to avoid difficult emotions. Phillips (2015) reported that many insisted their non-belief was related to their intellect rather than their emotions, despite very emotional experiences. Many also experienced confusion and “mental-gymnastics” (p. 100) in an effort to avoid cognitive dissonance. Eventually, the participants would experience a “breakpoint event” (p. 115) that led to a “reconstructed cognitive and moral schemes and rejected beliefs” related to being “bad or sinful” (pp. 108-109). Phillips’ (2015) findings influenced her grounded study model that highlighted deconversion as a major crisis that includes the loss of religious experiences, intellectual doubt, moral critique of their religion, deep suffering and loss of social support that eventually led to disaffiliation, a “rebirth,” healing and new purpose in life (Phillips, 2015, p. 121).

Emerging Christians and Disaffiliation

Bielo (2012) conducted ethnographic fieldwork with emerging evangelicals and their deconversion from their focus on right belief and doctrine. He explained that “Emerging evangelicals constantly draw attention to how their imagining and enacting of Christian identity diverges from and challenges the conservative subculture” (p. 264). Although the evangelical narrative is centralized in conversion, being born again and “self-consciously accepting beliefs,” emerging evangelicals challenge these assumptions (Phillips, 2015, p. 121). Bielo learned that his participants had a desire for simplicity, authentic hospitality and relationships that took the focus off of exegetical sermons and doctrine (Bielo, 2012). The deconversion of emerging evangelicals shifted towards something new rather than merely leaving the old. Bielo (2012)

explained:

As their preferred narrative of deconversion illustrated, emerging evangelicals orient themselves in relationship to a religious culture (conservative evangelicalism) they matured in and eventually became dissatisfied with. Rather than experience a loss of faith they become cultural critics, practicing their religiosity with an assumption of lost authenticity and a view toward regaining it. Their posture toward propositional belief is part of this deconversion. (p. 273)

Many individuals disaffiliating from conservative evangelicalism do not move towards unbelief. Some disaffiliates are able to reform their own understanding of Christianity and feel at home in their new expression and understanding of it.

Non-belief

The topic of deconstruction leads us to discuss different forms of nonbelief along with disaffiliation. Some disaffiliates take on a new identity such as atheist, agnostic, spiritual but not religious, humanist or secularist (Nica, 2018). Studying the complexities of nonbelievers and disaffiliates is a recent phenomenon (Silver et al., 2014). The grounded theory study by Silver et al. (2014), formulated six types of nonbelief that are helpful to this study: (a) The Intellectual Atheists (individuals who enjoy having rational discussions relating to ontology and nonbelief); (b) Activist Atheist/Agnostic (individuals who are actively engaged in socio-political and egalitarian issues); (c) Seeker/Agnostic (individuals who are unsure of the existence of God, search for meaning and understanding, “uncertainty is embraced;”p. 995); (d) Anti-Theist (individuals who are opposed to theism and believe religion is detrimental to society); (e) Non-Theist (individuals who are apathetic or disinterested in theism or religion); (f) Ritual Atheist/Agnostic (individuals who do not believe in God or the divine yet find some usefulness

and meaning in rituals, meditation, etc.). This study, however, neglected other forms, such as “skepticism, suspended judgement, doubt, or agnosticism” (Everson, 2019, p. 3) or deconstruction for that matter. As mentioned, those experiencing deconstruction do not have one outcome. It can take many years to reconstruct their spiritual identity, and they may embrace the mystery of not knowing indefinitely.

Well-Being and Spiritual Coping

Discussion of wellbeing and spiritual coping is relevant in the examination of the changing and shifting of one’s worldview and belief system. The next section explains the connection between well-being and spiritual coping. Although many people are aided by positive spiritual coping, negative spiritual coping can have aversive health impacts. Mental health practitioners that treat people with persistent mental illness are strongly encouraged to ask their clients about coping strategies that involve religion (Tepper et al., 2001). Literature reveals that religious involvement helps individuals cope with stress, promotes self-control and is connected to health later in life (Hayward et al., 2016). Tepper et al. (2001) found that 80% of their participants (325 out of 406) used religion or spirituality to support their coping. They found the participants would use religious coping when their mental health symptoms were at their worst. When nothing else seemed to work for them, they found it helpful to connect to something larger than themselves to find relief. However, Bjorck and Thurman (2007) found that as negative life events increased in a person’s life, there were equal amounts of negative and positive spiritual coping.

Literature reports higher subjective well-being (SWB) for those who participate in religion and lower well-being for those who have disaffiliated (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016). Some studies suggest that those who do not attend church are just as healthy as those who do

(Baker & Cruickshank, 2009; Wilkinson & Coleman, 2010). Others report that it is the family and friend support within their religion that reduces stress, rather than the religion itself (Gao, 2014). Nevertheless, Hayward's (2016) study revealed the wellbeing of atheists are not as optimistic. The results indicated that psychologically those who were religiously affiliated had higher happiness, higher self-esteem, higher levels of life satisfaction, lower anxiety, higher optimism, greater giving and receiving of emotional support compared to atheists and agnostics. Conversely, the affiliated in Hayward's (2016) study were the *least* physically healthy. Literature also conveys that those who have disaffiliated may experience guilt, loss of personal and spiritual support and have negative feelings towards the church that all contribute to lower wellbeing (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016). Those who have left their evangelical traditions are also more likely impacted by a loss of social support and relationship considering they "establish a strong boundary between themselves and non-Evangelicals and are more likely to believe that their religion is the only path to eternal life" (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016, p. 6).

Literature also reports that negative spiritual coping can be detrimental to one's health (Pargament et al., 2003). For example, Pargament et al. (2003) found that when people had anger towards God or felt punished by God they experienced a significant decrease in their mental health. They also noted that religious doubts increased anxiety, struggles with problem solving skills and a negative outlook on life. (Pargament et al., 2003). Religious doubt is "viewed as an unsettling state of indecision that arises from seeing the validity of two seemingly inconsistent points of view" (Krause, 2008, pp. 95-96). Evangelicals experiencing doubt may also struggle with shame and fear related to their doubt, as it is often discouraged (Krause, 2008).

Ellison and Lee (2010) concluded that those who are struggling with their relationship with God and chronic doubting experience the most distress. Intrapsychic conflict, or struggles

with chronic religious doubting, can cause an incongruence in how people perceive or feel God to be (e.g., they believe God can heal, but do not experience physical healing), which causes distress (Barrett & Zahl, 2013). Krause (2008) suggested this as a particular example of cognitive dissonance. Those who are unable to resolve the cognitive dissonance can experience psychological distress (Krause, 2008).

Park et al. (2011) noted that positive religious connections can be helpful to one's health, however, if there is strain on their belief or meaning system, their struggle with negative attitudes about God can have "adverse outcomes" (para. 2). These negative attitudes include "conflict with others on religious issues, disillusionment with religious beliefs, doubts about one's faith, guilt, and perceived distance from or anger toward a higher power" (Park et al., 2011, para. 3). Bjorck and Thurman argued that "minimizing negative religious coping is at least as important, if not more so, than maximizing positive religious coping strategies" (2007, para. 27). Therefore, those who have experienced more trauma and negative life events may not experience the same relief from religious coping; in fact, such coping may increase mental health symptoms. Therefore, mental health practitioners need to be aware of this phenomenon, as treating the whole person is crucial.

Those who have spiritual struggles experience more depression, delusions, substance abuse, anxiety, low self-esteem and suicidality (Ellison & Lee, 2010; Mohr et al., 2006). They also have greater symptoms of PTSD after a traumatic event (Wortmann et al., 2011). It has been determined that those who switch from a high cost religion (one that expects high levels of time and commitment socially and personally) experience negative health impacts (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010) and those born within "high-cost religious groups and who decide to leave tend to experience greater hardships and emotional suffering" (Nica, 2018 p. 4).

Dark Night of the Soul

The *Dark Night of the Soul* is another way to view spiritual suffering or deconstruction from an ancient Christian lens. Although doubt is not encouraged among evangelicals, Tillich, a protestant theologian, argued that doubt is a healthy aspect of faith and can lead to a deeper faith (Krause, 2008). In Christian spiritual theology, the *Dark Night of the Soul* (*La Noche Oscura del Alma*) is a 16th century poem written by St. John of the Cross to explain the struggle of spiritual distress (John of the Cross, 1990). Durà-Vilà and Dein (2009) explained the experience of *The Dark Night of the Soul* as “a metaphor to describe the experience of loneliness and desolation in one’s life associated with a crisis of faith or with profound spiritual concerns about the relationship with God” (p. 544). These authors attempted to differentiate the experience of pathological depression from a deep spiritual growth experience (Durà-Vilà & Dein, 2009). They explained that in a “dark night of the soul,” symptoms of depression may be experienced, including guilt, a negative sense of self, anxiety, insomnia, lack of appetite, fatigue, hypersomnia, tearfulness, crying, a “loss of interests and satisfaction, sadness, disappointment, lack of volition, feelings of emptiness, inhibition, and anhedonia” as well as other physical symptoms (Durà-Vilà & Dein, 2009, pp. 545-546). The experience of the *dark night* has the potential to become pathological but it can also be an “adaptive psychological response to existential crises, and its psychotic elements can promote a paradigm shift in the individual’s underlying assumptions” (Durà-Vilà & Dein, 2009, p. 556). In deconstruction, people experience a paradigm shift in spiritual beliefs or perhaps a maturing of beliefs that is similar to the *dark night of the soul*. This experience can lead to hope, revelation and a deepened connection to the divine as well as an amplified self-knowledge and compassion for others (Durà-Vilà & Dein, 2009).

Disaffiliation and deconstruction are complex experiences connected to one's overall emotional, spiritual, psychological and relational health. There are often "gains and losses" connected to the experience that is not described in most literature (Nica, 2018, p. 11). The literature on well-being and spiritual coping reflects the complexities of spiritual suffering and religion. The suffering individuals experience may be an indicator of the beginning or middle stages of deconstruction, disaffiliation and deconversion where doubt and intellectual struggles are most prominent. Otherwise, it may be an indication of a spiritual awakening. Although some individuals experiencing spiritual suffering or coping may lead to increased mental health issues, many may also experience disaffiliation, a stronger faith, relief or a sense of liberation post-deconversion (Fazzino, 2014; Wagstaff, 2015).

Meaning-Making, Identity and Existentialist Theory

I nest this present study in the theories of meaning-making, identity and existentialist theory as deconstruction is a deeply human experience connected to one's personal sense of meaning, identity, deep questions about life, existence and the sacred. Psychological literature has documented that humans are meaning making beings (Taves et al., 2018). Taves et al. (2018) explained "meaning frameworks range from simple schemas to sets of propositions that explicitly answer big questions" (p. 213). Meaning systems are "necessary for humans to function in the world" and are needed for stability, balance and healthy relationship (Silberman, 2005, p. 851). It has been considered a "survival advantage" to have a "sufficiently accurate model of the world" (Murphy, 2017, p. 4). Meaning systems include what is significant to a person, the reason for this significance and "allows us to make sense of our experiences" (Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012, p. 319). Religion and spirituality are meaning making systems for people "to render the world, self, others and one's actions readable, valuable and manageable" (Dahinden &

Zittoun, 2013, p.188). Understandably, people use religion and spirituality to reduce anxiety and increase a feeling of safety; an experience of transcendence that helps one make sense of the world and one's experiences (Murphy, 2017).

Dahinden and Zittoun (2013) explained that religions are organized around evolving values, rules and rituals for daily living that were developed by narratives (i.e., The Bible). Furthermore, religion is a way to recognize sameness and differentness socially or exclusion and inclusion (Dahinden & Zittoun, 2013). Individuals have their own personal interpretation of their spirituality therefore there are two realities of meaning systems: the "socially shared meaning" and "the personal sense" (Dahinden & Zittoun, 2013, para. 13). We are continually impacted by our past experiences and our present understandings of the world; "they shape our perceptions, our memories, and our brains themselves" (Murphy, 2017, p. 4). Internalized religion is used by individuals to direct their lives and identity (Dahinden & Zittoun, 2013). Hence, deconstruction impacts one's meaning-making identity and systems. For those who experience a crisis of faith, their meaning systems tend to shatter (Ward, 2011). If a spiritual identity is compromised, people may lose their regular support system as many people turn to their spiritual practice for comfort and relief in times of distress (also known as the Religious Operating System (ROS); Pargament et al., 2003).

Identity is a lifelong process in human development that answers the question, "Who am I?" in regards to how we define and make sense of ourselves in the world (Schwab, 2015, p. 5). Identity is essentially the meaning making schema's that we have developed over the years. It has a continuity and is "necessary as the anchoring of [our] transient existence in the here and now" (Erikson, 1968, p. 45). Boeri (2002) explains identity as "formed through a socialization process in which the shared meanings of a culture are internalized" (p. 337). Breakwell theorized

that identity is developed by motivations such as the need for self-esteem, distinctiveness (how am I unique and different from others?), continuity (a consistent narrative over time) and self-efficacy (experiencing “competence and control”) (Vignoles et al., 2006, para. 13). Other motives added to this model were belonging, meaning and psychological coherence (the need to have compatibility with “one’s (interconnected) identities” (Vignoles et al., 2006, para. 13). Vignoles et al. (2006) defined identity motives as unconscious “pressures toward certain identity states and away from others, which guide the processes of identity construction” (para. 5).

Jean Piaget is known for his theory of cognitive development and “schemata—organized representations of reality that are constructed from experience, and often fail to match our subsequent experiences” (Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012, p. 317). He called this confusing experience “disequilibrium”—a state that “motivates us to find other ways to make these experiences make sense” (Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012, p. 317). Proulx and Inzlicht (2012) explained this experience as a “violation of their committed meaning frameworks” and the need for humans to “restore a sense of familiarity to their experiences” (p. 317). To clarify, when someone experiences something that does not fit their understanding or experience, they are forced to somehow make sense of it. Furthermore, our bodies are aware of this contradiction and our sympathetic nervous system is stimulated (Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012). This includes any experience that is contradictory, including behaviours that do not match values or beliefs that do not match experience (Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012). Proulx and Inzlicht (2012) reported that “merely contemplating the contradictions that pervade these relational structures can be enough to bring them crashing to the ground” (p. 320). They explained that these “meaning violations” are usually tragic events and recognize they “shake the foundations of what we thought we understood in terms of both *what* and *why*” (Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012, p. 322).

Sneed and Whitbourne (2003) explained that “Identity forms an organizing cognitive–affective schema through which individuals interpret their experiences and that, in turn, can be altered by experiences” (p. 313). Identity is particularly formed by social experience including group memberships such as being involved in religion (Bardi et al., 2014). Religion plays a key role in identity and meaning making for many people, especially those who are highly committed and devoted. Many people base their entire lives around their religious beliefs. It defines who they are. For example, those who embrace the evangelical tradition base their identity on an external authority including believing in God, Bible reading, church attendance, actively engaging in prayer and participating in community events et cetera (Aten et al., 2012). Spiritual deconstruction therefore impacts one’s identity causing one to have existential questions and question their sense of self.

The following section will explain how humans respond to these contradictory threats. A contradictory experience is also known as ambivalence and is an uncomfortable experience (van Harreveld et al., 2009) and, as mentioned, impacts our sympathetic nervous system. For example, “being made aware of one’s incompatible beliefs should generate psychological discomfort” (van Harreveld et al., 2009, p. 47). Bardi et al. (2014) explained that “identity is threatened whenever the social context frustrates the satisfaction of any of the identity motives. Individuals utilize coping strategies to minimize the threat” (p. 176). Coping strategies include avoidance, procrastination, minimizing, denying responsibility or “problem-focused coping”—taking time to process and investigate the issue (van Harreveld et al., 2009, p. 55). Proulx and Inzlicht (2012) explained other modes of coping:

A “less effortful” mode of coping involves the wilful biasing of our cognitive processing so that one or the other attitude is wholly validated - thereby assimilating our perceptions

into a single understanding. Conversely, a relatively effortful mode of compensation involves the processing of both conflicting attitudes, and the conscious altering of one or the other to resolve the inconsistency - thereby accommodating the understanding to account for the perception. (p. 325)

Sneed and Whitbourne (2003) explained this coping as identity process theory; a balance between identity assimilation and identity accommodation.

Identity assimilation is “a process that individuals use to maintain a sense of self-consistency even in the face of discrepant experiences or information about the self” (p. 313). Individuals approach life with consistent schemas and encountering aspects outside of these fixed understandings can often be difficult and painful (Sneed & Whitbourne, 2003). Therefore assimilation is “returning to the familiar” (Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012, p. 325). However, identity accommodation is the ability to change one’s identity in response to life experiences (Sneed & Whitbourne, 2003) and requires “conscious effort” (Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012, p. 325). Accommodation may involve changing one’s beliefs about one’s religion to match their understandings rather than the understandings of others. Identity accommodation is experienced only when the person’s identity assimilation fails (Sneed & Whitbourne, 2003). For example, a schema might be a belief that an individual is a devoted Christian. However, if their denomination is not LGBTQ+ affirming and they discover that they are, this would require accommodation. They would typically evaluate how positive or negative this aspect of their identity is before accommodation (Bardi et al., 2014). A thriving individual needs a balance of both identity assimilation and accommodation or they will struggle with either being too inflexible or overly impacted by others (Sneed & Whitbourne, 2003).

Change in identity can also be caused by transitions in an individual's life that are typically caused by ruptures (Zittoun, 2007). A rupture in someone's life is a "modification of what is taken-for-granted in a person's life" (Zittoun, 2007, p. 195) such as a death, moving or a change in beliefs. A rupture includes an experience of uncertainty which compels one to seek new understanding and possibilities (Zittoun, 2007). This rupture leads to "transformation of identities" including meaning making (Zittoun, 2007, p. 199). This transformation can include a groundlessness that allows for exploration and change (Zittoun, 2007). In deconstruction, the individual ultimately needs to make sense of their changing beliefs and worldview and may experience an extended liminal state.

The existential-humanistic orientation is an appropriate approach for understanding the lived experience and meaning of deconstruction as existential theory is rooted in philosophy and concerns itself with consciousness, personal meaning, personal responsibility and existential "angst or spiritual dread" (Eliason et al., 2010 para. 6). Changing religious beliefs or leaving religion can create a "loss of community, tradition, and shared meaning" that can create an emotional and existential vacuum (Bugental & Bracke, 1992, p. 29). The word existentialism is "rooted in the Latin, *exsistere*, meaning to exist, or more fittingly, to experience, to emerge, or to become" (Eliason et al., 2010, para. 4). Existentialism is a unique counselling theory that does not find itself in the medical model, but rather asks psychological and theological questions related to the meaning of life (Eliason et al., 2010). Existential theory is aware of one's immortality and the angst of nihilism and responds by constructing one's own meaning (Eliason et al., 2010).

Nineteenth Century philosophers Kierkegaard and Nietzsche moved away from abstract beliefs and towards one's subjective experience about meaning in everyday life (Meyers, 2011).

Ironically, Kierkegaard developed his philosophy alongside Christian faith and Nietzsche developed his with the understanding that God is dead and science supersedes belief in God (Meyers, 2011). Despite these differences, existentialists concern themselves with what “makes me the particular person that I am” (Meyers, 2011, para. 9). Such as, how does an individual live authentically, independent of the rest of their family, institution or culture? What is one’s sense of self? Both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche rejected conformity as weak and inauthentic (Meyers, 2011).

Philosophers Sartre and Beauvoir “rejected the idea that there is some fixed human nature—character traits, behavioral or emotional dispositions, or values that are necessarily shared by all human beings” (Meyers, 2011, p. 100). We are each individuals, with our own unique subjective experiences. Existentialists are concerned with the human condition. For example, humans exist—we have all been born without choice (Meyers, 2011). Nevertheless, humans are responsible for their choices and actions and we also have a shared existence with others (Meyers, 2011). Furthermore, humans are capable of creating meaning and purpose (Meyers, 2011). Existentialists believe individuals are becoming who they are—they are continuously creating oneself (Meyers, 2011). Even in the event that one cannot choose their circumstance, one can still choose what attitude to approach the situation (Meyers, 2011). In the case of deconstruction, the person is experiencing profound change and transformation despite possible negative outcomes. Are they choosing to dismantle ingrained beliefs or experiencing countless ruptures and meaning violations that require accommodation? Perhaps it is a bit of both. Those deconstructing do seem to experience violations of meaning that encouraged them to start the process of creating their own meaning, aligning with what they value, and a more authentic sense of self (Park, 2011).

Conclusion

Deconstruction is a fairly new term to describe the experience of changing, shifting or unravelling one's evangelical or fundamentalist beliefs. The experience of deconstruction is a fast-growing phenomenon that affects people's lives across the globe in multiple ways: emotionally, psychologically, socially, spiritually and financially. Evangelicals and Fundamentalists base their lives and identity on their faith system which makes the process of deconstruction difficult. Emerging Christians have been participating in deconstruction and the attempt to reform evangelical systems and many are disaffiliating from mainstream evangelical traditions. Literature reveals that the unaffiliated nones have been steadily growing and church attendance is dwindling across North America. Literature on disaffiliation and deconversion focus mainly on those who leave their religion or become atheists, and not necessarily on those who were once dedicated to their belief systems. The studies focused on disaffiliation and deconversion reveal that their experience was gradual, an intellectual process, as well as an experience with incongruence and negative religious authority or experiences. This study seeks to understand the experience of those who were committed and dedicated to their faith system for at least 4 years prior to their experience of deconstructing their faith.

Literature on religion and well-being tends to focus on the positive religious coping that leads to a healthy well-being. However, other literature reports that those who have negative spiritual suffering or coping fare worse than if there was no spiritual coping at all. It is therefore important for mental health practitioners to help those minimize negative religious coping. The literature on the *dark night of the soul* is a reminder of the complexities of spirituality, well-being and the desire of an individual to evolve and transform into better versions of themselves. What

may seem like a negative, dark experience, may lead to greater personal insight and transformation.

Meaning and identity are existentialist issues that those deconstructing will wrestle with. If an individual deconstructing is encountering cognitive dissonance or meaning violations, they are challenged to either assimilate or accommodate these uncomfortable experiences. This study seeks to understand the complex lived experience and meaning of those deconstructing from their former dedicated evangelical and fundamentalist beliefs. Why did their process begin, what was the experience like, and how has this impacted their lives? Studies have been narrowly focused on deconversion, disaffiliation, switching, exiting as well as the connection between religion and positive coping. Using an interpretative phenomenological analysis, this study goes beyond the topics of disaffiliation and deconversion to understand that deconstruction is a broader experience that may or may not include these outcomes. This study also sought to balance the literature on religion by discussing harmful experiences rather than only the positive impacts of religion that dominates religious literature and well-being.

The present study was designed as an exploratory qualitative research study to contribute rich data to the field of religious deconstruction and its implications for helping professionals. Although participants in studies focused on deconversion and disaffiliation may experience similarities to those undergoing deconstruction, the language in these studies falls short for people experiencing this existential shift and needs to be represented. This study also attempts to broaden and expand the language of leaving religion and changing religious beliefs to include the word *deconstruction* into the world of religious academia.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience and meaning of spiritual deconstruction. The following section will explain the theoretical approach used to answer the research questions: What influenced the experience of spiritual deconstruction for post-evangelical and post-fundamentalist Christians? What is the lived experience and meaning of deconstruction to post-evangelicals or fundamentalists? How has this impacted their life (i.e., identity, faith, family, community or work)? In this chapter, I describe the research paradigm, the IPA methodology and I also outline the participant recruitment, data collection and data analysis processes. The chapter closes with a discussion of trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

Research Paradigm and Tradition

Deconstruction is an existential experience and deserves an up close and personal, in-depth inquiry. This research was exploratory, personal and subjective which necessitated a qualitative approach. Qualitative studies have the ability to be flexible, build theory and attempt to understand the deeper meaning of an experience (Hays & Singh, 2012).

The research paradigm that guides this research is social constructivism. Social constructivism respects each individual's unique experience and context and their subjective interpretations of their experience (Hays & Singh, 2012). Ontologically, deconstruction is a very personal experience and will therefore be highly subjective. Epistemologically, there are unlimited understandings of one's experience with deconstruction. This research aimed to understand the core processes and themes of participants' experiences and meaning of the phenomenon of spiritual deconstruction. Hence, a phenomenological approach was most suited to address the gap in research in this area. As McMillian and Schumacher (2010) explain, "in phenomenological studies, the interaction is more intrusive, close and personal...fieldworkers

are able to raise additional questions, check out hunches and move deeper into the analysis of the phenomenon” (p. 349).

This research attempted to understand the process one goes through in deconstruction, and explored questions such as: What influenced the beginning of their deconstruction? What was the experience like and how did this impact their lives? What meaning do they make of deconstruction? In phenomenological studies, the participant brings their own detailed knowledge and experience (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

To fully explore and understand participants’ experience with deconstruction, I chose Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) for the research methodology. IPA is used in this research to guide and answer the question: What is the experience and meaning of deconstruction as lived and interpreted by post-evangelicals? As Smith (2004) explained, “IPA aims to explore in detail participants’ personal lived experience and how participants make sense of that personal experience” (p. 40). Jonathan A. Smith (2009) explained that humans are “sense-making creatures, and therefore the accounts which participants provide will reflect their attempts to make sense of their experience” (p. 4).

IPA is grounded in three theoretical principals: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography. Although phenomenology is a qualitative methodology, it is first a philosophical approach conceptualized by Husserl (1931) that later influenced the philosophers Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sarte (Smith, 2009). The intent of phenomenology is to understand one’s “lived experience” and how they make sense of this experience. Husserl was especially concerned with what individuals experience in their consciousness which helps the researcher focus on the “process of reflection” (Smith, 2009, p. 16). Sarte was concerned with the

developmental aspect of being human and believed that “we are always becoming ourselves...the self is not a pre-existing unity to be discovered” (Smith, 2009, p. 19). This is of particular interest in the realm of this research as the person experiencing deconstruction is developing and discovering their unique spiritual identity. Phenomenology has matured over the years and much credit is due to Smith, Flower, and Larkin who have conceptualized IPA as a psychological research paradigm that seeks to understand and interpret lived experiences (Alase, 2017).

The second theoretical principal of IPA is hermeneutics. Hermeneutics aptly finds its history in theological studies and the interpretation of scripture. It is a “theory of interpretation” mainly influenced by Schleiermacher, Heidegger and Gadamer (Smith, 2009, p. 25). Schleiermacher approached interpretation as an artform, relying on skills but also intuition (Smith, 2009). This allows the IPA researcher to obtain meaningful insights into the phenomenon that participants may not be conscious of. IPA also allows for the hermeneutic circle, ensuring that one is looking at the part but also the whole, and vice versa. This ensures a more complete understanding. The process of analysis therefore is iterative as “we may move back and forth through a range of different ways of thinking about the data” (Smith, 2009, p. 28).

The third concept in IPA is idiography. IPA seeks to understand what a particular phenomenon is like from the perspective of each individual participant. Idiography concerns itself with the particular in two ways: the detail of the experience and the “depth of analysis” (Smith, 2009, p. 29). In IPA, the researcher concerns themselves with the particular details and analysis of each case before moving on to the next case. Once the researcher has looked deeply into a particular case, they would then move on to the next with the same intent before

connecting each case to the wider context as a whole. Hence, this research was studied in an in-depth, case-by-case manner before connecting to a broader meaning and interpretation.

IPA was chosen for this research because its purpose is to gather detailed narrative information, seek a “complete understanding” and “accurately reflect the complexity of human behavior” (James H. McMillan, 2010, p. 323). Smith noted that most researchers using IPA are researching existential, life-transforming topics as well as issues related to identity (J. A. Smith, 2004). Existentialism is related to the issues that are “intrinsic to being alive and of coming to terms with self and with the world” (Medina, 2010). Deconstruction is an existential, transitional experience of understanding one’s spiritual self. The purpose of this research was to gain insight in an effort to help others understand post-evangelicals’ experience of deconstruction and how it has impacted their lives.

Data Generation

The goal of IPA is to understand in-depth, lived experience of the participants along with what may have influenced them (Osborne, 1990). In a phenomenological study, one is looking for a detailed examination and structure in a phenomenon; therefore, the number of participants is smaller (Osborne, 1990). In this study, I recruited six participants. Although more people expressed interest in the study, six interviews were sufficient to bring forth both a depth of experience and a cross case comparison.

Purposeful sampling (Groenewald, 2004) was used to recruit participants who have had a dedicated evangelical or fundamentalist faith experience for at least four years, who were 18 or older, and have experienced a spiritual deconstruction process. Participants were recruited through a social media post. Potential participants emailed the researcher if they were interested in participating in the study. Once participants indicated their interest, a note of invitation was

sent explaining the study's purpose and procedures. From there, a screening questionnaire was implemented over the phone to ensure they were appropriate for the study and met the inclusion criteria. Participants were then sent a consent form (see Appendix C), as well as a mental health referral resource (see Appendix F) in the event that participants needed support after the interview.

All six interviews were completed within two weeks. The COVID-19 pandemic had created a barrier for in-person interviews and therefore the invitation to anyone interested in the study was expanded beyond the city limits. This expansion unexpectedly included two participants that were American. Participants were interviewed using an online video conference system; audio recordings of the interviews were then transcribed verbatim within two days of the interview. Data were transferred to a locked electronic word-processing file for analysis and pseudonyms were used to protect participants' confidentiality and privacy. Participants had two weeks to review the transcripts to make any necessary changes or omissions before signing the transcript release forms (see Appendix: Transcript Release Form). No participants withdrew from the study.

Good rapport with participants was crucial to receive "authentic descriptions" of the participants' experience (Osborn, 2011, p. 84). To ensure this rapport, I explained the reasons for the study, and communicated to participants that I also have a personal experience with and understanding of the phenomenon. In the interview, participants had the opportunity to reflect on and decide how to explain their experiences (Turley et al., 2016). Participants were also given the freedom to ignore any questions, share as much or as little as desired and add any topic areas that were of importance to them (Handy & Ross, 2005).

Siedman's phenomenological interviewing concept inspired the questions I developed to access the deconstruction experience (Hays & Singh, 2012). Bevan (2014) developed a phenomenological interview method based on Siedman's interviewing that consists of three main domains: "contextualization (natural attitude and life-world), apprehending the phenomenon (modes of appearing, natural attitude), and clarifying the phenomenon (imaginative variation and meaning)" (p. 138). The first phase of questions was intended to gather contextual information about participants' lives before deconstruction as well as what led people to a point of deconstruction. The second phase sought to understand what the experience of deconstruction was or is presently like for them (apprehending the phenomenon). The third phase sought the reflection of meaning deconstruction had for the participants (clarifying the phenomenon). In phenomenological interviews, it is important to take on the role as a guide rather than a dictator (Alase, 2017). As this is exploratory research, I used open-ended questions followed by semi-structured interview questions and clarifying questions (Osborn, 2011). As per IPA, the interview guide (see Appendix E) was not followed exactly for each participant, nor was every question asked. Many prepared questions were answered in the first open ended question. I began the interviews by collecting basic demographic information and then moved to the research questions.

Data Analysis

Social constructivism incorporates the researcher's experience and as the instrument (Hays & Singh, 2012). Hence, I approached the data as an observer and interpreter, gathered the information from the participants (McMillan, 2010) and recognized that I had influence on the data collection and analysis. The data I collected were analyzed using inductive reasoning (McMillan, 2010) where I investigated themes arising in the interviews. Reflexivity was

practiced to limit the amount of bias (Kovach, 2009) by recording thoughts and questions in a reflexivity journal throughout the interviews and data analysis process.

A unique aspect of IPA is that the researcher does not have to be completely detached from the data (Groenewald, 2004). I was involved in interpreting the data and drawing out the meaning and themes. IPA is a flexible, “in-depth qualitative analysis” that is a continual process (Smith, 2004, p. 41). Phenomenology allows the researcher to be open to change throughout the data gathering process (Osborne, 1990). IPA is inductive and is “often referred to as a ‘bottom-up’ approach to knowing, in which the researcher uses observations to build an abstraction or to describe a picture of the phenomenon that is being studied” (Lodico, 2010). The design is emergent as the data is only analyzed based on the findings and what is interpreted from the research. This often results in the researcher returning to a previous level of analysis with new insight.

IPA is also an interpretive process which uses a double hermeneutic (Smith, 2009). The researcher seeks to understand the experience of the participant with empathy but still maintain a questioning stance (Smith, 2009). The double hermeneutic means that the researcher is making sense of what the participant is trying to make sense of. Smith explains that IPA can be explained as cognitive psychology in that the purpose is to try and create meaning and make sense of the data (J. A. Smith, 2004). The goal of this research was to find essential themes, patterns and meaning of the experience of spiritual deconstruction. Data analysis was done using an idiographic method (J. A. Smith, 2004), which aims “to identify patterns of behavior, thought, and emotion within an individual over time and contexts, rather than to strictly identify patterns of differences between individuals” (Conner et al., 2009, para. 1).

For this research I followed a six step analysis process that included: (a) a case-by-case familiarization of the data; (b) my initial thoughts and commentary; (c) identifying developing emergent themes; (d) searching for connections across emerging themes; (e) moving to the next transcript, and lastly; (f) finding connections across all transcripts (Conner et al., 2009). The first stage of data analysis is one of familiarization and immersing oneself in the data. This entails the reading and re-reading of the text to capture initial thoughts, insights and questions. I mentally processed “ideas and facts while collecting the data” (McMillan, 2010, p. 329). I initially listened to the recordings twice while I transcribed the interviews, as well as read each transcript twice at this stage. I approached the data with curiosity and allowed the data to “speak for itself” (Osborn, 2011, p. 84).

The second stage involved re-reading the transcript and highlighting particular quotes or segments of the transcript that were important or relevant to the experience of deconstruction. I began writing exploratory commentary on the right-hand side of the transcript word document. At times I would summarize the comments or write my initial interpretations, context, or language used. I adopted phenomenological reduction, also known as the epoché (Bevan, 2014). The epoché is a form of self-questioning where the researcher will ideally “undergo new ways of experiencing, of theorising, and of thinking about a phenomenon” (Bevan, 2014, p. 139).

In the third stage, I moved the focus away from the transcripts towards the commentary looking for emergent themes. I focused on the comments I made on the right hand of the transcript and recorded any emergent themes that I conceptualized. I used the participants words and my own interpretations of these words and stories to create the themes. Multiple themes were written for the entire transcript before clustering them in the fourth stage. The fourth stage included identifying connections and clustering similar themes together. I created a chart to

organize themes with phrases and quotes from the transcript and the initial interpretations of these quotes and phrases. The initial coding revealed many themes per transcript and I used the strategies of abstraction (creating themes and grouping similar concepts together), subsumption (creating superordinate themes and grouping other themes under this larger theme) and numeration (how frequently a theme occurred in the data) to narrow down a clear list of themes (Smith, 2009). At this stage of analysis, I also compiled transcript extracts in a word document by theme. Descriptive superordinate themes emerged from my analysis along with subthemes, and others were discarded at this stage. To respect each voice and the uniqueness of the individual interviews, steps one through four were done for each interview before moving on to the next one.

The fifth step involved analyzing the next transcript, where I followed the same procedure for the remaining five transcripts. I used separate word documents with separate charts for each transcript. Once all the transcripts were analyzed, I started the sixth step—to compare all six transcripts and make connections between them. During this step, I printed out every chart of themes for each participant and circled and highlighted the main themes across transcripts. Themes such as devotion, control and shame quickly surfaced. I made sure to re-read the transcript for key phrases to ensure the theme connected to the context of the participant's narrative. This study produced rich data and at times I found it difficult to separate the themes from one another, as many of them overlapped. Final themes were chosen based on their richness and impact, as well as their frequency of occurrence. The results revealed many complex reasons that led to participants' deconstruction and their experience of deconstruction. I wanted to ensure that the most impactful issues were highlighted, even though not all of the subthemes appeared in

all cases (e.g., See results section: Interpretation of Fear of Hell and LGBTQ+ and Heteronormativity).

In the final step of analysis, I wrote a complete narrative of the phenomenon. The purpose of IPA is to look past the surface to locate innate patterns that people present in their narratives and seeks meaning rather than facts (Osborne, 1990). The goal is to find “multiple perspectives which can lead to a unified description of a shared phenomenon”(Osborne, 1990, p. 87). As I wrote the results section, I merged some themes and adjusted others for clarity and coherence. I wrote the results section to reveal the voices of the six participants and also what might be inferred from their words and actions. I analyzed what may have influenced participants’ experience of deconstruction and how they made sense of this experience.

Researcher Reflections

Participants’ stories were those of pain and discovery and impacted me deeply on a personal level. There were times that I felt anger at the oppression that the individuals experienced. I was especially moved by Sarah’s story and her experience of spiritual abuse. I resonated with all six of the participants and was able to connect their stories with my own experience of deconstruction. The participants were very eager and thankful to share their experience with me. A couple of the participants struggled to put into words their experience. However, it was obvious that others had done a lot of reflecting and thinking about their experience and were further along in their deconstruction journey. I was especially inspired by a younger participant at her ability to share with humility and self-reflection. One participant felt it was important to share mostly their experience in her church that led to deconstruction, and yet another focused mainly on his feelings of anger and betrayal at the loss of identity that was caused by his early religious childhood experience.

I found I was also able to laugh with the participants during the interviews. Grønnerød, (2004) defines laughter as “an interactional resource which individuals use in different ways, consciously or unconsciously, to relate to each other” (p. 33). I interpreted their laughter as occurring due to their resilience and also their feelings of incredulity of what they have been through. Comedy is often found in dark places and is a method humans use to cope. Most of the participants were incredibly vulnerable and often shared through tears the loss they had experienced. At the end of the taped recording, I had a transitional conversation where I thanked them for sharing their stories and its impact on me as a researcher. It was difficult to decide what to keep and what to omit because of the importance of each person’s voice and the richness of each narrative. During the data analysis process, I experienced further deconstruction myself and had realizations about broken systems, especially patriarchy, within my own faith history. I am incredibly thankful for the willingness of the participants to share their stories for this thesis.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to traditional notions of quality and validity and is an important aspect of conducting qualitative research. Although there is not a one-size fits all criteria for establishing trustworthiness, typically four criteria are considered: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Amankwaa, 2016). Credibility indicates how the researcher establishes credibility or believability in the research process. Credibility activities that I used included a detailed audit trail of my research journey. The first part of my audit trail was the audio recorded interviews and transcripts (Amankwaa, 2016), which were given to each participant to ensure the transcripts contained what they intended to share. Secondly, I used a reflexivity journal to document my thoughts, questions and emotional reactions to the interviews (Amankwaa, 2016). Thirdly, I kept a record of my written notes, summaries and charts that

would allow an outsider the ability to see the evidence of the final results. Lastly, the audit trail also included my research questions, data collection strategies, study design and methods, decisions and analysis that are all supported in this thesis (Hays & Singh, 2012).

I made the effort to be transparent by discussing my interest and bias at the beginning of the research process (see Chapter 1) and explained that I am approaching this research with both an etic and emic view. Although I had some preconceived notions as to what the experience of deconstruction would be for the participants, there were times where I was challenged by the uniqueness of each individual interview. Before analysis, I wondered how well a couple of the interviews would fit with the others, however, my analysis revealed many similarities.

To establish trustworthiness throughout the research process, I also incorporated peer debriefing. Peer debriefing allows a person external to the research to review and suggest changes to the study findings. I found it helpful to have an external person reflect on the themes of the thesis to offer insight. The themes of the thesis were discussed with this external person to comment on the understanding and flow of themes and they offered different terms that aided in fleshing out the meaning of the themes presented. These conversations were helpful in understanding the themes of patriarchy and heteronormativity in particular. Thick description, or rich detailed descriptions, were used in the results section to help the reader determine transferability (Amankwaa, 2016). Thick descriptions included quotations from the participants' transcripts to ensure that the interpretations were grounded in the participants' own words. Thick description gives the reader the opportunity to determine if they agree with the researcher's interpretation and may also increase the likelihood of a reader resonating with the findings, a concept known as the *phenomenological nod* (Nelms, 2021).

Ethical Considerations

The University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board (REB) reviewed this research application and approved the study. This study involved human participants; therefore, treating people with dignity and respect was of utmost importance. Obtaining informed consent was an important part of ensuring respect and dignity. As the researcher, I discussed with participants beforehand the purpose of the research, the risks and benefits and their right to withdraw from the research at any time (Groenewald, 2004). The informed consent form also clarified that the research questions and topics may cause emotional distress in the subjects, especially if they had particularly difficult experiences with organized religion or were experiencing depression and anxiety due to the experience of deconstruction. A referral list for counselling resources was also made available to the participants in the event that they experienced distress (see Appendix F).

As a graduate student in applied psychology, I paid attention to body language, allowed the participants to share at their own pace and informed them that they did not have to answer any questions that made them feel uncomfortable. Confidentiality was also extremely important. Any identifying names, places, third parties or institutions were removed from each transcript to ensure confidentiality. I transferred the audio recorded interviews to an encrypted password protected computer and labelled the file with a pseudonym to protect participant privacy. Emails will be deleted once I have contacted participants with a copy of the thesis. Participants' names will not be connected to the interviews and contact forms will be stored separately from data records. Lastly, an *epoché* was an important ethical aspect of this IPA study. As much as possible, I brought an awareness of my own biases and approached the experience of others with *naivete*. Throughout the research process I reflected on my own experience and interpretation of

deconstruction while using reflexivity as a reminder that I am the instrument in the research process.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to hear the voices of the participants, explore their lived experience and meaning they have constructed from experiencing spiritual deconstruction. These results confirmed that deconstruction is an unraveling, shifting, changing, or expanding in spiritual and religious beliefs. For many, it is also an experience of “leaving” their churches. The study was guided by the following research questions: What influenced the experience of spiritual deconstruction for post-evangelical and post-fundamentalist Christians? What is the lived experience and meaning of deconstruction? How has this impacted their life (i.e., identity, faith, family, community, work, mental health)?

Data were collected through online video interviews (n=6). The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed within two days of collection. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to analyze the data which produced five broad themes along with their corresponding subthemes. Although other themes surfaced, the final themes selected were based on their richness and impact on participants’ lives. This means that not every participant may have had an experience that fit within a particular subtheme. The voice of each participant was honored through direct quotations and excerpts from the transcripts, as well as my interpretations of their meaning.

Participants were given pseudonyms and I was careful to not use any words or phrases out of context. Ellipses are used to indicate both pauses in participants’ sentences as well as omission of words or sentences without altering the speaker’s meaning. Filler words such as “you know,” “right,” “like” and “um” and word repetition were omitted for improved readability. Changed or added words in quotations for additional context were denoted in square parenthesis.

Any identifying names, places, people and institutions were removed from the transcript to increase confidentiality.

Participants

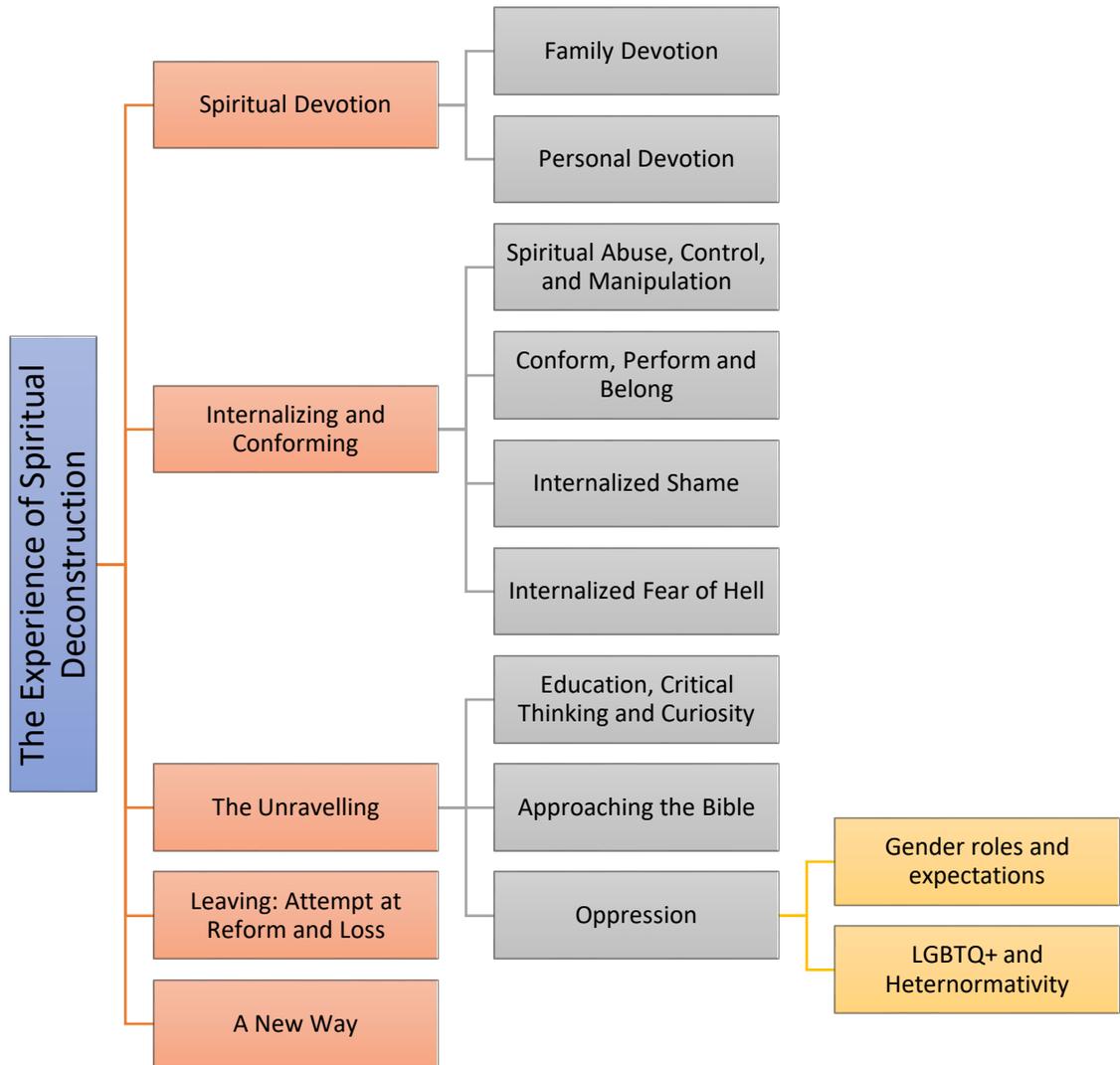
The mean age of the participants was 32 ranging from ages 25 to 43. Four participants were from across Canada and two were from the United States. Four women and two men participated, and two participants described themselves as LGBTQ+. Scott is an energetic, compassionate man with a graduate degree in theology and experience with charismatic Christianity. He is married with a family and continues to practice his faith in a professional setting; however, his understanding of God is not the traditional Christian understanding and would be considered a practicing atheist to some traditional evangelicals. Sarah is an optimistic single young woman who grew up in what she described as charismatic “bible-based cult.” Sarah left with the help of a family intervention a few years before the interview. She is learning how to live life outside of this church group and has not abandoned her faith. Sarah was attending an evangelical church at the time of our interview. Rachel is a thoughtful married professional who is struggling with how to understand her previous charismatic faith. Rachel left her church and hasn’t attended church for 5 years at the time of the interview. Samantha is an insightful student who is passionate about queer theology and has had a lot of support in deconstructing her former churches fundamentalist doctrines. Alayna is a married woman with children who also had biblical studies training and was involved in charismatic ministry. As many of the other participants, her experience with deconstruction has been a long, slow journey and she is still learning how to navigate personal relationships and her experience with mystery and faith. Jason is a young single man who is struggling with his sexual identity after he left his charismatic, anti-

gay church. He was deeply impacted by his church in a negative way and was grateful to share his experience. He does not consider himself an atheist but is unsure about anything spiritual.

Themes

The following themes, and subthemes emerged from participants' experiences and are discussed following the outline in Figure 4.1. The reader will notice in this section how often the themes overlap and are therefore interconnected.

Figure 4.1. Themes



Spiritual Devotion

The first theme, *Spiritual Devotion*, provides context and the foundation for the experience of deconstruction. All participants were born into a family that were devoted to their Christian faith, belief, and values. They were entrenched in a certain way of thinking and being in the world. This entrenchment strongly influenced them in adopting these ideals for themselves. Each participant, in their own way, was personally devoted to their faith (at least for a significant season). They were committed Christians who cared about the faith of their families and who had made their faith personal. For these participants, family and church established a particular belief system, which years later began to shift and unravel. Thus, the two main aspects of participants' spiritual history were *family devotion* and *personal devotion*.

Family Devotion. All six participants stated that they grew up in a conservative evangelical or Pentecostal background with parents who were strong believers and committed members of their congregation. Scott was raised in a non-denominational evangelical church and though they moved around when he was younger, his family always attended church. Scott communicated clearly his evangelical upbringing by discussing his parents' focus on understanding scripture, a personal relationship with God and living a morally upstanding life:

Every week we were in church and faith was always taken really seriously. The Bible as the revealed, inspired, authoritative, infallible word of God was always sort of held as the central standard of faith. And along with that...my parents emphasize very strongly that the most important decision that anyone would ever make is their personal relationship with God. Or as my mother likes to say, "God has no grandchildren"... so that's... the elements that were focused on—that being a Christian meant studying the Bible and living a morally upstanding life.

Sarah was close with her family and explained that her parents, who were immersed in the charismatic Pentecostal church, were “extreme” in their beliefs. She described her experience of her family faith as moralistic and focused on religious performance. Sarah was raised in a strict environment, with a focus on “do’s and don’ts,” and experienced a fear of “breaking a rule...and the need to perform.” She felt internal pressure to “make [her parents] happier,” which she “hated.” Sarah struggled to appreciate some aspects of growing up in the faith because of her struggle with moralism and the pressure to perform. Unspoken pressures in the church can often dominate a person’s faith narrative (Canter, 2020).

Rachel’s immediate and extended family were also connected and committed to their church community. She acknowledged that “my spiritual journey for me as a young person was not one of discovery or choice, it was one of being taught the pedagogy.” She explained her experience growing up in the faith:

There was no question of choice or of learning about the idea of Christianity. It was more of being trained...into that mindset of Christianity. So...then... the milestones of that was giving my heart to Jesus, because that's what was expected, and that was taught, and then being baptized at 10 and learning to speak in tongues at 13.

Rachel conceptualized her experience of faith as doing what was expected of her, rather than choosing freely. However, her narrative throughout her transcript revealed a deep desire to belong to her church community.

Jason’s family was incredibly committed to their church that they would drive long hours to attend three-hour services. In his interview, he shared bluntly how difficult leaving the church was for him and how he is still extremely impacted by his upbringing. He believed his parents were too involved and that it took over their whole lives. He explained, “My parents were

relentlessly part of this cult.” Alayna’s parents also participated frequently in a conservative evangelical church, bringing her and her siblings to church “twice a week.”

Samantha explained that her family’s church had a “fundamentalist view of the Bible,” was “led by the Holy Spirit,” and was moralistic and perfectionistic. She explained, “some of the things weren’t culturally relevant at all...no drinking, and they didn't even want us to listen to Christian rock 'cause that was too worldly. They were just very like protectionist, in a way.” She shared that the leadership focused strongly on the sanctity of marriage between a man and a woman and were fiercely anti-gay.

Personal Devotion. All six participants expressed how devoted they were to their faith and their church. Scott grew up attending Baptist or non-denominational churches and continues to attend church today. He discussed when his faith became personal:

As a kid I didn't really ask too many questions. What my parents and my pastor said was what was true. I had a sort of pre-critical naivete in that regard. And I think where I started to make that my own was in middle school and the youth pastor of our church... presented the Bible in a way that really made me feel connected and I enjoyed particularly the intellectual engagement with the text on my own terms.

Scott’s story reveals some positive examples of church leadership and he explained that he had a “profound experience of feeling this connection with Jesus.” This connection with Jesus touched him deeply as he struggled with loneliness in his younger years. He continued to be interested in the Bible and wanted to continue to study it. He was later exposed to the charismatic movement that was “another step further into the fanaticism...the extremism.”

Alayna explained that she was immersed in the church and wanted to become a missionary. She had done some work with Youth with a Mission (YWAM), a conservative,

charismatic organization. She went on to get a degree in Biblical studies. She was clearly dedicated stating, “I had plans to be a missionary, I was gonna move to India and did a stint with YWAM.” Youth with a Mission is a missionary organization that Alayna described as “very Conservative Assemblies of God tradition, very charismatic, very...in hindsight, sometimes I say ‘culty.’”

Sarah left home at a young age to live with her sister so that she could be closer to a church community. She became very involved and committed to her church community and sacrificed other interests that she wanted to be involved with and often worked for free cleaning the church and other work duties assigned by the pastor. Samantha, another participant, explained that she was a “keener” who was dedicated, but she also experienced her church community as enclosed and all encompassing:

I wanted to be...such a good Christian kid. So, I remember when I was seven... I’d be going up to sit in the front row by myself as a seven-year-old, 'cause I was like, ‘Oh my parents are too afraid to sit in the front row, I’ll sit in the front row.’ And I was always the first up for altar calls. I was super diligent in reading the Bible 'cause that was a huge thing that was valued by that church.

Rachel explained that she was “born into a church group,” and it became very important to her. She attended regularly even though there were things that she disagreed with. Jason also had a mixed, complex experience in his church in that he was devoted and entrenched in it, but at the same time “hated” it and found that the beliefs were “forced down this throat.” He further explained, “It’s hard to explain. I did feel like I was in it and dedicated, but I felt I didn’t want to be.”

Internalizing and Conforming

The first theme had hints of the second theme, *Internalizing and Conforming*, however this section explores further participants' internalized belief systems from their families and churches and how they conformed to them. *Spiritual Abuse, Control and Manipulation* were used to encourage this internalization. Participants clearly felt pressure to *Conform, Perform and Belong* in their families and spiritual communities. Their experience of shame is discussed in the subtheme, *Internalization of Shame*, particularly relating to sexuality. The *Internalization of the Fear of Hell* is also discussed. The participants reveal in this section how moralism, purity culture and "right belief" were internalized. This internalization was governed by pressure, shame, fear and, of course, the human need to belong.

Spiritual Abuse, Control and Manipulation

Control and censorship were themes that surfaced quickly in the interviews. Participants discussed being censored in thought and theology, and controlled regarding their sexuality, friendships and relationships. Leaders and group members used manipulation and spiritual abuse as a way to control. Spiritual abuse is defined as using scripture, God or spiritual leadership to control and shame, often using the person's desire to please God as a way to manipulate them.

Rachel explained how her church would "talk down about education and how that was going to destroy people's faith...looking into other faiths and religions was also a problem because of ...where that would lead." Rachel implied that investigating other religions might take one away from the Christian faith. Scott described the culture of the Christian school he attended. He explained there was censorship of what was acceptable:

The religious atmosphere at the school...was much more extreme than the very moderate and educated evangelicalism that I had known to that point and it was more of what I would call a fundamentalist variety. And so being told things like ‘you must accept young earth creationism, you have to beware of the gay agenda, look out for these secular scholars like Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud, Ralph Waldo Emerson...’

Scott was not encouraged to read or study anything outside of the fundamentalist Christian worldview for fear of being led astray.

Alayna explained that she felt “spiritually bullied” in YWAM. People would tell her, “‘I got a word from the Lord for you’ ...pressuring me and others into life decisions based on this ‘word for you.’” She struggled with some mental health issues at the time and the people around her would spiritualize her nightmares as “spiritual warfare” instead of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (5th ed.; DSM–5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013), an understanding of her experience she came to later. The Christians around her would say that her “depression and despair were a lack of faith.” Alayna also experienced what she described as “spiritual bullying” when a friend of hers was fired from church but was told, “the Lord is calling you elsewhere.” She explained:

You can’t argue with that because then you’d be arguing with God. But really you are just being bullied and he was kind of pushed out in part because he was really open about his battle with depression. It was pretty severe for him but would speak about that when he was worship leading and say, ‘I’m in a different place, but God is good, and let’s sing’...They didn’t like that cause it didn’t project the positive ‘Jesus is my boyfriend’ theology that they really wanted.

Jason also described his past church as a cult. He said, "I'm going to just call it a cult, our cult, it had a lot of emotional manipulation. They never really had a set doctrine or, or set, schedule for their services. We were just led by the Holy Spirit." He felt as though it was being forced down his throat and that his parents were too involved with the group. He explained that "with something like that it just takes over your entire life. I don't think there's anybody who's part of it that isn't just completely consumed by it."

Sarah's experience was dominated by control and manipulation. She explained her experience as a slow progression of increasing control. She started attending the group as a young teenager and explained that the leader of the ministry "was very personable" and had a "way of gaining your trust." He would find out the "ins and outs of their lives" and "your whole life was an open book in the group." There was little to no privacy as anything that she shared with others could "go up the line" to the leader. Sarah explained university was not encouraged as that would induce "critical thinking." She was censored in what she was allowed to read, and she was not allowed to use social media.

Sarah explained there was a group of women who walked closely with the leader and they felt special when they were called to one of these meetings. She was eventually invited to be part of that "inner circle" and realized this was to "basically control me, get me closer, see how I was doing." Sarah explained that "you were kept off kilter and you never really knew when there would be a meeting." The group was told to "pray about" making decisions, even when to go visit her family. She gave an example of going to visit her family, and once she had arrived, the leader would call a meeting and she would have to leave. When she returned, she "got yelled at for making this decision to go visit my family and basically putting them above [the ministry] and so then it completely messes you up." This was all meant to control her actions and keep her

from her family. She expressed that she was constantly “self-evaluating” and doubting her “thoughts and feelings,” as well as her actions and motivations.

Sarah was taught that giving up things that she would enjoy, such as being in a music festival, was “suffering for something that’s greater.” The members of the group would often do the cleaning of the church and the leader would create things for them to do; she stated that “it was this view that God is keeping us safe from the world, he’s keeping us safe from things that are out there, that could harm us or that could lead us astray...and so that’s what we were told, we were kept so busy.”

The leader of Sarah’s church also maintained control through “public chastisement” for anything that he did not like or that was “against God.” This is also connected to the theme of shame and conforming as members did not want to be the one who was chastised or shamed in front of the others. She explained that she often overheard the leader “yelling at someone in the other end of the building.” She continued:

And it was this belief that God was coming after something in our heart and so we just took it. There were times, maybe the details were incorrect, but he would always tell us it’s not about the details, it’s about what’s in your heart. And so, if he is saying the complete wrong information and you try to stand up for yourself, heaven help you. And so eventually you basically learned to not trust yourself.

At one point, the leader “yelled” at the children in the group for being “disappointed and crying” when he told them they could no longer participate in sports because it took the family from the church. She explained:

...like 10, 12-year olds that he is just reaming out, basically making them feel guilty for feeling sad that they can’t play sports. And so, it was just that type of control and it

happened so gradually that...eventually, slowly he gained this control. And he would take these verses in the Bible and would use them...for his gain, for him to keep this control over a group of people.

Sarah explained that another way that the leader would gain control is through claiming that he had special revelation of scripture and a focus on the “end times.” She explained that this group was a “Bible based cult.” She explained that “different scriptures were taken and...twisted ...so that the leader could control.” Sarah explained that there were people in the group who had gone to Bible school, who were trained to read the Bible, but were still impacted by the leader’s interpretation. Sarah described her perspective on how this occurred:

He breaks you down...he would take someone, and he would pick apart maybe their parenting and be like, ‘if it wasn’t for this place your child would be like this...[morally corrupt]’...we also believed that the ‘end of the age was coming soon’ or the ‘end times’ and so basically like the apocalypse or Armageddon.

The view of the end times convinced the church that they were special, better than the people who left, and the belief the church would be a safe place for her family in the end times. This elitism is common in cults (Rousselet et al., 2017) to espouse an “us” versus “them” narrative. Sarah mentioned multiple times that she made certain decisions because she did not want to be a “coward” or “failure.” It was instilled in the group that they were weak if they left or acted against the leader.

Sarah explained that she felt as though she was making decisions for herself, but in actuality, she felt pressured to do “his suggestion.” She explained:

But if you didn't do his suggestion then it was his view [that] you're going against God and we also believed... he was a Prophet. We believed he was hearing straight from God. And so again if you're not listening to what he's saying, you're disobeying God.

The leader in Sarah's church also used isolation. Sarah was yelled at because she wanted to attend a family function. Sarah explained, "I was fully bought in and [the leader] did a good job of basically detaching me from my relationship with my sister and her husband. He would build me up independent of them, cause I was really close to them." When her brother-in-law and sister left the group because of concerning behaviour, she was encouraged to not spend time with them. The leader claimed her brother-in-law had an "evil spirit over him and so people were even afraid to talk to him." Anyone who left the group were "of the devil." As a way to prevent church members from leaving the group, the leader of Sarah's church would often show a picture of a girl who left the group who is struggling with homelessness and a lack of support from her family and ask them, "do you want to be like that?" She explained:

He completely keeps them in his grip. And any time he senses that someone else has some influence or power, you can tell that right away he's there... chastising someone for something that doesn't even have anything to do with it, but it's because he feels like he's losing control.

Perform, Conform and Belong. Every participant expressed their experience in church included feeling the pressure to perform for the community and their families; conform to what was being taught and a desire to belong. As this next excerpt reveals, Scott was conflicted in his narrative. He was attracted to the mystical understanding of God and a connection with a higher power. But in hearing his story, I had a sense that he struggled with the need to "toe the line" and

did not experience any room for being different or thinking differently. He wanted to be close to Jesus and therefore, he would do what he needed to do to make sure that happened:

I was drawn to that sense of mysticism and miracles and you can hear the voice of the Holy Spirit guiding you. But you have to obey; you have to align; you have to believe... believe the dogma, behave according to the morals... there is a huge emphasis in that community on things like spiritual warfare. So the idea is that anything here is not just alive but it's an active demonic attack that's coming against you. And it applies to anything that doesn't fit their idea of how life or the world ought to work. And during that time, I was continuing to buy into and internalize this mentality 'cause I thought...I want to stay by my friend. I wanna stay with Jesus and I want to honor God with my whole life— be this Christian [and] taking it seriously.

Scott used the word internalize throughout his interview. He made sense of his faith upbringing as internalizing a belief system that threatened demonic attack and hell. He wanted to stay close to his friend Jesus and was willing to do what he thought it took to stay close to him.

Alayna experienced a pressure to conform to YWAM's understanding of the LGBTQ+ community, such as a normalization of conversion therapy. She explained, "It just made sense 'cause we were in our own little echo chamber of that making sense." Diverse views were not welcome in this community, particularly on this subject.

Rachel was taught that her church "was the one that Jesus blessed above all...that it had come from other churches or other denominations that had great flaws and this church was the answer to those flaws." This belief system internalized an "us vs them" mentality that results in an elitist perspective towards other faith communities. She also explained her inner conflict regarding her participation in this culture. She said that "there were things that I didn't like but I

had to do because that was expected.” When Rachel got married, she “desperately” tried to get her husband to attend her church, “because I couldn't possibly leave our church.”

Sarah shared that she experienced a lot of pressure to be spiritual in her early church environment. She shared:

I would feel the pressure of the crowd...or the pressure of the person in front of me— pushing you up like to the front, or...you know altar calls or... ‘come to give your heart to the Lord’ and things like that. But it would be more... in an emotional way.

As described in the previous section on control and manipulation, Sarah, as a youth, started attending what she described as “a cult.” She explained their group was “very close knit” and the control and internalization “didn’t happen overnight.” One of the beliefs Sarah internalized was the teaching that it was better to be single than to be married. She explained that if you joined the group before you were married you were pressured to stay single “until you died.” She explained that she “genuinely thought that God had called [her] to be single and that that's what [God] wanted for [her] life.” She explained that when you are “surrounded by 15 other women who say they feel the same way,” it is very difficult to be the only one who does not feel called to be single. This is especially the case with the pressure to be holy and looked upon with favour by your pastor. She now understands this as “group think.” Group think is a term that references a group of people who come to a consensus, without critical thinking, as to not disturb the harmony of the group (Kenton, n.d.).

From a young age, Rachel also experienced pressure to perform spiritually. She explained that everyone in their church who was 13 years and younger had to say a Bible verse in front of the church. She and her siblings were quite shy and did not like being the focus of attention. She stated that “the resentment of that experience started really about the time I was 10 or 11;”

however, it was an expectation, along with many others. Rachel learned at a young age that if you were accepted spiritually, you would have more approval, influence and recognition by getting to “tell your story...do your own solo” or “lead prayer.” In her early twenties, she felt even more pressure to fit in, “to have the right beliefs...to have the right mindset and have the right words and to fulfill what they called my ‘prophecies’.” The prophecies were words that were spoken over her in her church and “outlines what your life is going to be like.”

Jason had a complicated history with his church and faith. He explained that “the entire day [Sunday] was dedicated to church and it was terrible, and we all hated it. We...didn't really talk about that, because you're not allowed to talk about that kind of stuff.” At the same time, he was “super-duper into it.” He explained church was all-encompassing and he was conflicted about his experience. He didn't feel as though he could be honest about how he felt about church and his experience there, and instead put on a show. One example of this for him was pretending to speak in tongues:

Interviewer: Yeah, sounds like there was a lot of pressure to conform and that you couldn't really be yourself or share your thoughts.

Jason: Yes exactly...because... if you're doubting the good book, that means that the devil is trying to tempt you. So, you have to take that logical thought and lock it away. Which is...ridiculous. People speak in tongues and that's very confusing to me. And I faked it a couple of times... but I feel like that's what everyone does. I just started sort of speaking whatever words came to me like just gibberish, and there's no way that...
laughs... I can't be the only one doing that.

Jason explained how much this has impacted his life outside of the church. He indicated he has trouble being honest about what he wants and living a congruent life. He notices that it is easier for him to lie to others to please them instead of being honest with himself.

Internalized shame. *Internalized shame* was a struggle each participant experienced in various ways. In this thesis, shame is defined as the experience of profound heaviness and pain in one's consciousness that a person has done something dishonorable or *is* dishonorable (*Definition of Shame by Merriam-Webster, n.d.*). This feeling includes an intense fear or felt sense of rejection and a fear of disconnection.

When Sarah was younger, she struggled with feeling intense guilt for getting drunk with her friends explaining, "I just had all of this going on in my mind, I'm like, "WHAT HAVE I DONE? I'm this awful person!" She also did not feel she was ever able to be honest about how she felt about things in her church group. For example, at times the pastor of her church would have the members do menial work to keep them busy. She understood this as "God keeping me out of the world." She was taught:

It's not about the work, it's about your heart and so if you would ever go through a day and you were grumbling or complaining you would feel super guilty about that. Like 'Oh, my heart's not right with God. I should be grateful that I get to do this [and] serve him in this way.'

In Sarah's church, there was a lot of shaming, both privately and publicly. At one point, her family tried to intervene and help her understand the controlling nature of the group she belonged to. She called her mentor at the church to ask her what to do and her mentor responded that if it was her, she would have left the intervention. Sarah felt so much shame for not being strong enough to get up and leave. Instead of deciding for herself what was best for her, Sarah

relied on the group. When she went against the group, she often felt deep shame for “not being strong enough.”

Rachel experienced shame for never feeling as though she was doing enough spiritually. She shared:

The level of intensity that was pushed...if you weren't speaking in tongues daily, if you weren't praying daily, if you weren't reading your bible daily, if you weren't going to every prayer meeting on every Wednesday and every service on every Sunday, then you weren't good enough. And all while still recognizing that God's grace was there. So that's a very hard thing...so I'm not good enough, but God thinks I could be good enough? Or God thinks I'm good, but I keep proving him wrong?...it's that constant failure of being a [good] Christian.

Rachel still struggles to understand if the “guilt” experience is a common Christian experience. She relayed how this has bled into other areas of her life, such as the need to be competent, otherwise she avoids the activity due to a fear of failure. When Rachel began to disconnect from her church because she felt it was no longer fulfilling or “building” her up, she felt guilt and shame. There was a teaching in her church (and many others) that you are not only at the church for yourself; you are there to “feed” someone else. She stated, “So it doesn't matter how many times something doesn't help you or doesn't serve a purpose for you. If you don't go, you're failing someone else.” Even with this feeling of failure and shame that attempted to control her, she started to “step back from things” and eventually left.

Sexual shame was a prevalent theme in participants' stories that jumped out at me, even before official analysis began. This had a deep impact on the participants. Scott mentioned sexuality throughout his interview. It was clear that shame and sexuality contributed significantly

to his experience of evangelical Christianity. Scott attended a Christian school growing up that focused on cultivating a Christian worldview that obsessively focused on “particular moral issues and usually of the pelvic variety, though not entirely. There was this over obsession with sex and our private personal lives were policed to a very high degree.”

Scott’s church subscribed to a belief system called “purity culture,” an extreme moralism about sexuality where people are not encouraged to date or even kiss until they are married. The impact for this on Scott was a struggle with feeling as though he was “sexually corrupt” if he had a crush on a girl. He explained:

When you're 18, 19 years old and you've got all the hormones raging, just doing their normal stuff that they do, you've got this heaping scoop of shame it's just constantly being poured over you and...I was being told, ‘Oh you just gotta get into the word! You gotta pray some more, you gotta confess this, bring it into the light.’ And for them, confession was not like a Catholic priest in a private booth. It was, you grab the microphone, and you tell the whole church what you’re doing. And so, it felt like a real scarlet letter kind of situation there... and so... that really felt like a traumatizing and damaging experience for me.

Scott described his younger self as a sexual bulimic where he had a “cycle of starve, binge, purge.” He explained what the starve phase looked like for him:

[I would] sort of sequester myself away and guard my eyes, guard my heart and then to spend time in the word, sleepless nights, fasting, praying, ‘God please take this away!’ Similar to the experiences I hear from a lot of folks raised in that culture who are LGBTQ+ where they keep praying for God to take this away. It sounds similar to what I was experiencing except that I was praying that God would take away my straightness.

chuckle...this was a distraction from the real work of the Kingdom that I should be about.

Scott further confessed that he had been rejected by his pastor because he had had a fling with a woman and his pastor had told him: “You're gonna bring demons into my house, you're spiritually compromised... And...that was the moment I think something really snapped for me and I realized that this whole system was sick.” Scott explained that he was still drawn to Jesus. He never wanted to cease being a Christian. He remembers praying, “Jesus I love you, but I've gotta figure out a different way of following you...I think my pastor means well by what he's telling me. I think he genuinely believes what he's saying. But I think the system itself is sick.” Later in life, Scott came to realize that the “demon of lust” he was trying to pray away was just hormones and it was perfectly normal to have romantic and sexual feelings. He came to believe that: “The real demonic thing was the culture of shame that was being constructed and used to control people.”

At the time of the interview, Rachel still felt shame and guilt over her past choices. She stated that, “I was still doing things that were sinful and bad and wrong and then still feeling very, very ashamed of who I was and where I was and what I was doing.” She expressed that to this day she suffers from guilt for choices that she made in her early twenties, even though she has asked for forgiveness. She explained, “I don't know if I needed to, or if [forgiveness] stuck.” The shame is so ingrained that she still struggles with acceptance and letting go of her previous choices.

Alayna also experienced shame while she was serving in YWAM. Alayna experienced people monitoring and policing her friendships. She shared that she had always felt more comfortable around men and having friendships with men. This was “perceived as a problem by

many people from [her] life in the church” and she was informed that she “needed to work on [her] character,” even though there was no romantic interaction with any of these men. She had been given a “word from the Lord” to break up with her boyfriend (who is now her husband) in order to “let go of... [her] relationship with men,” which was considered by people in the church as “a part of [her] struggles.” However, the shame continued, “I had all this shame around being with him or... if we were supposed to be together or not... certainly a huge amount of sexual shame and all of that, but that's a whole other can of worms that I know many people in the evangelical church have had to unpack.”

In Sarah’s church, there was condemnation about expressing sexuality. She noted that the pastor would use their past “sins” and choices to shame them and would often yell, “FORNICATORS GO TO HELL!” to keep everyone from engaging in sexual behaviour. Sarah was also taught that men only wanted one thing from her (sex). The leader would control the girls through manipulation of their view on men outside the group. He had them watch a documentary of a murder trial and Sarah provided her perspective on the impact this had on her:

So, you’re completely... screwed up, and you have this view that men are awful human beings... you’re safe here, [because] you don’t have to deal with that. And so...one time [he] showed us the documentary...murder trial and there is one scene in there where it shows [a woman’s] throat slashed, and he pauses it at that point. We looked down, and he’s like “LOOK AT IT!” And makes us look at it on screen, of her slit throat, and he says, “that’s what it’s like out there.” And yeah, that was often. And so then leaving that and then trying to have a healthy relationship... *laughs*

Sarah still has difficulties forming healthy relationships today, as she lacks trust that men can be doing something for her because they are genuinely nice versus “only being after one thing.”

Jason is bisexual and he explained the shame and worthlessness he experienced growing up in the church:

(Sigh)...Being part of something like that [his church] makes you feel really worthless. They really make you devalue yourself. And I really learned to hate myself and I mean that's also because of me being a 'little bit' gay. *laughs* Apparently that being the end of the world...I felt like my only purpose was to...make someone else's life better. And I feel like I just kind of threw myself away and just wanted somebody who would love me. And I'm realizing that now. I obviously didn't realize it at the time. I felt like my...parents who told me they love me every day and then turned around and said that gay people were going to hell and they were terrible. I guess I felt like maybe they don't love me? And I know that they do, 'cause they don't have a choice, they have to. They're my parents. I just felt like I was worthless, and I didn't really want to be [at church].

Samantha is also queer and expressed her struggle with internalized homophobia, "I still had a lot of internalized homophobia, and a lot of internalized modesty and like, purity stuff as a woman and discomfort with my body." Her narrative is discussed more in the theme of *LGBTQ+ and Heteronormativity*.

Internalizing the fear of hell. It was clear to me through reading and re-reading participants' transcripts that the sheer volume of stories related to the internalization of negative emotions, such as fear and shame. One specific fear that connected to three of the participants was the fear of hell. Scott described his church culture as an "extreme form of evangelicalism that was very black-and-white, very much built on guilt and fear, the threat of hellfire and brimstone that became a constant companion." He felt he had been deceived, explaining:

Jesus loves me unconditionally—who I read about in the Bible. And then I get in there, discover actually he's looking over your shoulder. He knows your every thought and he will burn you in hell. And if anyone tells you differently than they're just deceived by Satan and...you have to prove yourself to God...You've gotta follow the way, you'll burn or even if you won't burn, you'll still be punished.

Scott experienced major psychological suffering because of this theology and reported that this “rigid black-and-white ideology” made him constantly fearful, so much so that he almost felt “psychotic.” He elaborated:

There was one point I was really convinced that God was trying to kill me—that I was so corrupted by lust and sin—that surely I could be of no good to the work of God's Kingdom in this world and therefore God had to take me out of it to protect God's other children from me.

Sarah felt that if she left the church, she would go to hell; the two were strongly linked in her mind. The pastor put fear into the members that their life would be a mess without the ministry. Sarah had internalized this and thought that if she hadn't attended the church, she would have likely ended up pregnant or addicted to drugs with no moral compass. When someone would leave their church, she explained, “It's like someone died because it's this view...they're gonna go to hell.” This strengthened Sarah's resolve to stay in the church as she didn't want to “wimp out and walk away.” It would be seen as a major failure, as well as result in eternal damnation. This fear of hell may explain why it may have been so difficult for some participants to begin questioning the beliefs held by the faith communities they belonged to.

Jason mentioned the threat of hell a number of times in his interview. He explained that he had thought that if he didn't say or believe what the church believed; he would go to hell.

Because of this, Jason had to hide and reject a large part of who he was (i.e., his sexuality) because it wasn't acceptable to his family or church community. Although he has now embraced his differences, he wasn't able to affirm his queerness when he was younger. He explained:

I just couldn't possibly be different, because that would mean that I was going to hell...hell is a terrifying and ridiculous concept. *Laughs* Like, eternal torture because you tried to enjoy your life. Shame on you! Shame on you!...But it's a terrifying thing to grow up with being like, 'Oh my God! One wrong decision could cost me the entire afterlife!' So, you're totally willing to sabotage your own life...

Jason believed threats of hellfire are effective and understood why it was convincing to so many people. He has very strong feelings towards this theology, "It's sick, it's disgusting. The gross stain on humanity. People getting rich...like it's like a lifetime subscription to heaven *laughs* where you give away 10% of your income." One of the things that comforts Jason is knowing that others are leaving that community and "that it's bad enough that they are willing to get out of it and risk Hellfire." He no longer feels alone.

The Unravelling

The Unravelling reveals the dismantling of thinking that participants experienced, shifting from certainty to uncertainty, from a solid foundation to a sense of groundlessness and crumbling. Although mentioned briefly in other sections, this theme highlights the questions and curiosities participants started to have about their Christian worldview. As well, this theme demonstrates how participants' Christian faith steadily became incongruent with their views on morality, scripture, theology, oppression, gender roles, heteronormativity and their sense of self.

Education, Critical Thinking and Curiosity

Scott explained that he majored in “philosophy and religion” in university, which is where “seeds of questions started getting planted.” Alayna admitted her deconstruction was not due to any significant events but because of many small moments over the last 10 years that “unraveled this really concrete perception of the world that I had growing up.” In reflecting further, Alayna realized that in college, she was “asking some big questions.” She began questioning the line, “I’m so blessed” and how this was often connected to having favor from God after she had traveled to a country with poverty. She began to question the purpose of praying for trivial things like losing her keys and Jesus being similar to a “boyfriend” and making you “feel better” and not being satisfied with that. She coined this “Jesus is my boyfriend” theology. She remembers thinking:

Everyone warned me that when you go off to college... you could lose your faith, and you have to be wary of anything that would cause you to stumble or backslide or whatever. And I would see all these people who went off to college and question what they believed and that was a thing to guard against and I just expected it to be this big monumental thing that would happen. And I was just driving down the road and was like, ‘shit is that what is happening here? *laughs* Is this how it happens?’ Cause...it [her faith] just wasn’t making sense anymore.

Alayna explained how scary the experience of deconstructing had been for her. It was difficult when her “schema of the world” began to crack and made less sense. It was also frightening to lose the church community she was involved in. She explained that “our friendships... are so connected to believing the right thing. Where do we even fit in the world? And who is our community? Who is our family anymore?”

Recently Alayna has been reading about Buddhism and it has actually made her “consider being a Christian again.” She appreciated how Buddhist thought does not intend to make you Buddhist. In Buddhism, there is no mandate to believe certain principles and to believe them in “the right way.” As well, evangelizing, or convincing others to believe the same doctrines is also not part of Buddhism. She had come to realize that there are different ways of being Christian outside of the fundamentalist version of faith. She is learning that different religions can help her to see a fuller picture of God and assist people in being a better Christian or Buddhist, for example:

So, there’s not so much a sense of figuring out what’s true and right or wrong but it’s more... how do we exist in the world as good humans? And how do we make the world better for other humans? *laughs* And how do we live in the here and now?

Jason reported that it took a long time for him to become aware of his disconnect with the church. He is starting to realize he has agency over his life, although it has taken a long time to arrive at this understanding. Jason expressed how important it was for him to leave his church, albeit painful. He stated:

It’s super difficult and I feel horrible for anybody who has to do it. But it’s the best decision that anybody could ever make...to learn to think for yourself and decide what is real for you...I feel for anyone who is questioning their spirituality...It’s *hard* and it’s a big step and it’s important. It’s good to do, to sit down and be like, ‘is this really what I believe?’

Samantha began “deconstructing” and “disassociating” from her church because she observed different variations of Christianity that had diverse perspectives that challenged the tradition she came from. She commented on how strange it is that it was actually Christianity

that helped her deconstruct her form of Christianity. She was part of a University program that was liberal and incorporated social justice. Samantha explained that they asked many questions she had never thought to ask before and viewed the Bible from a completely different perspective.

Sarah began questioning her church's teachings and the leader when her brother-in-law confronted her about her beliefs at an intervention the family had planned with an exit counsellor (someone who is also known as an intervention specialist who helps restore critical thinking; Kent & Szimhart, 2002). In this intervention, she and her brother-in-law debated their beliefs for four hours. She explained that her brother-in-law was trying to get her to think critically about her beliefs, which is not something she was taught, "I didn't have the freedom to go and read something that would contradict what I was learning." He specifically had her question her church leader's abusive actions towards another woman in the group. The words that made her stay for the intervention were, incidentally, a phrase that her leader always said. Her brother-in-law reminded her that the leader would always say, "Make a decision or make an informed decision." This convinced her to stay without fear so that she could make an "informed decision." She said, "It just flipped a switch at that point where I was actually willing to listen and where I was willing to sit and hear what they have to say."

During the intervention, the exit counsellor attempted to reveal to Sarah the control tactics of cult leaders. He explained the similarities between her church leader and dangerous cult leaders like those who were involved in the Jonestown massacre. The exit counsellor and her family wanted her to understand that these groups are very appealing at the beginning, which eventually increases to a person having such significant control that a mass suicide *could* occur. Sarah did not believe the leader of her group would do this but recognized that he had "enough

control to get people to.” This research interview with Sarah was done when COVID-19 lockdowns were just starting to happen all over the world and she stated that with the pandemic happening, her ex-church leader would now have a lot of power over his congregation.

Sarah explained that the decision to leave the group or stay was a “life or death” decision. She had an incredible amount of anxiety, could barely eat and felt in extreme “turmoil.” In many ways, this *was* about life and death for her. Changing her beliefs would be akin to losing her self-identity and her entire existence since she was a young teen. It would be a death to self, a death to identity, a death of her community, and a death of the belief system that had provided purpose and meaning for so much of her life.

Sarah explained that her family wanted her to leave the group, but she was not ready initially. She was discouraged from spending time with people outside of this church group, and therefore, her only friends and her community were in this group. She didn’t have anyone outside of her family as support. She needed time to process what she was learning and to decide for herself. Her brother-in-law gave her two books to read, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse* (Johnson & VanVonderen, 2005) and *Twisted Scriptures* (Chrnalogar, 2010). She recognized herself in the stories in these books and they helped her see how people use scripture to control.

Sarah reported that it took about three months after the intervention for “the fog to clear” and to begin thinking clearly due to the intensity of the group she belonged to and the pressure she experienced. Leaving the group made Sarah realize that it is “okay to question things and that critical thinking is so important.” She understands now that having conversations with others who think differently and challenge her is healthy, and feels more comfortable now with ambiguity and uncertainty. Sarah came to understand that what happened at her church and growing up were not acceptable. She expressed that she is still searching for “truth” and to define

what she believes, but noted that she has received a lot “support... love, and compassion” from others after leaving her church.

Approaching the Bible

Before Scott had learned to study the Bible academically, he understood scripture as some “magic book of rules and dogmas that was dictated word for word from heaven and kind of beamed down like Star Trek... Here are the unchanging and eternal truths that are the foundation of the faith and it is inerrant in every way.” He used to believe that even if science disagreed with the Bible, then science was wrong. He began learning from his seminary professors about liberation theology and to read the Bible from a different social perspective. Scott described what he learned through exegesis about the Bible:

[It's] not a book, it's a library. It's a collection of stories and poems and dreams and letters and all of this stuff that's been woven together in layer upon layer...and my reverence, my awe at what the Bible is actually increased.... my love for it increased. But it was no longer as simple as picking a verse, throwing it down on a table and saying, 'here's the truth, and if you disagree with it, you're going to burn in hell.'

Scott discussed some of the questions he started asking about specific scriptures, including: “What’s happening in that text? Why was that important to people in ancient Israel...? What does that mean for today? What can I gather from this conversation that is relevant now?” Scott began supporting and affirming people who are LGBTQ+ and came across a group of angry people online who made him realize how differently he approached scripture. He realized that he had “evolved” and had “become another species.” He recognized that he did not approach scripture in the same way. Scott realized in this moment that he was no longer an evangelical. He

wanted to be authentic and not misrepresent evangelicals. His “view of scripture was different and no longer could fit in any kind of definition of what evangelicals would accept.”

Similar to Scott, Alayna also had formal training in biblical studies; as part of her degree, she studied Greek and Hebrew, the two languages that most original copies of scripture are written. In learning Hebrew, she noted that she had learned a different way to approach scripture and her Christian worldview. She recognized that “different cultures look at the world differently.” This new understanding began challenging her worldview, how she was taught scripture and how she made sense of the world.

In her interview, Sarah also discussed how she approached scripture. During her intervention, the exit counselor would discuss how to read and interpret scripture properly. She had been drawn to her church because it was Bible-based. However, the leader of the group used scripture to shame and control. The exit counsellor explained how to read scripture in context, historically. Sarah reported that while she was in her church, the leader would tell the participants to read the Bible for themselves; however, after she left the church and read it for herself, she found that his words would be in her head. It was recommended to her that if she wanted to continue to read the Bible, it might be best to get a new translation so that it doesn't remind her of her leader and continue to influence her. Sarah began tearing up in the interview when she discussed how her “strong and solid foundation” was “crumbling underneath” her:

It crumbled and... it wasn't forced, it wasn't pressure. I look back now and... (tearing up)—obviously it was uncomfortable, but it was just really him [the exit counsellor] wanting to come and bring truth and clarity and help me...read the Bible in context, and why it was actually written in certain ways. And to show me, ‘no, this is taken and

twisted for someone's gain—for someone to have control over you and to manipulate you.'

Rachel struggled with patriarchal power in her church. A few specific instances made her leave her church entirely. For example, a "brethren" in her church had connected with a 19-year-old male, a convicted murderer who had recently become a new zealous Christian. This 19-year-old would write countless letters about his "interpretation of Christ and of the Bible, and the brethren would read them in church." The "brethren" were noticeably taken with this young man, sharing these letters on Facebook and sending them through email. This was frustrating for Rachel because this new young Christian was being raised up as this "great interpreter of scripture," when women were not even allowed to preach. She was bothered with the young man's interpretation about tattoos in scripture because she and her friends had tattoos that they considered artwork. She explained, "I have a real problem with Leviticus at the best of times, particularly when you pick out things that you don't like, or things that you like and then you use just those little verses to attack someone." She understood that this young man's interpretation of tattoos was based on his gang involvement and kill list; however, his interpretations were used to condemn those who had tattoos.

Samantha also realized that there were "other ways to approach the Bible and other ways to approach this faith." Similar to Sarah, she isn't sure if she would have ever "deconstructed" if she hadn't learned from other "people of faith, just simply because of how much of a hardcore Christian I was. I think I would have just completely broken if it hadn't come from a place that had made sense to me at the time." She recognized that the way her church was approaching the bible was damaging and began to "question the church; question the way they read the bible,

questioned basically everything they said...Also women and ministry, all this stuff, I just began to detangle all of it at that point.”

Oppression

Participants voiced their dissonance and incongruence with how minorities were treated in their churches, a major contributor to deconstruction. Alayna admitted to an incongruence in her identity as a Christian. She had struggled with how the evangelical church in the United States has “married itself pretty faithfully to our president [Donald Trump], which is pretty horrific and yeah, I don’t want any part of that.” She doesn’t believe this is an isolated thing in history, however. She shared her struggle with being a Christian as progressing from “having some doubts” to “I don’t even know if I even want to be associated with Christianity at all [with what] has happened over the last couple years.” In her social work program, she noticed:

the history of the church and how closely affiliated the church has always been with the side of the oppressor... Even just in the US—like slavery—all of our structures that we still have around race around here, that are unofficial but official—the way that the church has treated people of different orientations—the way that the church has treated women...

Alayna worked for a trauma assessment center with kids in foster care and explained that some of the most horrific domestic violence cases she has witnessed were “protected and perpetuated by the church.” This had been the “last straw” for her. She had been “unravelling” her beliefs and no longer wanted to be associated “with this group that is so consistently on the wrong side of the argument...in terms of humanity and justice and caring for the world.”

Rachel explained that she had been going to her church since she was seven and she always had an awareness about the aspects of her church she didn’t like. She stated:

I didn't like the way they treated women. I didn't like the way they treated other belief systems and even other Christian churches. I didn't like the way that they treated minorities. I didn't like the way that they were very class based. I didn't like the way that they didn't help their communities.

Rachel became known for being vocal in her church explaining, “The brethren actually quite dreaded when I was present for question period.” Although Rachel’s church was clearly patriarchal, she was raised by her family to think critically and question things and “yet also not question things and obey. So, it was a weird push and pull.” Rachel reported, “More and more my church didn’t feel right. It didn’t feel in the spirit. There were lots of parts that did, don’t get me wrong, but more...sounded discordant to me. I couldn’t be there anymore because it was so painful.” She shared that she still wakes up on Sundays with dread because she actually “hated going to church” and it still feels strange for her to not attend.

Gender Roles and Expectations. One of the themes that surfaced, especially for the female participants, was the concept of gender roles in the church. In Sarah’s church, the pastor controlled the appearance of the women in the group. They didn’t wear much makeup, and some were chastised for straightening their hair. Sarah explained that the women would then refrain from straightening or coloring their hair and would also wear baggy clothes. Samantha also mentioned gender and stated that she always saw white men in the pulpit, and no women in ministry, acknowledging that it was a very “fundamentalist and traditional understanding” of ministry. She clarified, “It was very charismatic, a lot of...being...led by the Holy Spirit and purifying your heart” with male “elders and deacons” leading that “had the final say on what the church believed.”

Alayna mentioned that when she was involved in ministry and working with the pastor, she was the sole woman on the team. She recognized quickly that the purpose of the group was not to share insights but rather to support the pastor and his ideas of what should be done. At one point, Alayna was bringing up concerns over certain teachings and her male pastor perceived that her friend, who is a man, had influenced her to think this way. After this, she and her friend were “pushed out of the church.” She explained that she felt “discredited” just for being a woman and [that] I couldn’t have my own thoughts.”

In her teens, Rachel felt disconnected from her church directly related to her gender as a woman. She began to “resent the rules that were applied to women that weren't applied to anyone else.” Rachel also felt that women who were married or married with children received “perks.” Subsequently, she began to ask questions such as:

...the place of women and about why it was more acceptable to wear a dirty T-shirt and a jeans skirt than it was a pair of dress pants and a blouse...And our church believed strongly in head coverings... I really struggled with that because that didn't make sense to me and the answer that I always got was, ‘that's the way it is, that's not something worth questioning.’

Rachel also started questioning the use of the pronoun “he” to refer to God in the Bible in her teens, and her church was adamant that God was a “he.” Rachel understands scripture as “a translation of a translation of a translation” and explained that “gender neutral pronouns” did not exist when the scriptures were written. She tried to have a discussion with the brethren of her church, stating that scripture was written in a patriarchal context and using a female pronoun wouldn’t have been acceptable then. Rachel reported the condescending response she received from them:

[They] basically explained to me how...that was really dumb and... I questioned them again. I said, 'but here's where we've seen this in the past where particularly when it's a translation of a translation that the wording [is] not always accurate.' And I kid you not, they repeated the same answer as before but slower. And then asked if I understood. And I just left it [and] said, 'I understand what you're trying to get across.'

Rachel explained that after this interaction, she was labelled a "feminist." Being in the church in the nineties, this was not a compliment and she considered it "a real insult." She explained, "You never wanted to admit you are feminist because that meant you were a man hater and you wanted to take over." She also felt disconnected from her friends "because none of them were asking questions."

At one point, Rachel was frustrated with the church allowing a 19-year-old convicted murderer to "lecture, or to minister or to preach but women couldn't." She knew many strong, intelligent women who she saw as "God-fearing" and "spirit led" who were silenced or who were permitted to speak only to discuss their own stories and in "deference to men." Rachel reported, "I really had a problem with that, and these brethren that I constantly challenged my entire life, patted me on the head and said, 'any man can minister who is spirit led.' I was like 'OK, great'[sarcastically].

The last straw that caused her to walk away from her church was a written document that one of the brethren published that was titled "women in ministry." Rachel was "thrilled" and thought, "we can talk about the place of women in our church and why we are being muted." Unfortunately, the article was "poorly written" and was "plagiarized and repetitive." She explained further:

The entire four pages was basically the answer is ‘no.’ Can women minister? No. Here's 14 plagiarized statements by the people on the internet that proves why they shouldn't. Can women give communion if there's no other man in the in the area? No. Here's why. Can women be the treasurer of the church local? No, here's why...basically using one section of... 1 Timothy...and here's why women are not allowed to do anything. It was degrading. It was offensive. It was dismissive. It was demeaning. It was all the D words I can think of.

Rachel was disheartened but hadn't given up. She spent time in prayer and did her own research, read books, organized, and wrote a letter back that she e-mailed to all the brethren. She received a letter back from the man who wrote the article. She reported that the entire message encapsulated the sentiment, “Isn't it cute that your husband allows you to have opinions. I'm sorry you were offended by the truth of the Bible.” He then suggested she look into some writings by a “19-year-old Republican” who had been raised with strict viewpoints on the subject. When Rachel decided to leave, she never returned. She shared:

I can't go back to a place that...teaches young girls that they aren't worth more than their virginity, that teaches young women that they aren't any more than their uterus. Who teaches moms that they aren't any more than their children? And teaches women that they are nothing more than what they do for men. And that says, they believe in the teachings of Christ while showing very little Christ like behaviour...but who can very easily show you all the ways they have followed [Jesus] because once they visited a prison, and once they gave poor people food.

LGBTQ+ and Heteronormativity. Five of the participants mentioned difficulties in their churches and faith relating to LGBTQ+ identity and heteronormativity. For four of these

five participants, these topics were significant to their deconstruction, as reported in their interviews. The prevalence of these topics in participants' interviews reveals the struggle they had with the way their churches understood LGBTQ+ issues and promoted the dominant narrative of heteronormativity. This theme intersects with many of the other themes discussed, including hell, scripture interpretation and shame.

Samantha's interview connected deeply with her identity as someone who struggled to accept herself and find acceptance as a gay person. She reflected that modesty was "a big pillar in the church," and the importance of "women being submissive" was stressed. Further, the sanctity of marriage between a man and a woman was constantly repeated, "as if they're just trying to drill it into you." She explained that this greatly contributed to her "deconstruction" because she "always" knew that she was gay. Samantha expressed how awkward it was growing up in a place where her queerness was not accepted. She said, "I cannot stress to you enough... I have never heard of a place that is more...vehemently actively anti-gay than the church that I grew up with." She explained that a sermon in her church argued that the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was a "political act of God against gay people." She was beginning to question this by wondering:

So, God committed a hate crime, because he hates gay people so much? As a kid, of course you blame yourself, right, so when I was a kid and hearing this stuff it was like, 'OK, well this is the truth, so I'm wrong.' But then...as I started to grow older, I [asked] '...Why would I be this way if it's this bad? I really don't understand.' I started to wonder if I needed to expose that part of me...in order to be able to be known and loved. Even if it was bad, I wanted to figure out how all that I was could be exposed, and somehow good could happen.

For a long time, Samantha accepted what her church taught on homosexuality. The dissonance began when she met Christian friends who were accepting of someone being gay. She was “reading queer theory and queer theology” and realized her beliefs no longer lined up with her church. She hadn’t fully accepted that being gay was acceptable because of “so much internalized homophobia,” but she was not comfortable with how the church handled the topic. At this point she realized for the first time that her church didn’t “have everything right” especially with how they approached the bible and the idea of sin because it was “literally making me sick. It's making me hate myself, it's making me unhealthy.” She began questioning the church, “the way they read the bible,” “women and ministry” and “basically everything they said.”

Scott was in seminary when another student came out as gay to him. He still considered himself an evangelical at the time but began to have “seeds of doubt” when studying scripture. One example was reading the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in the book of Genesis and realizing that the sin in the story was not homosexuality but actually “gang rape,” which made him question his former views. Scott stated, “I’m thinking that the genitals of the people involved in gang rape... that's not the biggest issue there.” He had compassion for this student and his views changed. This also shifted his perspective on judgment and the afterlife:

When I die, if I do go and face my creator for judgment, and I find out that I was wrong about this the whole time, is Jesus really gonna send me to hell because I put too much faith in my love? Or in his love? Did I really think that I'd stand there, and Jesus would go, ‘Scott, I'm sorry you just trusted my love too much you shouldn't have done that, that was wrong.’

Scott experienced peace with this realization that Jesus wouldn’t send him to hell for “trusting

his love too much or for trying to love other people best as I could figure out how.” He felt more confident in his feelings and told the student, “There’s not a darn thing wrong with you. God made you the way God made you and God made you gay. Alright, so there you are, so go follow Jesus and be gay.” He explained that he experienced a mix of both “joy and fear” in saying that. And eventually, when Scott was a pastor and speaking out publicly in his support of those who were LGBTQ+, he was told “You shouldn’t be allowed to minister. You’re a hell-bound heretic.”

Alayna shared that part of her deconstruction process began “when four of my long-time friends came out within three months of each other.” She started questioning her assumption about “God’s plan for marriage.” She shared, “Suddenly I was confronted with...these are real people, these are people I know and their experiences of the world and what does that mean now?” It didn’t occur to her until her friends had come out in college that women could have romantic relationships with each other—she hadn’t considered it as a possibility. Because of her experience with YWAM, she thought she needed to be careful with male friends because it could be “a dangerous thing.” However, unbeknownst to her, she “ended up in a relationship by accident that I didn’t know I was in with a girl who was in love with me.”

As shared in previous sections, Jason struggled to be authentic in his experience in his church. He wanted to belong and fit in and tried to be enthused about his church experience because “that’s what I was supposed to do.” However, internally, he felt differently and “thought [church] was dumb, but...I don’t have a choice. I just have to do this.” Jason also had a difficult time growing up bisexual, particularly because he denied this part of himself for a long time. He explained that he is a “pushover” and is now “learning to stand up for myself.” Jason stated that if he didn’t say or believe what the church believed, he thought he was going to hell. Because of this he struggled with self-doubt and a split self. He explained:

And so, I felt like...I learned to tell lies. A lot of lies and cause I would mostly be lying to myself...I just sort of said how I wanted things to be...I made a lot of decisions based on what [was expected], rather than what I actually wanted. And I never learned how to set boundaries or anything. Nothing really was ever off limits from anyone ever...because God knows everything so there's no sense in hiding anything. It just really fucked me up.

Jason expressed that he had recently broken up with his girlfriend because he was feeling confused about his sexuality. He explained that he is starting to realize the damage of repressing his sexual feelings and that it “destroyed” him as a person. He relayed his experience:

Basically, I was told growing up that a huge part of me was terrible and just for the way that I am. And that I was going to hell... so [I] just pushed it away and suppressed it and I was like, ‘well I can’t be gay, I’m going to hell, so I’m not gay.’ And I believed that.

Jason explained that coming to terms with his sexuality was “a big deal.” He reflected that he is “not locking away who I really am, in favor of who I would rather be...[I] needed to figure out who I was and realized that was different from the person that I was trying to be.” He explained that it has been a struggle to “get that stuff out of your system.” He felt growing up in his church negatively impacted him. He doesn’t believe that it is good for someone to grow up not having a “choice in anything.” He struggles with the concept that people are pressured to not be their authentic selves because of the threat of hell. Jason lamented, “and then they wonder why so many people kill themselves.”

Rachel shared her concern about how the church she was belonged to treated gay people, along with other minorities. When asked what she would like others to understand of her experience, she stated:

I want them to understand that the people who have left that church didn't leave because they stopped believing in God. Some of them maybe...but for the most part, people that I know left because of the way they treated gay people, the way that they treated gender, the way they treated people of a different color and different culture and different religion. The way they treated the disabled as though they were someone to cure and not someone to engage with. That's why people have left the church. Because it's not safe for a lot of us to be there.

Leaving: Attempt at Reform and Loss

Many participants shared that they had made efforts to reform or change their church to be more accepting and progressive before they made a final decision to leave. As with anyone who is grieving a loss, bargaining will often occur before acceptance (Mahmood, 2016). Each participant experienced a deep and profound sense of loss, especially regarding their friendships.

Scott was serving as a pastor when he was undergoing his deconstruction. He explained the significant impact his deconstruction had as a pastor because "in realizing that [I] might not believe God, that's like, wow...this could affect my income, my job. This is more than just personal. This is professional." Alayna explained how difficult it was for her and her husband to leave their evangelical church. They had many important relationships at this church, and they struggled with leaving their entire social group. She reported that this was the hardest part of leaving and she still struggles to find community. In her previous church, she felt she was the only one who felt dissatisfied because she didn't feel she could ask questions or if she did, "they'd get shut down so quickly." She didn't realize that other people were asking these questions outside of her church and didn't know "how to find them." Alayna is ready to connect

with others “on a spiritual level” but doesn’t like when Christians assume she agrees with them on a topic or a certain “way of thinking.”

Before Samantha left her church, she continued attending for a long time because she wanted to believe that she could somehow influence the church. She related:

I knew that [my] church was toxic, but I still held on because I wanted to believe that people on different sides of the spectrum could still meet in the middle somewhere. I was a huge believer...that I could almost change things from the inside. So...I stayed for longer than I should have. And I took up a huge beating for it... I just let them fricking pummel me.

After Samantha came out as gay, she thought the church accepted her, as they wanted her there and told her to continue to attend. But she realized they were thinking, “Oh God, I guess we’ll let this kid keep coming to church and keep trying to like, work on her and change her.”

Samantha also struggled with losing friends at her church and spoke about this difficult time. She noted, “I was losing friends from my childhood left, right and center.” She expressed that she had “a lot of mental health problems and definitely a crisis of identity, and a crisis of...trying to hold it all together somehow.” She explained how confusing it was for her friends to stop talking to her. She said, “I’m still literally the same person.” Samantha said that for a while she wanted to believe she didn’t have to leave the church, “I wanted to almost deconstruct the church from the inside rather than deconstructing the church in me.” Samantha stayed at her church until she realized they would not accept her dating another woman. Initially they seemed to “contend” with her introducing new ideas to the church. However, the church had an “intervention” at her parents’ home when she began dating her first girlfriend. She tried to

explain to them that this relationship “could be loving and life-giving,” but her explanations fell on deaf ears:

I smacked into the big ‘ole fundamentalists brick wall where they just wouldn't move, and they just beat me up at that fricking meeting in my parents own home. And...I couldn't, and I didn't go back...for a year after that. And that was probably the roughest time of my life.

Samantha finally realized that this community was not going to be a supportive and nurturing place for her. She stated that she had already “deconstructed,” but had not left her church until this happened because she thought the church could change. She realized that being “a gay Christian” often included “secrecy and festering and staying and hating yourself or... leaving and not dealing with it.” Samantha thought she could be “an ‘out’ Christian” and help others “realize that there's a different way to see things.” She eventually realized that wasn't working and she “ended up having to deconstruct the church in me” rather than deconstructing things “within the church.”

Samantha explained that she did not leave the church out of “shame.” She didn't leave because she thought her beliefs were wrong and conflicted with the church or because she was unwilling to “sacrifice” and “follow all of their rules.” She explains that she “left in order to try to become a better person.” Her deconstruction led her to want to become a “better Christian.” She felt as though her church “did not give a shit about people,” except for those who were “the most pure and the most heavenly.” Samantha reported that she left the church because she wanted to be able to “love harder, more openly, and more freely.” She felt it was “a big weight off my chest having deconstructed the stuff that they wanted me to believe and having left the

walls of that place.” She ultimately realized, “I can’t break bread with you people anymore, I have to leave.”

Rachel foreshadowed her experience with leaving near the beginning of her interview by explaining that she saw people who were deeply involved in their local church who “would just disappear, and no one would mention them again.” She also made attempts to reform her church before she ultimately left. Rachel stated, “I tried to impact and question and point out things and encourage people to think in different ways and it just got to the point that it was too painful to stay in that place.” Rachel noted that it wasn’t because she didn’t love God or Jesus:

It caused such physical pain to be there, to see where they were going...that I wasn’t able to be useful there and I wasn’t able to be productive there. And to protect my heart and myself and my anxiety and my dysfunction, I had to get out of there.

When Rachel and her husband finally decided to leave and look for a new church, her husband was supportive of her decision to never go back, “And I have never been back. Not once.” She explains how painful this was, even five years after leaving. Through tears she shared, “It feels like losing a limb...like losing my family...like walking away from God. It felt like failure. And it felt like no one noticed. Because in our church, if you stop going or you stop believing, you stop existing.” Rachel experienced profound loss. She hasn’t seen some family members in years and many of her friends do not speak with her anymore. For those who do speak to her, they tell her they can’t wait for her to come back.

Jason decided to leave his church as soon as he moved out of his parents’ house. He realized that he didn’t have to attend anymore, that no one was “forcing” him to. He explained, “As soon as that happened, I lost all of my friends.” His friends would no longer talk to him and he felt alone and isolated. This was also why it was so difficult to leave. He lamented, “Because

every single person that you know is part of this little religious group and if you leave that, you literally have to leave everybody behind.”

As mentioned, Sarah expressed that she needed an intervention to leave her church and doesn't think she would have left without it. The leader had previously warned her that her family might “come after you...one day they're going to try and get you out of here” and had prepared her if this happened. Her family did eventually plan an intervention with a mediator (the exit counsellor). Once the intervention took place, Sarah did not leave the group right away and felt “in limbo.” She struggled when trying to decide whether to leave her church. She felt isolated and conflicted in trying to make this decision on her own. She would leave work and “drive around aimlessly” because she didn't have any friends, or anyone she could trust outside of the ministry. She didn't know if she could trust her family or the church community so she would “drive around the city, sit on park benches reading these books, and I would just read and read and read.” While physically shaking, she finally told her mentor, “I've decided to leave,” and her mentor looked at her with a “look of utter defeat and basically just like ‘really?’ Basically, ‘you're giving up.’” Although it was difficult and she was shamed for deciding to leave from someone she cared for, she was grateful that she left and continues her healing journey today.

Finding a New Way

The theme, *Finding a New Way*, encompasses the language and metaphors participants used to communicate their experience of deconstruction, their wrestling with a change in their spiritual identities, their adjustment to a new normal and their efforts to rebuild a new life and new way to be in the world. Several participants no longer expressed their faith in traditional ways and others attempted to make sense of their faith after leaving their primary church

community. Furthermore, some participants felt liberation and expansion in their deconstruction journey as well as experienced psychological trauma from their time in their church.

Some words Scott used to describe his deconstruction were, “deconstruction,” “dark night of the soul,” “evolution,” “a crumbling,” “spiraling” and “flying in mid-air.” He used the word “leaving,” “breaking point” and “making a break.” He expressed that he had evolved into a “new species,” “no longer fit” and had a “final break” with evangelicalism, which he called the “extinction phase.” Scott indicated that “The old things gotta die to make space for the new thing.” He explained that he had a worldview that suddenly shifted and changed:

Suddenly I am not this thing that I said I've been my whole life. So, what am I? Do I even believe in God? Am I still a Christian? And those were real scary questions and I really felt like I was spiraling throughout that period cause every part of what I believed in... how I thought was just flying in midair.

Scott used the skills he “garnered from seminary” to let go of the shame he had about his sexuality. He had a mixed experience with feelings of liberation, doubt, and fear. He recognized the scriptures were actually for “people who don’t quite measure up, for the screw ups, like me.” This was “exhilarating and liberating” but he was also terrified because he was afraid to be deceived and face the “judgement of God.” Scott also used the word “reconstruction” in finding a new spiritual identity.

On her new trajectory, Alayna struggled with finding her place in the world. It was a “heavy” time and she worried about “disappointing everyone.” She described her deconstruction as a “gradually unravelling trajectory.” In her unravelling, she would “plateau for a while at a place of still [being a] Christian.” At the time of our interview, she identified as a Christian, but that “looks really different” now and that’s where she has landed for the time being. She

expressed at the end of the interview that she doesn't have anyone else in her life that has been in church and left or "transitioned."

Sarah used the words "big shift" and "flipped a switch" towards being open and willing to expand her thinking. She explained that she was "in limbo" for a time. When Sarah was asked how she made sense of this experience and what she wanted others to understand about it, she stated that she wouldn't trade the experience because it has allowed her to "view the world differently... to not take things at face value, to think for myself, and [to] feel a sense of freedom." She expressed that the journey had been difficult, "ugly," and "amazing." She had moments where she had suicidal thoughts and felt that she could not "make it another day, where I considered driving into oncoming traffic because I couldn't even handle it anymore." Sarah reflected that this sense of hopelessness was due to the fact that previously, her whole life had been dictated for her and predictable and now she had to make her own decisions. She explained that she was an "extrovert" and had to find a new social circle, which was very painful for her. Sarah said she struggled because she didn't know how to do life "in the real world" and experienced pain and hurt from losing her close, intimate friends in an instant.

Sarah stated that her "foundation began to crumble" and that the intervention "destroyed my foundation, but in a way, it started building up something that I actually believed was true." Sarah didn't want to leave her faith completely and started attending a different church a month after she left her old church. It is a large church, and she feels safe because she can hide in the crowd. She gets "fired up" when she hears about spiritual abuse being used to manipulate people. She added that she is "very cautious" now, asks questions and does her research. She shared:

There are some things that irk me [about church]...I have so many questions on a regular basis... but the fact that I have those and that I can ask them without feeling condemned

or judged...is so freeing. Even after leaving it took me a period of time to even start talking about [my experience] and to open up... but then being able to talk about it—what I was in—brought a ton of freedom and shed a light on it.

Sarah has been seeing a psychologist since she left who has been doing Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). She explained that she was in the process of “rewiring my brain and those different pathways that were wrecked and it's been a journey obviously.” She explained that there are situations at work that cause her to “freeze” and feel afraid because in her church, if she didn't have all of the information needed for a particular task, someone would yell at her and tell her to walk away. She recognized this as trauma and a PTSD response that caused her to feel physically afraid, even though she had a supportive work environment. Sarah acknowledged that different situations may trigger her, but she was confident that she can work through this and sees it as an opportunity for healing and a “new life”.

Rachel explained that she feels she is in the “wilderness” and has “stepped away from the church.” Since leaving her church, Rachel still experienced shame. She felt as though she should “always be apologizing.” She expressed that she felt she had failed, that she wasn't “good enough” to follow her church, and that she “gave up.” She felt discouraged that she couldn't make changes in her church. Even though some would agree with her in private, no one was willing to speak up and be treated like Rachel. Rachel also struggled with how to have God and Jesus in her life in a healthy way that wasn't “following rules and checking things off [her] list.”

Rachel explained that her deconstruction has been quite painful, especially regarding her relationships. She shared that she has not “found another church that feels like home. I have found people that feel like home, and I have found people that feel like church...I just find that the more that people who identify as Christian speak, the less I see Christ in them.” She

explained that she would like to belong to a church that is “full of people who want to make a difference and bring others up.” Rachel struggles with feeling as though in the present political state that Jesus’ words are being used as a “bargaining chip for people who believe the same things or do the things they want them to.”

Rachel hasn’t attended church for five years. Her Sunday mornings are often spent doing things she enjoys, such as “exercising or lounging with coffee in the sun or listening to a book because I feel like I should be somewhere that I don’t want to be.” Rachel explained that she is “kind of stuck” because she is “terrified to be vulnerable” and her church wasn’t “safe to be vulnerable.” She expressed that she found “church” the last couple years in Al-Anon and described her experience there:

When I started going to Al-Anon, it was just like listening to others who were in the same place and they were having struggles...they were talking about them and nobody was telling them what to do. We were just holding space for the fact that they had problems (begins to cry) and to me, that was just this revelation...because church to me had been where you hide your problems, and you pretend that everything is fine and that you are this good person and that everything is great...we just held space for the fact that we weren’t perfect and that we were struggling and that others had learned things and that we weren’t alone. And the one thing I felt in Christianity and my church, was so alone. Rachel’s experience with church was one of shame and hiding. She is only now learning to accept her imperfections and feel safe to share them with others.

Alayna noted that it was difficult having conversations with evangelical Christians because many “assume” others think the same as them. She explained that it is “new territory”, and she doesn’t feel the need to “convince anyone of anything,” other than her wish for the world

to be “a lot less hateful.” One of the more difficult aspects of her deconstruction is deciding what to teach her children about the afterlife and prayer. She still believes that spirituality is important from a “psychological perspective...it’s a resiliency factor for people and it’s a really profound way of connecting with the world and finding community and finding meaning.” She still feels like a “spiritual being”, but she doesn’t have a clear picture of what God is. In a conversation with her mother, Alayna said that she wasn’t feeling comfortable in church and her mother asked, “you still believe in Jesus right?” She struggled with this question, as it doesn’t have any nuance. She and her husband have “learned to take in the world with a more nuanced perspective.”

Although Alayna stated earlier that she sees herself as a Christian right now, she also shared contradictorily that she hasn’t “landed anywhere” and isn’t interested in landing anywhere. She has replaced certainty with uncertainty. She said, “[I] don’t want to be in that place of like, ‘I got this figured out, let me just tell ya’ll...’” She wants to continue to learn and grow and be willing to “be wrong.” This shift would have “horrified and panicked” her 10 years ago. Throughout Alayna’s deconstruction, she began finding “comfort in ambiguity.” She realized the freedom in not having to know all the answers. Previously, she felt pressure to have certainty and needed an answer for everything. It is clear that she is struggling to come to terms with her new spiritual identity.

Alayna also felt as though she can have “more meaningful relationships” when she is “not preoccupied with trying to convince anyone of anything.” Before her deconstruction, she felt it was her “responsibility to make sure that everyone knew the ‘truth,’” and all the “right” things to believe (i.e., thought, theology, etc.). Now, she does not experience this. She explained, “I have no sense that anyone needs to think about things the way that I do or [the need] to share

my perspective.” She described that she can now be “awed” by someone’s profound experience of Buddhism without feeling as though she needs to “fix it or find out what’s wrong with that or identify problems with it.” Alayna and her husband visited an Episcopal church for a little while and she “loved it.” She shared:

It was just so much more open, and you could have questions about things, and it was like...’Ya, let’s talk about that, that’s an interesting thought.’ It wasn’t like a ‘oh, you gotta fix the way you’re thinking.’ But I was also drawn to the ritual and the liturgy and the eucharist. I was really drawn to the ritual of it. That felt meaningful and connected to something bigger.

Jason explained his experience as a “long process” and “slowly piecing things together.” He experienced liberation when he realized that he didn’t have to attend his church anymore. However, he experienced the disillusionment that can occur after belonging to something that provides a “divine purpose” and makes one feel “destined for something great.” He explained that “It’s really hard to break out of that because when you leave something like that...suddenly your life doesn’t have any purpose anymore.” He shared that he was an “alcoholic,” after he left his church. “I just drank every day, as much as I could all the time... it hasn’t been easy. But...maybe...I don’t need a purpose. I can just exist...That’s cool.” When asked where Jason was at with his spiritual identity or non-identity, he stated that he used to identify as an atheist and now he doesn’t know what he is and doesn’t “really care.” He said that he thinks there’s a “reason for all of this” and doesn’t believe in “coincidence.” He explained, “I don’t know what the reason is, and I don’t really care. If I have to be part of it, I’m going to enjoy my life. I don’t think that I have some divine purpose or anything. I think that we’re just supposed to enjoy it while we’ve got it.” Although Jason seemed to believe in some aspects of spirituality, his

tentativeness to care about it suggests it is potentially not safe for him as he wants to protect and redeem the life he is now free to experience. His apathy also suggests the exhaustion and psychological toll one faces when being in a “high cost” religion. He shared that his present experience is one of “deprogramming” or “reprogramming.”

Samantha explained her deconstruction as a “detangling” and as taking apart “a frame.” She stated that she was “framed” by how she saw herself through “fundamentalist Christian eyes.” She explained that she “sought God with all my heart, soul and mind” and “saw myself as a person who wanted to help the world in the ways that you’re told you help the world in that worldview...that white saviour stuff.” While she was taking university classes, she was “deconstructing [her] faith” and “beliefs about the world.” She felt as though you “lose who you are” in deconstruction. She shared further, “If that’s how you frame yourself and now you’re taking that apart...then who am I? Why am I here? And what am I supposed to do? Honestly, if I’m being real—that identity crisis—that’s never really stopped for me.” After leaving such an “all-encompassing” experience, Samantha continued to wrestle with her identity and wondered about her place in the world. She is still working at “reconstructing” what is left and what she wants to keep of her former life.

Samantha values the positive qualities the church cultivated in her, such as “being open” and finding ways to “connect to people better [and] treat people better.” She admitted she doesn’t have a community “to walk that path with,” as it is difficult to find the same “locus point of identification.” She noted, “part of me will always miss that.” Part of her still “craves for community to call [her] own.” She connected for a season with the anabaptists because of their social justice and community orientation. However, she realized they construct “in and out groups” which she does not want to be a part of.

Samantha described an important aspect of her deconstruction had been her ability to value other people's perspectives, and her perspective on love for others had drastically shifted. In the fundamentalist church, she was encouraged to love others, but in service of transforming them. Now Samantha is "learning how to love" and allowed herself to be "transformed by [others]." She explained that it was a big moment when she could simply love people for who they were "without any expectation of them picking up any aspect of my worldview whatsoever." She felt great relief that she doesn't have to perform for non-Christians in the hopes that they would "want to be like [her]." She can "literally just love people and be loved by them."

Samantha explained that the word "deconstruction" fit, but more so "a parting of ways" as she still keeps "in touch with the Christian faith in some ways, but just definitely left that Pentecostal, evangelical, fundamentalist form of faith." When Samantha left her church, she felt an expansion because leaving opened her to possibility. She acknowledged that at first she "froze" because there was "so much out there," but also, "found so much beauty and so many things that feel so true and right and good, that I wouldn't have been allowed to find true and right and good." She continued, "When you walk out a door, or you take a wall out with a sledgehammer... you're gonna find something else out there and it is a huge expansion of what else is possible." Samantha recognized that the process of deconstruction has taught her a lot about herself; she discovered that what she liked about herself hasn't changed, especially her desire to love others without limits.

Samantha expressed that she occasionally attended church and doesn't wish for everyone to undergo a deconstruction process. She doesn't believe that everyone in her old church should "completely deconstruct" their beliefs and "level it to the ground." However, she believed that

deconstruction is important for some people, and some need to leave the church. Regarding deconstruction, she stated, “I think we all need to do it to different amounts in order to grow and live our lives...that level is never gonna be the same for everyone.” She doesn’t judge those who are at a different level of deconstruction than she is. She said, “I had to [deconstruct]. I probably wouldn’t be alive today if I hadn’t done it. I think that some people need the traditions that they were given and that they were born into in order to live and have community and have meaning.” Samantha needed to deconstruct to evolve, live and find meaning, yet she doesn’t expect everyone to experience this. It seems apt to conclude this section with Samantha’s beautiful understanding from Ram Dass that “every person just needs to all try to walk each other home.” She shares further:

And that home is going to be different for every person—where they feel comfortable. Where they feel like they are building themselves into a better human is gonna be different. But...my mom for instance, walking her home means still sending her texts of Bible verses or quotes from books that I think will mean something to her. Meanwhile, walking my atheist friend home, or walking my brother home will mean something that affirms their worldview in a completely different way.

Summary

All six participants were interviewed with an open-ended question asking them what their experience has been with spiritual deconstruction, starting with their faith history. Five main themes surfaced: *Spiritual Devotion; Internalizing and Conforming; The Unraveling; Leaving: Attempt at Reform and Loss* and *Finding a New Way*.

In the theme *Spiritual Devotion*, all participants discussed how they and their family were clearly devoted to their evangelical faith. However, participants also experienced an

Internalizing and Conforming process that was not necessarily positive. This internalizing and conforming experience involved *Spiritual Abuse, Control and Manipulation*, the pressure to *Conform, Perform and Belong*, and the *Internalization of Shame* and a *Fear of Hell*. As they gained further awareness of their experiences, their discomfort and distress led them to *The Unraveling* in their thinking and processing of their faith and belief systems. *Education, Critical Thinking and Curiosity* played a large role in this unraveling, including their *Approach to Scripture*. Their experience with *Oppression* was also a significant aspect of what contributed to their shift which included frustration and exclusion due to the church's perspectives on *Gender Roles and Expectations* and *LGBTQ+ and Heteronormativity*. The unraveling process led to *Leaving: Attempt at Reform and Loss*. The participants left their belief systems and churches, but not before some attempted reform in their church communities. Through leaving, they experienced significant loss in their lives. To conclude the results, *Finding A New Way* reveals how the participants made sense of the challenges and the liberation they experienced in deconstructing their faith.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the lived experience and meaning of spiritual deconstruction for post-evangelicals. The data were collected using open ended, semi-structured interviews with six participants. Each participant had their own experience of deconstruction, however, many common complex themes surfaced through IPA: *Spiritual Devotion, Internalizing and Conforming, The Unravelling, Leaving: Attempt at Reform and Loss* and finally, *Finding a New Way*. The results indicate that the experience of deconstruction has similarities to deconversion and disaffiliation narratives. The results also reveal that deconstruction is a complex process that includes: an unravelling and shifting of one's religious beliefs that precludes a previous devotion and commitment to one's faith; a recognition of the pressure to perform and conform; a processing of painful oppressive experiences within the church; a development of intellectual curiosity; critical thinking and questioning; an acknowledgment that one no longer fits; a process of leaving and intense loss and the struggle to create a new identity and meaning. The results also exposed a critical matter of patriarchy and heteropatriarchy within the church. A unique experience in deconstruction versus disaffiliation or deconversion narratives reveals the attempt and desire to reform the church before leaving, as well as the mixed outcome of spiritual and religious preferences and expressions. The following section connects these findings with current literature on high-cost religion, fundamentalism, spiritual abuse, sexual shame, the harm of heteropatriarchy, deconversion and disaffiliation narratives, the process of grief, loss of identity and social stress connected to leaving one's church or belief system. The strengths and limitations of this study, implications for counselling practice and recommendations for future research are also discussed.

Spiritual Devotion

The participants in this study all came from dedicated evangelical or Pentecostal Christian homes, which led to their own personal devotion. Interestingly, there were no participants who had converted as an adult. Another note-worthy finding is that each participant had an experience with charismatic forms of Christianity, a unique expression of the Christian faith that is particularly zealous and focuses on experiential forms of experiencing the Holy Spirit. The dedication of the participants to their faith is important to note, as some people may argue the individuals deconstructing were not true Christians. For that reason, the study design ensured those recruited were dedicated to their faith before deconstruction.

Literature on religious belief explains that adolescents' beliefs are anchored in their parents' beliefs (Ozorak, 1989). This is especially the case when parents' beliefs are strong. Group cohesiveness and conformity are associated with this anchoring, along with the emotional closeness of parents to their children (Ozorak, 1989). Similar to the results, research literature reveals how consuming fundamentalist and "high cost" religious groups are for the people involved, especially second or further generation participants (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010). Churches and fundamentalist faiths give members a sense of meaning and commitment that connects them to their families and their church. They tend to function in a way that "provides characteristically strong social and emotional incentives" that prevent leaving their churches (Adam, 2009, p. 48). Those belonging to these churches indicate that the most attractive aspects of their faith community are "friendship and family, sense of purpose, sense of belonging, sense of community, sense of certainty, feeling loved, sense of security, comfort, salvation, feeling of power, prayer, and happiness" (Adam, 2009, p. 49). These attractive attributes are directly connected to shaping identity and a sense of well-being.

The results of this study reveal that the participants in this study were greatly impacted by their churches and consequently, their identity, meaning making and connection were profoundly and traumatically disrupted during the experience of deconstruction. Furthermore, while some studies report that people who have strong parental religious role models have a positive connection to their faith in adulthood (Hunsberger & Brown, 1984; Marks, 2002; Ozorak, 1989; Smith, 2009), this study provides a different perspective. Although the participants were raised in committed Christian homes, they left their parents' tradition. The dissonance of the participants led them to accommodate and eventually re-story their identity (McSkimming, 2017; Sneed & Whitbourne, 2003).

Internalizing and Conforming

Many evangelical and fundamentalist Christians have a certainty, confidence and belief that they contain the full and complete truth about God and morality, especially in relation to their sacred text, the Bible. They believe they have a special revelation that supersedes any type of empirical knowledge (Adam, 2009). As evidenced in the study, there was an internalization of the participants' parents' faith. Brent's (1994) study on leaving fundamentalism explained this experience as "tolerating the tradition" (para. 19). This indoctrination connects to a person's identity, self-worth and self-esteem (Boeri, 2002; Nica, 2018). As mentioned in the literature review, having a sense of spirituality and faith can often be a source of well-being. However, the findings of this study revealed that the fundamentalist evangelical experience was the cause of psychological distress for all participants. Participants in this study experienced suffering particularly regarding spiritual abuse and control, the pressure to perform, internalized shame and internalized fear of eternal damnation. Furthermore, they experienced doubts, as well as

cognitive and emotional dissonance with systems of belief and oppressive, heteropatriarchal power.

Barrett et al. (2013) discussed that cognitive approaches to the study of religion have been neglected. They explain that people tend to have an "intuitive, nonreflective system" that "informs and constrain reflective level thought and consequent behaviors" (Barrett & Zahl, 2013, p. 222). This can create something called "theological correctness" (Barrett & Zahl, 2013, p. 222), similar to what we understand to be political correctness. Some might feel obligated to conform to what they assume is the appropriate response in terms of religious beliefs, even if it is not congruent with their own beliefs. Hence, it is easier for people to assimilate contradictions rather than accommodate them. Furthermore, intrapsychic struggles with chronic religious doubting can cause an incongruence in how people perceive or feel God to be (i.e., God is loving, but I experience God as punishing or God wants a relationship with me, but I do not experience him/her; Barrett and Zahl, 2013, para. 2). This problem causes incongruence and cognitive dissonance in the psychology of the person and can be detrimental to their wellbeing (Stone, 2013). Boeri's (2002) study on leaving cults also revealed the pressure to conform, the need to hide their true self and the tension of being compliant versus listening to their "inner voice" (para. 47). Stone explained that because dogmatic religion tends to focus on the positive and honourable aspects of self, people experiencing incongruence about belief systems "may be prone to using a variety of defensive coping strategies including repression, denial, projective identification, reaction formation, and splitting. These defensive strategies are often driven by fear of the consequences of failure to comply with legalistic religious standards" (Stone, 2013, p. 325). In the present study, this experience was especially true for the LGBTQ+ participants.

Although other studies discuss the problem of “psychological, emotional, physical or sexual abuse” in religious groups (Matthews & Salazar, 2014, para. 39), this study exposes the specific experience of spiritual abuse. Spiritual abuse and trauma “generally accrues gradually through long-term exposure to messages that undermine mental health” (Stone, 2013, p. 325). Many people are raised with fundamentalist religious beliefs that control them through fear and ostracize them from others based on an “us vs. them” approach (i.e., outsiders are destined for hell). Purcell (1998) explained that there are three main issues in fundamentalism that connect to spiritual abuse: legalism, literalism and mixed messages, all of which were discussed by participants. Legalism is a strict form of rule keeping, and shaming occurs when someone steps outside of the rules. Literalism is a particular approach to scripture that does not tend to accept or understand the symbolic and contextual understandings of scripture and often uses scripture to control others. Mixed messages are common. For example, on the one hand God is love, but on the other, you are a sinner and will burn in hell for eternity if you do not convert. For instance, one participant received the mixed message that she was free to go to her parents’ house to visit but was later criticized for it. A more general view of spiritual abuse is using religious teachings (e.g., the Bible) or spiritual authority (pastor, priest or spiritual leader) to manipulatively control someone or a group of people. Ward (2011) explained spiritual abuse as “a misuse of power in a spiritual context whereby spiritual authority is distorted to the detriment of those under its leadership” (para. 12). This abuse can happen from the leader, the religious group or the teachings (Cashwell & Swindle, 2018). Ward (2011) found that those being spiritually abused experienced an internal and external tension that ultimately led to physical health symptoms. The participants in this study experienced emotional manipulation, distress, anxiety, confusion, a

questioning of oneself, feeling inadequate spiritually, feeling worthless, suppressing one's true emotions and thoughts, fear of eternal punishment and shame.

Similar to deconversion narratives the participants in this study shared the devastation that internalized shame brought to their lives, particularly sexual shame (Matthews & Salazar, 2014; Phillips, 2015). One of the tenets of the evangelical faith is the focus on sexual purity. Literature reveals that a high number (82%) of unmarried evangelicals between the ages of 18-24 are sexually active (Smith et al., 2009). This demonstrates that a large number of evangelicals are likely experiencing shame and dissonance connected to their faith beliefs regarding purity and pre-marital sex. Park (2016) reported that shame is the feeling that one is “fundamentally flawed, deficient, and defective” (p. 354). Shame also includes the fear of being exposed and being disconnected from others. One participant experienced profound shame when he publicly shared his sexual “sin”. He claimed this public confession was a traumatizing experience leading to greater disconnection with his church community.

Toxic shame can abound in religious systems often because of “perfectionistic moral standards” (Park, 2016, p. 358). Shame can also cause one to withdraw from others and creates an increased disconnection with self (Park, 2016). Another participant experienced tremendous shame and disconnection with his self from his inability to express his sexuality as a queer person. Shame often creates a “false self” narrative as the person struggling attempts to perform to the perfectionistic standard (Stone, 2013). Canter, in her dissertation on shame, religion and emotions, explained Jackson's (1994) view that “shame and a negative view of self are necessary for the oppressed to internalize their subordination and act in ways affirming it” (Canter, 2020, p. 4). Thus, shame is used to ensure control and subjugation and is directly connected to why those may deconstruct or leave their faith (Zuckerman, 2012).

Although most literature reveal that religion and spirituality are a source of comfort psychologically, it can also be a source of emotional pain. Oates outlined both the positive and negative aspects of religion, including religion's "punitive measures for control," "constriction of growth, and/or its avoidance of the developmental tasks of life" (Hughes, 1994, p. 5). Several participants in particular experienced what is described as unhealthy religion: "preoccupation with one's sin and imperfection, guilt, rigidity, and idiosyncratic and literal interpretation of religious symbolism" (Lea, 1982, p. 347). The DSM-5 explains a particular form of obsessive compulsive disorder in religious expression as scrupulosity (American Psychiatric Association & American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Francis and Jackson (2003) reported that "religiosity [is] inversely correlated with guilt, and positively correlated with unhappiness" (para. 1).

Beier (2002) argued that Christianity has been known to use fear "as one of its prime motivators of "faith:" fear of hell, fear of being excluded from the (dominant) social group, fear of losing one's status, and most of all: fear of God—all have been and are being instrumentalized to keep people in line with the interpretations of Christian beliefs formulated by a hierarchy of Church officials." Confirming research literature (Matthews & Salazar, 2014), fear was a common experience among the participants and the fear of hell loomed large. Although I did not come across any academic research on the psychological impact of the threat of eternal damnation, as previously indicated, individuals who felt punished by God experienced a significant decrease in their mental health (Pargament et al., 2003). The fear of hell expressed by half of the participants is an obvious existential threat and appeared to have an impact on their cognitive and emotional development. In literature, the fear of divine punishment was "associated with more severe depression" in some cases (Rosenfeld, 2010). Other studies reveal the difficulty of overcoming the fear of hell (Phillips, 2015) and questioning the threat of eternal

damnation is not uncommon in disaffiliation (Zuckerman, 2012). Questioning this doctrine could be considered “a product of cognitive development that creates a socio-cognitive conflict” (Adam, 2009, p. 54). The participants are reflecting critical thinking, cognitive development and struggling to come to terms with this belief system that their church community and family accept.

Spiritual abuse, shame and fear of hell could be considered religious trauma. Stone (2013) agreed with Winell (1993) in her connection of religious trauma to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (American Psychiatric Association & American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Those who have experienced religious trauma may include avoidance of religious environments, people or subjects. Unfortunately this has not been studied in the academic field nearly enough for the impact that it has on individuals. Stone (2013) explains religious trauma as “pervasive psychological damage resulting from religious messages, beliefs, and experience” (p. 324). Stone is a psychotherapist who has worked with people who have experienced religious trauma and recognizes that it generally “accrues gradually through long-term exposure to messages that undermine mental health” (p. 325). Individuals can develop a “false self” in their attempts to meet the expectations of family or religious systems (Stone, 2013, p. 325). The Bible warns against negative emotions such as fear, anger and bitterness which may lead a devout religious person to experiencing shame over normal emotions and “contribute to psychological difficulties, including depression, anxiety, guilt and addictive or compulsive behaviours” (Stone, 2013, p. 325). Another concerning issue regarding mental health and spirituality is that some religious individuals may believe their mental health issues (e.g., depression or anxiety), is a result of spiritual failings (Lowenthal, 2013). One participant struggled with others explaining her mental health issues were a “lack of faith.”

The Unravelling

The results of this study indicated the participants experienced a period of questioning, doubting and reframing their beliefs on how they view and interpret the Bible and what it means to be a Christian. A study by C. Smith et al. (2009) revealed that just over half of emerging adults in the United States are stable in their faith experience. This means that approximately 40-45% of young adults are either struggling with their faith, shifting their beliefs, deconstructing or deconverted. Hackett et al. (2015) claims that “people who grew up as Christians are expected to make up the overwhelming majority of those who switch into the unaffiliated group” (para. 18). It is estimated that between 30 and 40 percent of emerging adults disaffiliate from religion (Uecker et al., 2007). This is not a small number and deserves attention. The experience of deconstruction for participants included questioning their own Christian worldview and the views of their churches. Participants’ original worldviews and those of their churches eventually became incongruent with their views on morality, scripture, theology, oppression, gender roles and heteronormativity. The participants experienced multiple ruptures in their lives that has led to a transformation of their identities (Zittoun, 2007). Although many of them did not have “social resources” in their beginning stages of deconstruction, some had “cognitive resources” such as education, books and critical thinking to support them (Zittoun, 2007, p. 199).

Results reveal that identity formation, meaning making, connection and well-being are profoundly and traumatically disrupted in the experience of deconstruction. The participants struggled with who they were and what they believed. Ozorak (1989) explained that change occurs for adolescents’ beliefs when they develop the capacity to reason and question. Cognitive growth tends to prompt a “re-evaluation of previously accepted knowledge” (Ozorak, 1989 p.

458). The results of this study indicate that participants' education and their approach to interpreting scripture influenced their ability to question and doubt their evangelical beliefs. This connects with Ozorak's research that "intellectual ability and existential questioning are positively related to change"(1989, p. 458). Participants in this study were able to read scripture from a more symbolic and nuanced viewpoint rather than a literal point of view. Typically, this is not encouraged in fundamentalist religion (Adam, 2009). However, symbolic reading and understanding the use of myth in scripture is common in the narrative of Christian historical hermeneutics (Wright, 2016). The participants acknowledged their faith became less certain, they were more comfortable with "grey" rather than "black and white" thinking and they became more comfortable with nuance and mystery. The participants allowed themselves to experience greater cognitive complexity despite the socio-emotional pressures they experienced. This suggests that those deconstructing may have been at a different developmental stage in their faith as the community they left (Adam, 2009).

The deconstruction of the participants faith philosophies led many to challenge social structures and systems of power related to oppression, patriarchy and heteropatriarchy. Despite the fact that women tend to be more devout and religious than men, there is a clear patriarchal order in Christianity that has not evolved to align more with modern society (Cragun, 2014). As Gillette (2016) explains in her dissertation on the lived experience of women leaving fundamentalist religion:

Patriarchal culture is rooted in sexism, by which the differences between women and men are understood to be evidence of the inferiority of women. Sexism manifests through misogyny, which is the cultural practice that seeks to preserve the subservience of women

through the dominance of men (Szymanski, Gupta, Carr, & Stewart, 2009) and the oppression of women. (p. 29)

Many Christian denominations do not allow women to be ordained, let alone preach or have any leadership positions. Many Christian churches encourage traditional family roles where men are the leaders and breadwinners in their homes and women the caregivers. Most religious folk do not encourage egalitarianism and are arguably misogynistic (Cragun, 2014). A number of studies on leaving fundamentalist religion also described sexism and patriarchal systems (Brent, 1994; Matthews & Salazar, 2014).

Eccles et al. (2015) attempted to determine if there was a connection between feminism and apostasy (those who leave religion) with her participants in the UK. Eccles interviewed women along with participant observation for six years to learn the reasons they left their religion. She found that the older group of women (age 45-92; n=8) were impacted by intellectual disagreements, hypocrisy among churchgoers, the problem of evil and a loving God and a desire to live an honest life (Eccles et al., 2015). The younger group of women (age 19-26; n=11) were impacted by religious pluralism and post-modern understandings of religion. Most of the women who had left their churches were directly or indirectly affected by patriarchy (Eccles et al., 2015). It is clear that the women in the present study were affected by patriarchal systems in their churches which was connected to their deconstruction narrative.

Of note, four of the six participants were greatly impacted by the heteropatriarchal teachings in their churches, similar to those in Mcskimming's (2017) study. Heteropatriarchy is a socio-political feminist theory term that bridges the term heterosexual and patriarchy. Heteropatriarchy can be defined as “the social systems in which heterosexuality and patriarchy are perceived as normal and natural, and in which other configurations are perceived as

abnormal, aberrant, and abhorrent” (Arvin et al., 2013 p. 13). The results of this study on deconstruction show similarities on Brañas-Garza et al.'s, (2013) international study on disaffiliation. They revealed liberal beliefs were strongly correlated with disaffiliation especially referring to gay relations. Deconversion narratives have also revealed a high prevalence of LGBTQ+ individuals being shamed for their sexuality (Phillips, 2015).

Confirming literature, the impact of anti-gay rhetoric and prejudice was incredibly harmful for the LGBTQ+ minorities in this study (Meyer, 2003; Sowe et al., 2017). Those who are LGBTQ+ and religious report “higher levels of internalized homonegativity; more sexual risk-taking and self-harm; more instances of discrimination and violence; less family and friend support; greater loneliness; lower self-esteem;” and increased anxiety and depression (Sowe et al., 2017, p. 691). Moreover, former church members who are gay or lesbian have an increased risk of suicidal ideation and attempts (Gibbs & Goldbach, 2015) as two of the participants insinuated. Suicide for gay men is also greatly influenced by homophobia in the family (Correa-Márquez & Luna-Flores, 2015).

Ultimately individuals have multiple identities (spiritual, sexual etc.) and connections between these identities (Levy & Harr, 2018). Individuals who “resolved conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs” in one study described the need for living authentically (Levy & Harr, 2018, para. 43). The experience of the two queer participants in the present study aligns with Lapinski and Mckirnan's (2013) summary of identity development stages: “an initial period of confusion, exploration, and personal turmoil; followed by a period of gradual acceptance of an LGB orientation; and finally a stage where one's LGB orientation is fully synthesized with one's personal identity” (para. 2). However, they suggest this is not linear. The initial experience of confusion includes secrecy, especially for those who are involved in religious activities (Lapinski

& Mckirnan, 2013). Lapinski and Mckirnan (2013) argued that acceptance “underlies the crucial transition from identity formation to identity integration” (para. 7). They explained that acceptance includes not only the individual admitting to same-sex attraction, but also the “positive approval” of gays and lesbians (para. 7). This acceptance “oscillates” from positive and negative views of themselves and other gays and lesbians “depending on the availability of social support, cultural shifts, or personal experiences” (para. 7). Therefore, it is more difficult for those to come to acceptance if their religious organization is not-accepting and view expressing homosexuality as sinful. Hence, religion can hinder one’s LGBTQ+ identity development and lead to “higher internalized homonegativity and negative views toward same-sex attraction” (Lapinski & Mckirnan, 2013, par. 13). Lapinski and Mckirnan (2013) summarized:

Gays and lesbians have found a variety of ways to respond to religious conflict, such as considering oneself to be spiritual rather than religious, reinterpreting religious teachings, changing religious affiliations (participating in a more gay-positive church), and only sporadically or not attending religious institutions (Schuck & Liddle, 2001; Wilcox, 2009; Yip, 2003). (para. 14)

In their study on the impact of religious upbringing and lesbian, gay and bisexual identity revealed that the identity integration between one’s sexuality and religion is changing to be more accepting (Lapinski & Mckirnan, 2013). Other literature also revealed that some gay and lesbian individuals reflected on their religious and theological beliefs in an effort to seek resolution and some sought out affirming congregations (Levy & Harr, 2018). One participant identifying as gay was able to seek affirming relationships and religious traditions.

Studies including bisexual individuals revealed similar outcomes. Bisexual individuals embraced a more affirming faith, while others “desexualized their own sexuality and placed

religious identity at the forefront...remained celibate” or they did not see any discrepancy with their faith and their sexuality (Levy & Harr, 2018, para. 12). Similar to the participant who had identified as bisexual, bisexual individuals can pass off as straight and often struggled with confusion regarding their sexuality, however, they also used critical thinking in questioning religious authority (Levy & Harr, 2018). Yarhouse and Beckstead (2011) encouraged the use of group therapy to resolve sexual orientation and religious conflicts. A person-centered approach using assessment, intervention and integration is also encouraged to facilitate congruence between one’s sexual orientation and faith (see Yarhouse & Beckstead, 2011).

Leaving: Attempt at Reform and Loss

Participants in this study shared their experience with leaving their evangelical churches and several attempted to reform their church before leaving. The participants in this study confirm that it often takes months and years for people to leave a fundamentalist religion (Adam, 2009; Matthews & Salazar, 2014; Mckimming, 2017). Attempting to leave one’s fundamentalist church community and beliefs often leads to a socio-cognitive conflict (Adam, 2009). Many participants wrestled with intellectual and emotional conflicts for extended periods of time, and remained connected to social and family relationships in their church communities. It is documented that many second generation members take longer to leave because of the closeness of the members of the group and to their families (Rousselet et al., 2017; Shoenberger & Grayburn, 2016). Leaving one’s religious group can be isolating and many individuals may experience anxiety, anger, guilt and depression (Shoenberger & Grayburn, 2016). Hawkes (2016) explained in his dissertation:

Although religious rituals provided a pattern of reassurance, its demands seemed to increase in intensity...[and] my conflict of identity around sexuality. Its pledges of

damnation accompanied by promises of supposed relief from the sin of being myself
grew progressively heavier and less sustainable. (p. 30)

Similar to Hawkes (2016), those deconstructing in this study embraced ambiguity and relief over the reassurance of certainty.

Leaving their churches and evangelical faith created social stress for the participants. Social stress is impacted by one's social environment and can influence mental and physical health (Meyer, 2003). Meyer (2003) asserted that being in harmony in one's environment is the "basis for healthy living" (para. 12). The participants in this study experienced social stress in a multitude of ways: unhealthy controlling and shaming environments, internal dissonance, awkward and oppressive conversations with friends and family about their changing beliefs, attempts and failed attempts at reform, homophobia, misogyny and eventually the social stress of leaving their church or tradition. High cost groups tend to demand time and commitment and connect people to a larger social support system (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010), which makes leaving an even more painful and distressing social stress.

Unlike some people who disaffiliated from New Religious Movements (also known as cults) (Coates, 2013), the participants in this study did not necessarily need others to "anchor their sense of self" to leave, deconstruct or self-construct (Coates, 2013, p. 323). However, similar to other studies of those leaving fundamentalist religions (Berger, 2015; Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016; Zuckerman, 2012), this present study found that participants experienced extreme loss, including loss of relationships, including friendships, family, social support and a sense of identity. Most research on loss is connected to death, however those who experience deconstruction experience similar aspects of grief such as trauma, shame and guilt and existential issues (Nord, 1996). Counselling interventions include grief work addressing these issues, but

also cultivating self-acceptance, a positive identity and “Daily customs that encourage affirmation, mirroring, and trust in self and world” (Hawkes, 2016, p. 28). Rituals and contemplative practice are also helpful in “stabilizing self-concept” (Hawkes, 2016, p. 42). Mental health professionals can use existential, humanistic and client-centered counselling to address the existential and grief issues that surface from the experience of deconstruction (Spillers, 2007). This is discussed more under *Implications for Future Practice*.

Finding a New Way

I interpreted the participants experience in this section as *finding a new way*, making sense of their experience with deconstruction and the beginning stages of restructuring their identity. In this section, the participants shared their difficult and liberating experiences of deconstructing which included struggles with identity. The results of this study align with other research that demonstrates that people struggle to reconstruct their identity after a change in their belief system (Adam, 2009; Phillips, 2015; Smith, 2011; Zuckerman, 2012). In Brent’s (1994) study on leaving fundamentalism, he named this phase, “The emotion-laden aftermath” and “establishing new horizons” (par. 23, 24). Mcskimming (2017) explained the process of reconstruction as “storying, restorying, and ultimately de-storying of Christian identity, from a self-concept shaped, contested, and controlled by the Christian church, to a reconstituted disaffiliated identity beyond the previous Christian hermeneutics of the self” (para. 2). Nica (2018) described the need for some deconverted individuals to find a “meaning structure” that includes a “spiritual journey” or “spiritual progression” (p. 141) as they miss this aspect in their lives. The participants in this study, however, did not all reject their Christian roots. Many were making sense of their changing beliefs relating to Christianity and what this meant for their lives.

Reconstruction is important for discovering meaning and purpose, and for restoring well-being (Nica, 2018). Existentialist theorists believe that we are becoming who we are (Eliason et al., 2010). The participants in this study “revised and refashioned their stories of self and preferred morality” (Mcskimming, 2017, p. 170). Adam (2009) explained that most apostates walk away from their religion or church rather than towards something new. As a result of this study suggest, most participants were not walking towards a safe new community; they were forced to leave in order to remain cognitively and emotionally authentic. The experience of deconstruction creates “the exertion of opposing forces in a single psyche” (Adam, 2009, p. 47). It is a “sociocognitive [sic] disequilibrium” (Adam, 2009, p. 48); the cognition of the person no longer resonates with the larger social group. This dynamic can create a nihilistic fear and a sense of groundlessness and isolation. Furthermore, the psychological toll of deconstruction can lead to an identity crisis. Winell (1993) argued that losing one’s faith is similar to post-traumatic stress because it is essentially the death of one’s previous life, a shock to the system and one that needs to be recognized as trauma. Thoits (1999) described that loss of identity plays a central role in psychological disorders including “major depression, bipolar disorder, dysthymia (chronic depressed mood), and borderline and avoidant personality disorders” (p. 345). The more committed the person is to their “self-schema,” the greater the impact on one’s emotional self (Thoits, 1999, p. 352).

The deconstruction of one’s spiritual identity the participants experienced is particularly painful. Deconstruction could be expressed similar to Hawkes’ (2016) discussion on melancholia. He explains that it is a grief that is “not loss of other; it is loss of self, or perhaps upset at never having fully formed a self-identity” (p. 31). The experience of deconstruction can be considered a complex loss, including the loss of self. For instance, “When an individual undergoes a

significant transition, they are faced with the psychological task of grappling with the self that they will no longer become” (Aten et al., 2012, p. 52). Spillers (2007) explains this loss as a symbolic death, grieving the life of a future that will no longer exist. She shares that grief can allow “a person to separate from the loss and make some sense out of it (Moses, 1989; Schneider, 1984)” (para. 8). Initially a person experiences denial, a process that allows them space before coming to terms with the reality of their loss (Spillers, 2007). However, as the individual moves towards acceptance, they begin choosing how to respond to their choices and circumstance (Spillers, 2007). This is the experience of spiritual freedom in existentialism, a “relinquishing of the lost dream (death), acknowledgment of separateness (loneliness), owning of the impairment (responsibility), and answering of the question posed by life (meaning)” (Spillers, 2007, para. 38).

Deconstruction is a complex cognitive, emotional, and spiritual experience lasting a period of months and often years. Tranquility is severely impaired for a season in the lives of those who are deconstructing. The results of this study confirm emotions that others have experienced leaving fundamentalist religion: fear, loss, confusion, guilt, rejection, depression, anxiety, grief, suffering and anger (Berger, 2015; Nica, 2018; Zuckerman, 2012). Those deconstructing experience an unravelling and groundlessness that can impact one’s psychological health and well-being. The participants meaning-making schema is disrupted and requires accommodation or restructuring. They are no longer their former selves, further, they have lost a possible future self. Their identity no longer matches what their friends and family consider them to be. Their identity must be restructured.

Although the results of this study reveal participants experience of anger, frustration, depression, isolation and grief in their deconstruction, they also experienced positive experiences

such as increased critical thinking, a sense of relief and freedom, a greater love and acceptance of others (Brent, 1994; Mcskimming, 2017). Other positive experiences with deconversion narratives include self-acceptance, new social connections, a feeling of liberation to seek knowledge and the ability to throw off shame (Phillips, 2015). To conclude, the experience of deconstruction is a life orienting transition that includes intense grief and loss, losing their foundation and understanding of God and faith, a loss of relationships and closeness to family, a loss of a sense of meaning and purpose and loss of their sense of self and a struggle to reconstruct one's identity.

Strengths and Limitations of Study

There are many strengths in this qualitative study including the use of IPA. This qualitative study allowed for in-depth exploration of experience and gained a deep understanding of the experience and meaning of deconstruction. The case-by-case analysis allowed for an individual exploration of each narrative, as well as cross-comparison analysis between participants to find connections. Finding patterns and similarities reflected in the themes was an intense, detailed, methodological process. This thorough analysis allowed for abundant insight of the complex experience of deconstruction.

Another strength was the use of counselling interview techniques. This study began with one open-ended question that allowed participants to share openly about what was most important to them. Participants were provided the space to share what was most impactful for them and my empathetic approach to the interview allowed participants to feel heard and vulnerable about their personal experiences. My ability to connect, resonate and laugh with the participants increased their ability to share. Only a few clarifying questions were asked which allowed for the themes to surface organically. This strengthens the study findings as the data

collection was exploratory. The participants had an opportunity to share what was most concerning that I may not have initially expected (such as the rich data on LGBTQ+ issues and heteropatriarchy).

An important strength of this study was how it was able to fill the gap in the literature regarding peer reviewed studies on deconstruction. Most qualitative and quantitative studies focus on the experience of deconversion or religious exiting (Brent, 1994; Fazzino, 2014; Nica, 2018; Streib, 2021); whereas this study attempts to understand the process of deconstruction despite the final outcome of beliefs. Also, studies mainly note the positive aspects of wellbeing and religion, whereas this study reveals a unique contribution to discussing negative well-being with mainstream religion and the experience of spiritual abuse. This study makes a significant contribution in giving this minority a voice to tell their story and allowing for discussion about the reasons and psychological needs that occur when people change their religious beliefs.

Another strength of this study was the diversity of participants. These participants varied in cultural backgrounds, sexual identity and age, the length of their deconstructing process and how this has impacted their spiritual identity. Although every person had different experiences, there were common themes that were weaved through their collective voice. Most importantly, a strength was the impact the research and interviews had on the participants. The participants were eager to share their experience, some felt honored to share their experience, others came to new, albeit painful realizations, and others were very interested in hearing the other stories of the participants. This reveals that this study was needed to help others process their own experiences of deconstruction and was a worthwhile research project that touched me deeply as well.

As with any research, there are limitations. Being new to interviewing, I recognize that although it is also a strength to allow the interview to be open ended, in hindsight I might have

given more time for the interview and/or planned a follow up interview. There was much information to cover and I would have liked to have more of an opportunity to follow up on certain aspects of the participants' experience. Open ended and semi-structured questions do not give the interviews consistency as not all questions were asked of every individual. Although this may be a limitation, it can also be strength to reveal similar themes between participants without instigating a particular topic or theme.

IPA is a strength for in depth research, however a quantitative study with more participants would be beneficial for transferability. As well, the analysis and interpretation of the findings are my own, it is subjective and open to criticism. Another limitation in this design is the lack of in-person interaction with the participants. Although COVID-19 allowed me to recruit participants from other geographical locations, there were two participants who were American, therefore not all of the subjects were Canadian. I felt that although they were American, they brought a depth to the topic, as American religious ideologies can greatly impact Canadians. There were also some limitations to online interviews. For instance, in some interviews, the video lagged several times, which interrupted the flow of the interview and it also made it more difficult to interrupt the speaker to ask clarifying questions. The online interview may have caused some discomfort for participants; however, as the interviewer, I was still able to process body language and voice nuance and maintained a sense of eye contact as much as possible.

Ultimately, this rich phenomenological study contributes to the body of research on the impact of religious change and the findings may be useful for mental health professionals who have clients wanting to process the unique experience of deconstruction.

Implications for Professional Practice

Mental health and spirituality are intrinsically connected, and spirituality needs to be given its proper place in the therapy process. Stone (2013) explained that most people rarely seek out therapy for religious trauma but that it surfaces over time. It can often take religious trauma years to surface as the defence mechanisms of spiritual bypassing (“the use of spirituality to avoid unmet needs, painful feelings, and unresolved wounds”; Stone, 2013, p. 326) is difficult to reform. For a holistic approach to mental health, mental health practitioners must not shy away from discussing spirituality and religion in their therapeutic practice. Hackney (2000) explained that this includes, “a holistic view of the person, human development over the life span, a concern for wellness and prevention, and a resource-oriented (as opposed to pathological) view of the counseling process” (p. 172). As Mohr (2013) noted, mental health practitioners do not need to have the same spiritual or religious beliefs as their clients, but rather must be open, curious and non-judgemental about the person’s beliefs. Mental health practitioners must learn to be aware when someone is not spiritually well; they have a unique position to highlight incongruous beliefs that may be causing harm to clients.

Counsellors can build a therapeutic alliance not only asking about a client’s presenting problem, psychosocial development and personality, but also how their belief or religious perspectives impact this problem, either positively or negatively (Hackney, 2000). A non-threatening question such as “Is religion or spirituality important to you?” can start a dialogue around this topic (Rosenfeld, 2010). Assessing clients’ spirituality will address values, meaning and possible supports and family of origin issues. Assessment can also include questions such as: “Could you describe the beliefs, values, and philosophies that guide your life? Do you consider yourself a religious person? Does the transcendent or spiritual have a place in how you think about yourself?” (Aten et al., 2012, p. 55). Asking “what practices keep the client ‘on track’ in

his or her search for meaning” will also help a mental health practitioner to discover key spiritual influences and potential positive or negative spiritual coping (Hackney, 2000, p. 174).

Furthermore, counsellors can build their therapeutic alliance by ensuring an egalitarian relationship as some clients may have experienced power dynamics within their religious history (Matthews & Salazar, 2014). The mental health practitioner must also be aware of what a healthy spiritual authority looks like so as to distinguish between healthy spirituality and unhealthy spirituality. Ward explains that “healthy spiritual leadership respects individual autonomy, tolerates and encourages critical thinking, and is appreciative of any power inequality” (Ward, 2011, para. 71). Falgoust (2008) created an interesting “curriculum for building religious and spiritual cultural competency in mental healthcare” that includes self-reflection exercises to challenge one’s bias, assessment interview questions and guided imagery exercises (p. 1). Rosenfeld, (2010) suggested the importance of informed consent and respecting the client’s beliefs. In the event of unhealthy and harmful religious beliefs, he suggests that mental health practitioners explore “the content and consequences” of beliefs that have most likely not been examined since childhood (p. 522).

A spiritually sensitive mental health practitioner “recognizes that the client’s spiritual and/or religious perspectives can: a) enhance well-being; b) contribute to client problems; and/or c) exacerbate symptoms” (Cashwell & Watts, 2010, para. 2). Many people who experience religious trauma engage in negative spiritual coping, cognitive incongruence, physical health issues, increased symptoms of PTSD, increased depression and anxiety, interpersonal issues, the traumatic effects of spiritual abuse and a sense of spiritual alienation and isolation. The mental health practitioner must understand the intense cognitive and emotional distress people can experience when transitioning out of their fundamentalist beliefs and community and must be

comfortable discussing spiritual and religious issues. The practitioners also need to be able to help affected people reconstruct another worldview and be aware of the various results of this experience.

Existential therapy is a helpful philosophical approach that was developed by individuals who all had their own difficult circumstances in life, such as Viktor Frankl, Irvin Yalom and Carl Rogers (Corey, 2016). Frankl discovered through suffering in concentration camps that finding meaning separated individuals who were overcome with despair (Eliason et al., 2010). His therapeutic approach, logotherapy, is comprised of the following understanding: humans can find meaning in the present, they can make personal choices or reactions and they have personal responsibility (Eliason et al., 2010). For Frankl, the therapeutic relationship was paramount to the counselling process (Eliason et al., 2010). Eliason (2010) explained:

Love is the only way to grasp another human being at the innermost core of his or her being. No one can become fully aware of the very essence of another human being unless love is experienced. Through love, one is able to see the essential traits and features in the beloved person; and even more, one sees that which is potential in the other, which is not yet actualized, yet ought to be actualized. (para, 19).

Frankl expresses that love is what helps a person self-actualize. Love is the most powerful form of unconditional positive regard that helps build a strong therapeutic alliance that is paramount for a client struggling with deconstruction.

Irvin Yalom is a psychiatrist who has helped develop existential therapy (Eliason et al., 2010). He believes that death, freedom, existential isolation and meaninglessness are the cause of distress for humans. The issue of freedom in particular is an interesting concept relating to spiritual deconstruction. Spillers, (2007) explained, “We are free to think, feel, and believe as we

choose, and bear a corresponding responsibility for those things” (para. 15). Yalom believes that freedom can be a frightening notion. Eliason (2010) explained, “Without structure and framework, freedom implies that one is totally responsible for his or her life. Distress occurs when one confronts the groundlessness, void, or abyss of nothingness versus our wish for structure” (para. 30). When the participants experienced deconstruction, there was a groundlessness many felt in terms on their belief systems and meaning structures. Existential isolation is also a concern as those deconstructing are alone on their journey and now have the responsibility of finding meaning separate from what gave them meaning—their previous religious and spiritual beliefs, church and community.

Deurzen (2014) profoundly expressed, “Since human beings evolve and change as they become more conscious and alter their position in the world, the objective of existential therapy is to awaken a person to consciousness and awareness of their own position in the world”(par. 14). Deurzen realized in her practice and studies that people who struggle with existential issues need to be understood and to help them face their problems with courage. She explained, “Existential therapy helps people not just to find resilience in their times of trouble, but to discover and value the personal authorship and authority that allows them to transcend their hardship” (para. 24). Deurzen’s role is to help the client understand their lives, gain balance and sense of direction:

Hopefully they will discover to their delight that times of crisis are moments for reflection rather than moments where we should rush into panicky action. They learn to thrive on anxiety and find their true depth when despairing or upset. People who are engaged with something of value always surprise themselves. They find fresh energy and

purpose to engage with life in a new and wholehearted fashion. A calm and kind, quiet but searching dialogue is often all it takes to help them find their depth. (par. 23)

Deurzen inspired her clients to embrace crisis and invites it to be transforming. Those who are deconstructing would benefit from this approach.

Humanistic psychology draws from existentialism and the concern for what it means to be human (Angus et al., 2015). Humanistic psychotherapy focuses on meaning, values, personal and interpersonal relationships and one's relationship with self (Angus et al., 2015). Humanistic psychotherapy also focuses on "spiritual aspects of human life" and affirms "personal experience as authoritative" (Kugelmann, 2005, p. 365). Angus (2015) explains that "Clients are viewed as meaning-creating, symbolizing agents, whose subjective experience is an essential aspect of their humanity" (p. 2). Therefore, humanistic psychotherapy prioritizes the therapeutic relationship and the clients subjective experience (Angus et al., 2015).

Carl Rogers experienced his own change in beliefs from attending theological seminary and later becoming disillusioned and focused on philosophy and psychology. This led him to develop the therapeutic approach of person-centered-therapy and the importance of the psychotherapist to approach the client with empathy and unconditional positive regard (Corey, 2016; Eliason et al., 2010). Trust, respect, empathy and unconditional positive regard are important aspects for the client-counselor relationship. This will create the safety and support that is needed in helping the client identify "destructive familial and sociocultural effects on the client's identity, and the client's expression of grief emotions, including anger"(Hawkes, 2016, p. 47) that those deconstructing may need to process. Hawkes (2016) also encourages those who are building a new identity to incorporate reliable practices and rituals such as meditation, stillness, play, art and dreams to help guide them.

Recommendations for Future Research

Previous research has focused mainly on how spirituality and religion contribute to a person's well-being. Abu-Raiya et al. (2016) and Pargament (1999) noted that those who have spiritual struggles tend to seek out their religious orienting system (ROS). They argue that those who have a stronger commitment to their spirituality fare better in times of spiritual struggle. What is the impact on one's coping when their ROS completely dismantles? What is the impact when spiritual beliefs are the cause of the suffering? Studies on this topic have been neglected. Of particular importance is the connection between mental health and wellbeing for people in the midst of deconstruction. Many of the participants in the present study were in therapy specifically related to the negative experiences they had in evangelicalism. Studies on how secular mental health practitioners can help recovering fundamentalists cope with their grief and loss related to losing their faith and their relationships, but also in "reconstructing" their identity and finding new purpose and meaning, would add to the literature on helping this population.

In her dissertation on deconversion of religious belief to atheism, Phillips (2015) revealed a history of emotional, physical and sexual abuse perpetuated by Christian parents and religious leaders. This present study also revealed the impact of patriarchal and heteropatriarchal systems in the church and further research focused solely on the outcome of these systems on people is relevant. For example, one could explore an examination of the ways religion is used to control and instill fear and shame and how this affects psychological development in childhood, specifically related to trauma and complex PTSD.

Exploring how one deconstructing experiences meaning making and identity change is also important research. It was beyond the scope of this thesis to explore the reconstruction experience of those deconstructing; however, this would be a worthwhile qualitative study to

explore. Furthermore, this study revealed potential stages of deconstruction, therefore a grounded theory study could be implemented to investigate the stages and processes of deconstruction.

Conclusion

This study sought to understand the lived experience of spiritual deconstruction for post-evangelical and post-fundamentalist Christians as this is a relatively new term in academic literature. Previous literature focused on disaffiliation, deconversion and religious switching. This research was successful in gaining an in-depth look into the experience and meaning of deconstruction using the qualitative research design of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. The results indicated that deconstruction is a complex experience of processing the impact of one's experience of evangelical Christianity, an unravelling and taking apart one's faith philosophies and the struggle to reconstruct one's philosophies and identity. Five subordinate themes surfaced: *Spiritual Devotion*, *Internalizing and Conforming*, *The Unravelling*, *Leaving: Attempt at Reform and Loss* and *A New Way*. Participants all expressed their commitment to their faith and *Spiritual Devotion*. They had various experiences *Internalizing and Conforming* to the beliefs of their families and churches. They experienced *The Unravelling* of their beliefs through education, critical thinking and frustration surrounding heteropatriarchal systems. Many participants *Attempted Reform* in their churches before ultimately *Leaving* and experienced profound *Loss*. Finally, the participants discussed deconstruction and how this has impacted their lives in the theme *Finding a New Way*. This research surfaced a number of key issues such as spiritual abuse and control, internalizing of shame and fear of hell, loss and patriarchal and heteropatriarchal systems. Unique findings were the process and experience of deconstruction, the desire to reform one's church before leaving and subsequent expressions of belief or non-belief.

Ultimately, literature is contradictory on the issues of well-being and religion (Mora, 2009). However, the results of this study reveal that well-being can be subjectively experienced as threatened by experiences of evangelical and fundamentalist belief systems, especially related to control, shame and fear. The experience of deconstruction profoundly impacts one's beliefs, sense of self, identity, community and relationships. This experience can have an impact on one's mental health and is often an ignored aspect in secular counselling. This study revealed topics such as unhealthy and healthy spirituality, reconstructing identity and philosophies, meaning making and family and social connections are associated to the psychological well-being of those experiencing deconstruction. Adopting a holistic approach to counselling, including the topic of religion and spirituality will ensure the client is addressing every aspect that is in need of deconstruction, healing, restoration, re-storying or reconstruction. Although deconstruction can be a painful, unravelling experience, it is also a freeing and hopeful journey of people developing an authentic and congruent spirituality and self.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Messages

Invitation to participate on social media site/Paws:

Have you experienced a major shift in your spiritual or religious beliefs? (Often called deconstruction)

Would you be willing to share your experience in a **confidential** research interview?

I am an master's Student in the School and Counseling Psychology program at the University of Saskatchewan. I am currently conducting research on the experience of spiritual deconstruction. My research is being supervised by Dr. Stephanie Marin, a registered psychologist. I am seeking volunteers to participate in a private interview for approximately 60-90 minutes.

I am looking for adults who are:

1. Aged 18 and up who have had a dedicated, evangelical or fundamentalist faith experience for at least 4 years and have gone through a major change in their spiritual beliefs and are in a stage of recovery.
2. Are willing to share their personal story of major change in their spiritual beliefs
3. Are not currently in a state of emotional crisis
4. Have access to personal and emotional support

This research has been approved by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board on_____. Anyone who has concerns about their rights as a participant can call the Research Ethics Office at 966-2084.

For more information or to volunteer, please email me at jd1187@usask.ca

If potential participants make contact and wish to proceed after discussing participation criteria and activities, response is 'yes' I will send the following email in response:

Thank you for being willing to participate in this study!

The purpose of this study is to understand the experience of changing your spiritual beliefs relating to your Evangelical or Fundamentalist Christian beliefs. The objective is to learn what influenced the experience of spiritual change/deconstruction, what the experience and meaning of deconstruction is for you and how this has impacted your identity, spiritual identity, family, community and work and any other area you find are applicable.

I am looking for adults who are:

1. Aged 18 or over who have had a dedicated, evangelical or fundamentalist faith experience for at least 4 years and have gone through a deconstruction process and are in a stage of recovery.
2. Are willing to share their personal story of deconstruction
3. Are not currently in a state of emotional crisis
4. Have access to personal and emotional support

If this fits you, I will give you a quick screening call and send you the consent form.
Please let me know if you are interested or if you have any questions.

Jolyn Sloan

Appendix B: Screening Call and Questions

Thank you for your interest in this study. I am studying the process of spiritual deconstruction.

First of all, are you 18 or older?

What has drawn you to this study?

Have you had a dedicated evangelical or fundamentalist faith experience for at least 4 years? Can you briefly describe what you understand to be a major faith shift or spiritual deconstruction?

Are you in a present state of emotional crisis in regard to this change?

Do you have access to emotional support?

Great, now that we have covered the participation criteria, I would like to set up a time to meet with you and to hear about your experiences. There are a couple different options of where we can meet. If you have an office you would feel comfortable with, I can meet you there, or you can meet me on campus in a private interview room at the U of S campus.

At our first meeting we will go over informed consent. Our meeting will last approximately 1 ½ hours.

Appendix C: Participant Consent Form



UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN

College of Education

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL
PSYCHOLOGY AND SPECIAL EDUCATION
EDUCATION.USASK.CA

Participant Consent Form

**You are invited to participate in a research study entitled:
*THE EXPERIENCE OF SPIRITUAL DECONSTRUCTION***

Researcher:

Jolyn Sloan, Graduate Student, Educational Psychology and Special Education, University of Saskatchewan, 306.221.4800, jolyn.sloan@usask.ca

Supervisor:

Stephanie Martin, PhD, RDPsych, Professor, Educational Psychology and Special Education, University of Saskatchewan, Stephanie.Martin@usask.ca or 306-966-5259

Purpose and Objective of the Research:

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study. The purpose of this study is to understand the experience of changing your spiritual beliefs relating to your Evangelical or Fundamentalist Christian beliefs. The objective is to learn what influenced the experience of spiritual deconstruction, what the experience and meaning of deconstruction is for you and how this has impacted your identity, spiritual identity, family, community, work and any other area you find are applicable.

Procedures

- You will be asked to participate in an interview approximately 60-90 minutes in length which will be audio-taped and transcribed. The interviews will be held at a convenient time and location, possibly the University of Saskatchewan campus or a private space of your choice. The style of the interview will be conversational in nature and the topic will be on your experience of spiritual deconstruction.
- A transcript of the first interview will be given to you for review in order to verify its accuracy. Any portions of the transcript that you do not want included will be removed. In addition, preliminary findings will also be shared for your review and you will be invited to provide feedback on these findings. If you wish to receive a copy of the final research results, please email Jolyn at jdl187@usask.ca. Alternatively, you may access overall results of this study through the General Office of the Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education in the winter of 2021.
- For this research I aim to interview 5-8 participants.
- Please feel free to ask any questions regarding the procedures and goals of the study or your role.

Potential Risks:

The risk in participating in this study is very low, however you may feel some discomfort in sharing your story especially if you have had traumatic religious experiences. Please only share what you are comfortable with. You can choose not to answer any question. This opportunity will allow you to share your unique story and provide important information on your experience of spiritual deconstruction. A list of resources will be given to you in the event that you would like to meet with someone.

The following contact information can be used if you experience any discomfort from the interviewing process:

Potential Benefits:

There are no direct personal benefits to participating in this study. However, some individuals who have taken part in similar research have found the process to be somewhat insightful. This study may benefit the wider community, particularly other people going through deconstruction, as well as counsellors and other helping professionals providing services to people going through this major life transition. These potential benefits are not guaranteed.

Storage of Data:

All data will be stored in a secure manner on a password protected computer and the information will be destroyed after 5 years post publication. The consent form will be kept separate in a locked cabinet at the University of Saskatchewan. This is to ensure your privacy, confidentiality and anonymity.

All data reported as aggregate themes and data records, including the interview questionnaires, tapes, transcriptions and research documents will be stored separately from the signed consent forms in a locked cabinet in Dr. Stephanie Martin's office at the University of Saskatchewan. The data will be stored for five years post publication upon which time they will be destroyed. This is all done to ensure your privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity.

Confidentiality:

Your confidentiality is of utmost importance. Your participation and data will be anonymous. The data from this study will be reported in a master's thesis, with the possibility of being published in an academic journal or presented at conferences. The researcher will make every effort to ensure confidentiality and remove any identifying information. You will be asked to choose a pseudonym (alias or fake name). Although the data will be reported in aggregate form through themes, direct quotes may be used using a pseudonym and only characteristics necessary will be included.

Right to Withdraw:

Your participation is voluntary, and you have the right to decide what you wish to disclose and only what you are comfortable with. The information will only be shared with the research team

in strict confidence. Should you wish to withdraw, your data will be deleted from the research project and destroyed at your request. Your right to withdraw data from the study will apply until results have been pooled or aggregated. After this date, it may not be possible to withdraw your data.

Follow up:

Results will be available by Winter of 2021. If you wish to receive a summary of research results, please Jolyn at jd1187@usask.ca

Questions or Concerns:

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact Jolyn at or 306-221-4800. This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Research Ethics Office (306) 966-2975. Out of town participants may call toll free (888) 966-2975.

Consent:

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the description provided; I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my/our questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

_____	_____	_____
<i>Name of Participant</i>	<i>Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>
_____		_____
<i>Researcher's Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>	

***A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.
Thank you for your interest in this study.***

Appendix D: Contextual Participant Information Form

Participant Pseudonym:

Date:

Age:

Relationship Status:

Children?

Ethnic/Cultural Background:

Sexual Orientation:

Appendix E: Interview Guide

Date of Interview:

Note: These guiding interview questions are intended to be open ended and used to elicit participant accounts of experiences of spiritual deconstruction.

Phase 1: Focused History

1. In order for me to understand your experience of deconstruction, I'd like to understand your history. Tell me about your spiritual/faith history before you began deconstructing.

Prompts:

What was the faith/belief system of your parents? How did you come to faith? Did you experience a religious conversion? What would you describe as your level of commitment to your faith? How did your faith impact you and play out in your life? What did faith mean to you? What was your experience of God?)

Phase 2: Influences and Details of experience

Now I would like to understand some of the stories or experiences of what you see as signposts or things that led up to your experience of deconstruction and your experience of deconstruction.

2. Tell me about the experiences that influenced spiritual deconstruction in your life.
3. What was or is the experience of deconstruction like for you?
Prompt: Tell me about a specific time or story that you were wrestling with deconstruction.
4. How has deconstruction impacted your life? (ex. emotionally, psychologically, spiritually, relationally.)

Phase 3: Reflection of meaning

Finally, I would like to understand the meaning you give to the experience of deconstruction and how this may have impacted the meaning for your life.

5. Tell me how deconstruction may have led to any insights, personal understandings or realizations.

Prompt: How your spiritual identity has been shaped or changed by deconstruction? How do you understand deconstruction and your experience of it? What would you want others to understand about deconstruction? Upon reflection are there supports that may have helped you in this experience? What was helpful, not helpful? Given your overall thoughts and feelings surrounding your spiritual history and experiences with deconstruction, what sense do you make of this experience?

Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience with deconstruction?

Phase 4: Language and Terminology

6. Terminology: Does the term Disaffiliation resonate with your experience? Why or why not? Does the term Deconversion resonate with your experience? Why or why not? What definition of your experience most resonates with you and why?

Appendix F: Referral Handout

If you are experiencing distress, please consider seeking support at one of the following support agencies. Many of these agencies provide no cost or low-cost counselling and some options for drop-in counseling.

Hotline and online chat for those who may have Religious Trauma Syndrome:

<https://www.recoveringfromreligion.org/hotline-project-support/hotline-project-training/religious-trauma-syndrome>

If in a crisis, you can Text HOME to 686868 in Canada to text with a trained Crisis Responder; or Text HOME to 741741 in the United States or search “crisis phone line or text” in your country of residence.

Adult Community Services

Address: 4th Floor 715 Queen Street Saskatoon, SK S7K 4X4

Phone: 655-7950

Website: http://www.saskatoonhealthregion.ca/your_health/ps_mh_adult_community.htm

CFS Saskatoon (Drop in available; call for more information)

Address: 200 - 506 - 25th Street East Saskatoon, SK S7K 4A7

Phone: 244-7773

Email: staff@cfssaskatoon.sk.ca

Family Service Saskatoon (drop in available; call for more information)

Address: 506 25th Street East Saskatoon, SK S7K 4A7

Phone: 244-0127

Website: www.familyservice.sk.ca

Student Counselling Services (for U of S students only)

Address: University of Saskatchewan 104 Qu'Appelle Hall Addition
Saskatoon, SK S7N 5E8

Phone: 244-4920

Hours: Monday–Friday, 8:30 a.m.–4:30 p.m. (closed over noon hour May to August)

Appendix G: Data/Transcript Release Form

THE EXPERIENCE OF SPIRITUAL DECONSTRUCTION

I, _____, have reviewed the summaries of my personal interviews in this study, and have had the opportunity to add, alter, and delete information from the actual transcripts. I acknowledge that the summary accurately reflects what I said in my personal interviews with Jolyn Sloan. I hereby authorize the release of this transcript to Jolyn Sloan to be used in the manner described in the Consent Form. I have received a copy of this Data/Transcript Release Form for my own records.

Name of Participant

Date

Signature of Participant

Signature of Researcher