

Multicultural Considerations with Ex-Jehovah's Witnesses

Tanya Willson, LMHC, NCC  
PhD student

Barry University

When one thinks of Jehovah's Witnesses, also known as the Watchtower Society, one may think of a pair of formally-dressed people knocking on the door, or the policy of refusing blood transfusion, but for a counselor who is striving to be aware of and sensitive to multicultural issues, the nuances of the culture are also important. With the Jehovah's Witnesses, or Watchtower Society, there is also a counter-culture of sorts, comprised of those who have been members of the organization and have subsequently left. While no longer identifying as Jehovah's Witnesses, someone who has left the organization still carries the experience with them, and thus becomes an ex-Jehovah's Witness. This unique subset of people face unique challenges that counselors can be of valuable assistance with, as transitioning away from one's religious beliefs, cultural values, community, and often family of origin, is a very distressing experience.

### **Literature Review**

While the peer-reviewed articles do not speak to the experience of leaving the Jehovah's Witness organization in particular, some research has been conducted on the phenomenon of people leaving religion in general. This research, combined with articles about the culture and values of active and believing Jehovah's Witnesses, can create a picture of what those who choose to leave the Watchtower Society may be facing. The Pew Research Forum released a study in 2012 indicating that one in five adults have no religious affiliation, which has markedly increased since 2007, the last time the study was conducted (Pew Research Center, 2012). Many ex-Jehovah's Witnesses likely relate to this, as many of them in the community I visited identified as non-religious, atheist, or agnostic.

Diener, Tay, & Myers (2011), explored why so many people are leaving formal religious organizations when previous research has found that religious involvement is correlated with an increased sense of well-being. In their study of communities in the US and around the world, Diener, Tay, & Myers (2011) found that “a strong predictor of an individual’s religiosity is the conditions of the society in which he or she lives” (p. 1288). The societal factors that determined religiosity were economic well-being and homogeneity. If a community has a shared religious tradition, an individual is more likely to participate in the religious customs. The study also found that societies that are more economically prosperous are less likely to be religious, as religion seems to offer three benefits: a sense of purpose, respect, and social support, which are benefits that are more attainable outside of a religious organization in an affluent society (Diener, Tay, & Myers, 2011). These two variables are noteworthy as the ex-Jehovah’s Witnesses I spoke with were generally from affluent countries, although there are many Jehovah’s Witnesses in less affluent countries throughout the world. The Watchtower Society is not a mainstream or common religion that is shared throughout any one society or community, and those who reflected on their experience as a member did not feel part of their society as a whole, which suggests that the Organization does not benefit from the identified advantage of homogeneity to incentivize individuals to continue participating in the religion. In fact, Jindra (2008), identified that in converting to the Watchtower Society, themes of separation from society as a whole and reduction in individualized decision-making in favor of following prescribed guidelines appeared in a case study on religious conversion. Scheitle & Adamczyk (2010) confirm this idea, describing membership in the Jehovah’s Witness organization as preventing an individual from identifying with the greater community, instead forming one’s identity around the religion.

To summarize, the Pew Research Council has identified a growing trend of adults disaffiliating with organized religion, and further inquiry into this phenomenon by Diener, Tay, & Myers (2011) reveals that without the cultural homogeneity of religious tradition and the secondary benefits of sense of purpose, respect and social support that are founds through religious organizations in less affluent countries, individuals are more likely to leave their religious traditions as they are able to obtain these benefits outside of formal religion. For ex-Jehovah's Witnesses in particular, who appear to most often live in affluent societies, the lack of homogeneity in the larger society may be a factor influencing their decision to leave the organization, as well as the availability of social support, respect, and sense of purpose outside of the religious community they were raised in.

Scheitle & Adamczyk (2010) studied the health effects of leaving a religion, and made the distinction between low-cost and high-cost religion, specifically including Jehovah's Witnesses in the latter category. High-cost religion was defined as "theologically, socially, and culturally exclusive" (p.325). Exiting a high-cost religion involves "strained or severed family relationships, loss of self-identity, social isolation, and the personal stress that accompanies these issues" (p. 327). The authors also point out that due to the unique cultural features of high-cost religious organizations such as Jehovah's Witnesses, many who leave the organization do not join another religious organization, and therefore are less likely to gain the benefits of social support and community from an alternate organization. The study concluded that those who leave high-cost religions such as the Watchtower Organization, are more likely to report poorer overall health than those who stay in the religion (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010).

Related to healthcare is the most commonly referenced cultural consideration related to Jehovah's Witnesses: the policy of refusing blood transfusions. Muramoto (2013) discusses

current healthcare policies around, encouraging healthcare providers to be aware that within the Watchtower Organization, the risks of an individual going against this policy are high, as the consequences of accepting blood is being disfellowshipped and disassociated from the congregation and subsequently “the religious community must ostracize and shun the wrongdoer” (p. 37). The author describes the cultural process of accountability for one’s actions, as a visitor to the hospital reporting a red bag hanging from an IV pole to a church leader is evidence enough to prompt an investigation into the person’s conduct and result in the person’s being disfellowshipped and consequently shunned. This is an important consideration for healthcare providers and counselors, as many ex-Jehovah’s Witnesses shared in an online forum, Jehovah Witness Recovery, that there was a period of time, from several months to several years, where they had stopped sincerely believing in the doctrine of the Watchtower Organization, including refusing blood transfusions, but continued to attend services and did not share their feelings with friends or family members, because they were not yet prepared for the high costs of exiting the social structure and community support of the organization. The privacy of healthcare decisions and information for someone who identifies as Jehovah’s Witness must therefore be kept especially safe, due to the increased social risks for someone who may privately disagree with their community’s values (Muramoto, 2013).

### **Immersion Experience**

In order to identify people to interview, I joined an online community forum called Jehovah’s Witness Recovery. The homepage states: “Our Mission is to provide an online environment that promotes positive healing and recovery from the Watchtower Society of Jehovah’s Witnesses” ([www.jehovahswitnessrecovery.com](http://www.jehovahswitnessrecovery.com)). I created a username to identify myself, and chose “docstudent.” I was a bit anxious about joining in on the discussions. In order to create the

username, I had to answer some questions about Jehovah's Witness doctrine, which I had to look up online in order to answer correctly. I know this is to prevent spamming and other riff raff from joining the site, but I wondered if I would be rejected from the group once I made it known that I was not an ex-Jehovah's Witness. I read through some of the threads, finding myself particularly drawn to the subgroup "healing and support," where people were expressing their feelings of depression and problems with their family members. The first thing I noticed is that on every comment, the person who wrote it has added details about him or herself that are visible to the side of the comment, including their age, location, and current beliefs. Most of the people in the forum are in the United States and Canada, and identify as agnostic or atheist. The ages of the group members vary widely, from as young as 15 to as old as 70. Underneath each person's name is a large label indicating the length of time someone has been a member of the forum. Once I logged in, my name had a green box labeled "New Member" beneath it. I noticed others with different colored labels indicating they were a "Forum Friend," "Valued Member," "Seasoned Member," or "Master Member." Forum administrators and moderators are also labeled in this way. Members also have the option of including a picture of themselves that will be displayed with each post, but many choose to use a cartoon or other abstract picture instead (Jehovah's Witness Recovery, 2013).

As I started reading, I was surprised to see the strong level of camaraderie among the group, and also the amount of times that members encouraged each other to seek professional help. Many members described using anti-depressants, and were very open about seeing therapists, psychiatrists, and their experiences with these avenues for seeking relief for their depression and anxiety. The members also seemed to take great comfort in hearing each other's stories and knowing they had similar experiences to each other's. Many threads started with

something like, “Am I the only one that whose family...” or “Was my congregation the only one that...” which resulted in a thread of stories from around the world around a theme, sometimes serious and sometimes humorous, but bringing the members together around a shared experience that they thought no one would understand. Aside from experiences and memories, members also sought understanding about vague feelings of guilt they were having trouble understanding, such as feeling guilty about not attending meetings, despite having an intellectual belief that the teachings of Jehovah’s Witnesses are incorrect and attending meetings is not something the person wants to do. Forum members would express understanding of these feelings, talk about having similar feelings either currently or in the past, and offer support for the person about how to handle what they are experiencing, or simply hope for feeling better in the future (Jehovah’s Witness Recovery, 2013).

After reading a few threads, I posted a thread of my own to ask if anyone would be willing to talk to be about their experience for the purpose of a research paper. I identified myself as a doctoral student and as an ex-Mormon, which some members refer to as “cousins” because of the similar cultural dynamics. I was met with a warm reception, some followup questions, and several people willing to talk to me within a short time. My fears about being rejected from the group were quickly relieved. I then felt comfortable to add my comments to other threads, offering support to those suffering from depression or struggling with family issues. Because interaction is not in real-time, however, it is easy to make a comment and then forget to return to the thread to see if someone replied.

### **Interpersonal Interaction**

As a result of my request on the Jehovah's Witness Recovery Forum, I was able to speak with Linda, age 36, who is a married mother of two who lives in Manchester, England. We spoke for one hour over Skype on February 12, 2013. Linda was raised in the Watchtower Society. She told me that "mentally left" about 5 years ago, but continued attending until she and her husband were ready to tell their families, which happened 15 months ago. When I asked her what prompted her to lose faith in the doctrine of the religion, she explained that once she had children her perspective changed, and she could not imagine herself shunning her child or letting one of them die because of the church's policy of refusing a blood transfusion. Linda also told me that when she saw the movie "the Truman Show," she related to it in that she felt like the main character. She felt that she knew some of the church's teachings were "ridiculous" but she would just "push away" those thoughts as much as she could. When she did let herself examine her feelings and realized she did not believe, she shared her feelings with her husband, who came to share her perspective. Linda told me that their home is much more relaxed now, and her marriage is more egalitarian and she and her husband are more honest with each other. She shared with me that the period right after leaving was the most difficult, however, as she felt she had to re-examine every aspect of her life, including morality, health, environment, and family. She described this process as "exhausting" and feeling like "sifting salt and sugar." (L. P., personal communication, February 12, 2013).

Linda's father is an Elder in the Watchtower Society, which is a leadership position within the congregation, which made it more difficult for her to explain to him her change in belief, and adds a complicated community dynamic to her leaving the organization, as she is expected to be more righteous or upstanding as the daughter of a leader in the church. Linda told

me that last year, she and her husband sat down with their families at separate times to explain their change in belief. As a result, a family member had severe health problems and had to spend several months recuperating due to the shock. The congregation shunned her and her husband, and her family stopped talking to her completely. Her parents started talking to her again six months ago, but her brothers still are not speaking with her (L. P., personal communication, February 12, 2013).

Linda told me that she was able to find a counselor in her area with experience in helping people leaving high-control religions, and found therapy to be very helpful. She is now going to college, celebrating holidays, and working, which are all activities that were discouraged by the Jehovah's Witnesses. She is a moderator on the Jehovah's Witness Recovery forum and enjoys staying involved on the board, helping others through the process of leaving the organization (L. P., personal communication, February 12, 2013).

On February 14, 2013, I met Molly over Skype, who lives in Montreal. I made the error of asking her if she minded meeting on Valentine's Day evening, before remembering that she likely did not have a strong sentimental attachment to the holiday because of her upbringing as a Jehovah's Witness. She told me she didn't mind because she and her husband had never celebrated that holiday. Monica is also 36 and married, but has no children, as she was discouraged by the Watchtower Society from having children because it was considered "selfish." Monica and her husband left "mentally" two years ago, and told their families one year ago. They also moved from Toronto to Montreal as a result of leaving the organization, in order to "start over" away from family and the congregation they left. Molly and her husband had been "pioneers," meaning they were financially supported by the Watchtower Organization in order to be proselytizing up to 70 hours per week. Her husband also was an elder, or leader, in the

congregation. She explained to me that it was through a proselyting trip to the Dominican Republic that she met other missionaries from other organizations, who believed just as passionately as she did, which surprised her and caused her to wonder how that could be. She was also troubled at seeing a teenage girl being shunned and outcast from her family and community (M. C., personal communication, February 14, 2013).

Molly told me that now that she has left the organization, she feels less judgmental and sees more good in the world, but she also feels "like a refugee in a new world" and "feels like it's written on my forehead," describing feeling that she doesn't fit in with society as whole. She said she also feels bitter about losing so many years of her life having dedicated them to the organization, as she is only now starting to go to college and trying to start a family at a later time in life than others do. Molly described her family relationships as strained and distant, and that she does not share very much with them, in order to not offend them. She also feels sad about losing a lot of friendships and relationships. Molly told me that she would seek therapy if she could afford it, but she has found some help in reading books on PTSD. She shared with me that she now describes herself as agnostic, and she and her husband enjoy reading about Buddhist practices. Molly did not tell me too many details about her own experience, but was very happy to tell me about other issues within the organization that counselors should be aware of, particularly about the experience of someone who is shunned and cut off from all social resources. She also told me about Bethels, which is where Jehovah's Witnesses might apply to work and live permanently, where they live communally under a strict schedule and rules, and if they were to want to leave, they would have even fewer resources and living skills than others who do leave (M. C., personal communication, February 14, 2013).

The two women I interviewed seemed to have had similar experiences. They were not casual Jehovah's Witnesses, but very involved and devoted, but found themselves no longer able to intellectually view the religion as what it claimed to be: an organization with the truth about the world. Both women have suffered loss of friendships and damage to family relationships, and felt the need to move to new cities to start over. Both women describe feeling out of place and struggling with their sense of identity after leaving the Watchtower Society. While Linda spoke to me in detail about her personal experience and her family, Molly told me more about the organization as a whole and the risks that other Jehovah's Witnesses may face in wanting to leave the organization, especially in regard to shunning practices. Both women shared that they felt counselors could help ex-Jehovah's Witnesses a great deal, if they have a proper understanding of the circumstances they are facing, and the seriousness of the internal struggle and family dynamics they are navigating while making a dramatic lifestyle change.

### **Professional Consultation**

On April 17, 2013, I interviewed psychologist Dr. Marlene Winell of Journey Free, an organization based in San Francisco focused on education and recovery for those "recovering from the effects of dogmatic religious indoctrination" ([www.journeyfree.org/about-us-2](http://www.journeyfree.org/about-us-2)). Dr. Winell provides counseling services in person, offers weekend retreats, and also does consulting and coaching online. She also provides group counseling services online through a private forum, as well as through webinars that are attended by ex-Jehovah's Witnesses and others from all over the world. Dr. Winell has worked with ex-Jehovah's Witnesses as well as people who have left other high-control religions for over twenty years. I asked her what is unique about ex-Jehovah's Witnesses, and she told me, "They win the prize for shunning. No other group goes that far." She went on tell me a story about a client of hers whose mother would not allow her in

her home after she decided to leave the Watchtower Society. Dr. Winell said that because of the severity of the shunning that ex-Jehovah's Witnesses are subjected to by their families and friends, they are more likely to return to activity in the organization, which is very rare in people leaving other religions. Dr. Winell also emphasized that because of the doctrine of Armageddon occurring soon, many ex-Jehovah's Witnesses will have phobia or PTSD-like symptoms, including nightmares or anxiety attacks, even though they do not intellectually believe in this doctrine anymore, because many were often taught as children to fear Armageddon (M. Winell, personal communication, April 17, 2013).

I asked Dr. Winell about common misconceptions that counselors may have about ex-Jehovah's Witnesses, and she told me that uninformed counselors are likely to do more harm than good because of the unique challenges of this population. She said that she has become aware that many counselors will attempt to use spirituality as a counseling method, or try to reframe the ex-Jehovah's Witness concept of God as a loving god. Dr. Winell stated this is the wrong approach, because the religion should be viewed as a source of trauma in this case. She explained that many counselors fail to understand the gravity of what ex-Jehovah's Witnesses are experiencing, and used the metaphor of finding out Santa Claus is not real, expecting a person to be able to quickly recover and move on with their lives without much intervention, when in reality the person has a lot of recovery to go through (M. Winell, personal communication, April 17, 2013).

I then asked Dr. Winell about her perspective on the online community I visited, Jehovah's Witness Recovery, and the similar online communities for other religions. Dr. Winell joked that "the internet is where religions go to die," explaining that since the internet has become widely available, she has seen a dramatic increase in people researching their churches

online and subsequently leaving them, and seeking support through Journey Free. She offered her opinion that the forum websites offer support for people in that they see they are not alone in their experience in losing their faith, but they lack the help and recovery necessary to truly heal, which is the mission and purpose of Journey Free (M. Winell, personal communication, April 17, 2013).

Dr. Winell recommended I refer to her book, "Leaving the Fold" for more information on her method for how to help ex-Jehovah's Witnesses recover. She has defined the experience as Religious Trauma Syndrome and expressed surprise that no other books have been published on the subject as many people suffer from serious anxiety and depression following leaving a high-control religion. I asked why she thought this had not gained more attention, and she explained that our society's attitude toward religion is very sacred, and it is still considered taboo to criticize religion or consider it to be harmful in any way. Dr. Winell clarified that she does not believe all religions are harmful, but that in some cases, extremely dogmatic religious beliefs can become harmful, and for those trying to leave a religion, if the belief system proscribes damaging families and extreme guilt to the point of depression and phobic reactions, one could consider the religion harmful (M. Winell, personal communication, April 17, 2013).

My view of Journey Free as an organization is positive. I am impressed that Dr. Winell and the small group of psychologists she works with have taken the steps necessary to make their organization as accessible as possible to an international group of diverse people, including ex-Jehovah's Witnesses, who are in need of specialized counseling services and support. The online group forum and webinars are a more affordable option for those who cannot pay for individual coaching or therapy, and some of the weekend retreat content has been filmed and made available online for free. I was also impressed that Dr. Winell asked for my input at a later time

about the Mormon culture, as she works with ex-Mormon clients, which demonstrated to me that she is aware of her need to continually learn about other cultures to be a multicultural practitioner. The website [www.JourneyFree.org](http://www.JourneyFree.org) also includes information about alternate spiritual ideas, addressing the idea of atheism and agnosticism, which can be helpful for an ex-Jehovah's Witness in exploring a new worldview, which is where many in this population find themselves. Overall, Journey Free offers a needed set of services for ex-Jehovah's Witnesses that is sensitive to varied economic statuses. One improvement I would like to see would be services made available in other languages, or at least written materials available in other languages, as there are likely ex-Jehovah's Witnesses who would feel more comfortable reading these materials in their native language. While it is somewhat implied by the non-religious standpoint of the website, it would also be helpful for there to be a symbol or picture indicating support or welcoming of the LGBTQ community on the home page of the website, especially as ex-Jehovah's Witnesses are going to be especially weary of bringing up the topic of their sexuality and would need to be assured that Journey Free is a safe space for this.

### **Final Reflections**

I am amazed that I was able to speak to people from all over the world while sitting at my desk this semester, and learn so much about a community that is so invisible. I have probably met several ex-Jehovah's Witnesses in my life, but because they are not an visually-identifiable group, I would have never known it. The internet has both increased the size of this group by making information more available to people who are having doubts and has brought people together to give each other support. While I anticipated hearing similar stories to my own because of my journey away from the Mormon church, I was surprised to hear about the differences between the cultures, particularly the shunning practices the Jehovah's Witnesses

will engage in when a person leaves the organization. Despite the amount of pain that many people communicated through the Jehovah's Witness Recovery forum, they were very welcoming to me, valued my input and my ideas, and did not reject me for not being an ex-Jehovah's Witness, as I had been afraid of. I learned even more about the individual experience of recreating one's life and exploring a lifestyle through talking with Linda and Molly, who had come from different expressions of practicing their faith, but ultimately ended up having similar struggle regarding personal experiences and relationship problems. Talking with Dr. Winell was very informative, as I had fallen into the trap of believing I could consider myself an expert on people leaving fundamental religions because I am in that category, but she was able to give me new insights on ex-Jehovah's Witnesses unique struggles and how to approach them as a competent practitioner.

Although I started out expecting to find only subtle differences between my own experience and those of ex-Jehovah's Witnesses, I am glad to have had the experience of stepping outside my comfort zone and realizing that even if there are many similarities, the differences are important and should not be overlooked. I can see how this same concept should be applied in other similar cultures, such as different Hispanic cultures or other similar religions, where a practitioner may feel that because he or she understands one culture, they are competent to counsel someone from a similar culture without doing sufficient research into the differences. I understand now that even if a culture appears to be almost identical to one's own on the surface, it is important to understand what the differences are in order to provide truly competent multicultural services.

## References

- Diener, E., Tay, L., & Myers, D. G. (2011). The religion paradox: if religion makes people happy, why are so many dropping out? *Journal of personality and social psychology, 101*(6), 1278–90. doi:10.1037/a0024402
- Jindra, I. W. (2008). Religious Stage Development Among Converts to Different Religious Groups. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion, 18*(3), 195–215. doi:10.1080/10508610802115768
- Jehovah's Witness Recovery. (n.d.) Retrieved from [www.jehovahswitnessrecovery.com](http://www.jehovahswitnessrecovery.com)
- Winell, M. (2013). About Us. Retrieved from [www.journeyfree.org](http://www.journeyfree.org)
- Muramoto, O. (2013). Bioethical Aspects Of The Recent Changes In The Policy Of Refusal Of Blood By Jehovah's Witnesses. *British Medical Journal, 3222*(7277), 37–39.
- Pew Research Center. (2012). “ Nones ” on the Rise : One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation, (202).
- Scheitle, C. P., & Adamczyk, A. (2010). High-cost religion, religious switching, and health. *Journal of health and social behavior, 51*(3), 325–42. doi:10.1177/0022146510378236

**Appendix A: Individual Interview Questions**

Name, age, and location

Were you born in the church or did you convert?

Are you married?

Do you have children?

How long ago did you leave the organization?

What caused you to leave?

What is your relationship like with your immediate and extended family?

Do you celebrate holidays now?

What are your current beliefs and/or spiritual practices?

What is your attitude toward counseling?

What is your attitude toward education and/or pursuing a career?

What is your current cultural identity?

What current issues are you still dealing with related to your leaving the church?

How much activity do you engage in on the ex-JW forums, or engage in activities in person with other ex-JW's?

### **Appendix B: Practitioner Interview Questions**

How long have you worked with ex-Jehovah's Witnesses?

What services do you provide to them?

Do you participate on Jehovah's Witness Recovery or other online forums?

Do you have ex-JW's in your online support group?

What is unique about ex-Jehovah's Witnesses? What are their challenges and strengths?

What are some common misconceptions counselors have in working with this population?

How has this population changed with the increased availability of the internet?

Why do you think this population is so hidden or misunderstood?