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"To Thine Own Self be True:"

A Narrative Analysis of Social Group Disengagement and Associated Identity Implications

By

Catherine de Boer

(MSW, Wilfrid Laurier University, 1998)

Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty of Social Work
In partial fulfilment of the requirements
For the Doctor of Philosophy degree
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2007

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of individuals who had voluntarily disengaged from social groups that had once been central to their self-understandings. Theoretical underpinnings of the study proceeded from the distinction made by social psychologists between personal identity, self-definitions derived from an understanding of one's self as unique, and social identity, self-definitions derived from an understanding and identification of one's self as a member of social groups. The overarching aims were to: 1) determine if a disengagement process exists, and if so, to discover its defining characteristics and phenomenological aspects; 2) describe the shifts in personal and social identity that accompany a disengagement process; and 3) consider the implications for direct social work practice.

Two in-depth audio-recorded interviews were conducted with sixteen participants (9 females, 6 males, and 1 transgendered individual) who disengaged from a total of 9 different types of social groups (e.g., occupational groups, religious groups, territorial socio-economic groups, sexual orientation groups, gender groups, and extremist groups). Interview transcripts were examined using narrative analysis with particular attention paid to the revelatory and constructive relationship between the disengagement stories and the identity of the participants.

The findings of this study suggest that social group disengagement is a definable social process, one that can be mapped using a three phase, nine stage model. Disengagement is the product of mounting feelings of incongruence between one's personal and social identity, with the individual, in the end, deciding to privilege personal identity over social identity. The results of this study speak to the indomitable nature of

the self to develop and the painful and destructive ramifications that occur when living with high levels of personal and social identity incongruence. An argument is made that social work, with its person-in-environment focus, is a profession uniquely suited to helping individuals who are disengaging from social groups. Guidelines for direct social work practice are presented.

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This research would not have been possible without the contributions of the sixteen study participants, who patiently sat down with me and told me their disengagement stories in all their richness and complexity. I have tried to honour these stories and the spirit in which they were entrusted to me. I have spent a great deal of time with these stories over the past few years and I am grateful they have been such good company.

I wish to thank all the individuals who have positively shaped me as a social worker and an academic. Specific to my years in direct social work practice, I wish to thank Linda Gray, Ann Schneider, Chris Willette, and Noreen Steinacher. Positive academic influences include Orm Stanton, John H. C. Neeb, and Brian Peckham. Special mention goes to Judith Levene, who encouraged me to apply to the Ph.D. program and served as the Chair of my comprehensive committee, and to Gary Cameron, who gave me numerous opportunities to research and publish, teaching me invaluable things along the way. I wish to thank Nick Coady, the Chair of my dissertation committee and my committee members, Carol Stalker, Sarah Maiter, and Mark Pancer. All the horror stories I have heard about dissertation committees could not have been further from my experience. I thank you for making my doctoral studies so enjoyable and (relatively) painless.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

This is how we live, forever
Taking our leave.
-- RAINER MARIA RILKE, The Duino Elegies: The Eighth Elegy

A professional football player quits the "game" at the peak of his career. A lawyer takes an early retirement. A woman leaves the religious community she has been a member of since birth. A young adult immigrates to Canada. An outlaw biker leaves the brotherhood. A man leaves his wife of fifteen years to move in with his gay partner. An individual undergoes a sex change operation. A young man moves off the multi-generational family farm to study medicine.

What do these vignettes have in common? In each vignette an individual "voluntarily" leaves a social group, whether that be a football team, the practice of law, a religious community, a homeland, a family, or a way of life. Membership is terminated in a social group that was once central to identity and to which significant emotional attachment was held. How do those who have voluntarily participated in social group disengagement experience the process? How does disengagement impact on the individual's sense of self? How is identity equilibrium restored? What are the outcomes of the process? What roles do others play in aiding or hindering the process and outcome? What can we as social workers learn about the process? How can we help facilitate a good outcome? These are the broad questions this study attempted to answer.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of voluntary social group disengagement, specifically the experiences of those who have disengaged from social

groups of significance. The overarching aim was to develop an understanding of how these individuals negotiated the transition and its accompanying shifts in self-understanding. Theoretical underpinnings of the study proceeded from the distinction made by social psychologists between *personal identity*, self-definitions derived from an understanding of one's self as unique and *social identity*, self-definitions derived from an understanding and identification of one's self as a member of social groups. It has long been understood that social connections are primary constituents in identity development (Bion, 1952; Cooley, 1902; Erikson, 1968; Freud, 1921/1991; Hogg & Abrams, 1998; Kohut, 1985; Mead, 1934/1962; Tajfel, 1972). This study was based on the assumption that social connections, including connections to social groups, are essential to identity formation and hence social group disengagement has identity implications. This study focused on the following topics or themes:

1. **Process** – What did the participants' stories reveal about the process of disengagement? How was the process experienced? Was there evidence of any patterns, sequential experiences, sets of circumstances, or social and psychological variables that could be considered "characteristic" of a disengagement process? What meaning or meanings were derived from the process?
2. **Identity** – What insights were gained with respect to the relationship between personal and social identity? What did these stories reveal about the experience of identity formation or transformation? How were changes in self-understandings understood and negotiated? Did self-understandings related to

the past social group membership become part of their current self-understandings?

3. **Practice Implications** – What were the outcomes for these individuals who left social groups? What variables contributed to a successful or unsuccessful outcome? What are the implications for direct social work practice?

Statement of the Problem

"Few ideas are both as weighty and as slippery as the notion of the self" (Seigel, 2005, p.3). Thus begins the historian Jerrold Seigel's (2005) massive tome entitled *The Idea of the Self.* Seigel argues that the nature and meaning of the self is intensely debated in the modern West, "the locale in which individuality has been the most fervently celebrated and the most ardently denounced" (p. 3). Seigel (2005) argues, "the modern West has made the debate about selfhood and individuality a central – perhaps the central question of – its collective attempts at self-definition" (p. 4). It seems counter intuitive that a "collective identity" could be forged from the value and importance placed on the individual and selfhood, yet this may indeed be the case. For as Seigel (2005) explains, much of the modern West is also the story of the

> ways people have found to call all these claims for individual independence into question, to transcend mere selves by fusing them with communities, nations, classes, or cultures, or humble them by trumpeting their radical dependency on historical processes, cosmic forces, biological drives, fundamental ontologies, discursive regimes, or semiotic systems (p. 4).

Whether one agrees with Seigel or not, his work on the history of the idea of the self is a fitting introduction to a study on social group disengagement. Seigel's work draws our attention to two points central to this study. First, understandings and questions pertaining to the self are *contextual* – they are rooted in historical time and space and

prevailing theoretical and philosophical paradigms. The questions I explore in this dissertation, my method of data analysis (narrative analysis), and ultimately the answers I derive are positioned in my Western location at the dawn of the twenty-first century and can be best understood within a postmodernist paradigm. These parameters need to be acknowledged.

Second, the self is comprised of several seemingly contradictory *dimensions* – the self and the relation of that self to others in the "fusion of selves" that become communities or social groups. Understanding the self, then, is neither a solitary nor an exclusively individual exercise. Others shape and create our self. Others teach us about who we are. Thus, as Seigel (2005) argues, "selfhood matters to us as individuals and as social creatures, shaping our personal existence and our relations with those whose lives we somehow share" (p. 3).

Social group disengagement is a common social phenomenon of our current age. We change jobs, marriages, geographic locations, and religious affiliations at a more frequent rate than our ancestors. Advances in transportation and communication technology have increased both our physical mobility and our rates of disengagement. According to the latest census reports by *Statistics Canada* (2002), 18.4 % of all Canadians, close to 5 ½ million people, were "foreign-born" and immigrants to Canada (Statistics Canada, 2002a, 2002b). Although it is uncertain how many of these individuals voluntarily left their homelands compared to individuals who were forced to leave due to war, natural disaster, and political upheaval, it seems significant that almost 1 in 6 Canadians have experienced a disengagement experience of some sort related to immigration and acculturation. As Ebaugh (1988) predicted, "most of us today will make

at least one major shift in our lives which we consider central to who we are" (p. xiii). Alcock, Carment, & Sadava (1998) speculated that "many of the most important changes in our lives result when we change groups" (p. 326).

Côte & Levine (2002) suggest the basis of human identity is "having a sense of self-definition rooted in a community of others" (p. 2). They likewise contend that our social identities (i.e., the senses of self we derive from our affiliation with others) are becoming more transitory and unstable, a phenomenon they attribute to the high levels of individual choice that confront us in our current western society.

> For most of human history, identity formation was not a matter of individual choice and negotiation, so problems associated with these activities were not common. Accordingly, in this historical sense, humans have not been accustomed to living in societies where they are continually confronted with high levels of choice over fundamental matters of personal meaning (Côte & Levine, 2002, p. 1).

It could be argued that social group disengagement is one of the bi-products of living with high levels of individual choice. Certainly such things as global travel, satellite communications and television, and the World Wide Web have increased our awareness of social group alternatives.

Côte & Levine (2002) argue that high levels of personal choice have led to a "diminishing consensus regarding traditional and contemporary norms" (p. 1). This may be true but we need to guard against unduly glorifying the past and lamenting the current state of affairs. "Traditional norms" were undoubtedly reproachable for some, and "consensus" led to marginal but nevertheless important voices going unheard (Mill, 1859/1984). However, the fact remains times have changed. The stable and structured society, despite its potential flaws, was helpful in identity formation and maintenance. Hence, its erosion has identity implications.

Erikson's (1968) pioneering work on identity formation underscores this point. As Adams (1992) explains:

> Erikson views individual development as occurring within a social context where societal expectations require a selection from available choices, with the individual, in turn needing confirmation of choices and community acceptance. (p. 2).

The challenge with respect to identity formation and transformation in our current age is two-fold. Becoming oneself is complicated by the range and variety of options available on the identity smorgasbord. It may be harder now to "choose". Likewise it may be difficult to find a stable community that can accept and confirm these choices. Perhaps these challenges are becoming a normative state of affairs yet we remain reliant on identity theories that may not have envisioned such challenges. As a result we need to advance our knowledge in these areas. Certainly the work of Côte & Levine (2002) from a social psychological perspective is a sizable effort in pursuit of this end. Similarly, the results of this research study are valuable and timely contributions.

Unless we live a solitary existence on some uninhabited island, belonging to social groups will remain a large constituent of our self-understandings. We are social beings and for the most part we derive enjoyment, comfort, and a sense of belonging from our social group memberships. But we can also rail against them. The psychoanalyst Bion (1952) wrote, "the individual is a group animal at war, both with the group and with those aspects of his personality that constitute his groupishness" (p. 238). According to Bion (1952), the tension between the individual and the group is a manifestation of the individual's internal conflict to both belong and preserve distinctiveness. Ganzarain (1989), an object relations group therapist, observed that members in a group often struggle with the seemingly incongruous fears of being smothered and abandoned. This

research will provide some insight into how these tensions between belonging and leaving are negotiated. In particular, this study will increase our knowledge of the identity-based factors that incite some individuals to choose disengagement over continued membership.

Social groups are not benign. They can be positive and affirming. They can support our individual self-understandings and allow us to become who we are. But they can also bind and chafe. Worse yet, they can be destructive and identity destroying. Many of the participants in this study spoke about how their former social groups had failed them and hurt them in significant and profound ways. In situations such as these, social group disengagement was an act of courage in service of the self. Several participants indicated had they not left their social group, they would now be dead. For these individuals, disengagement was a matter of life and death. Thus, it is imperative that we as social workers learn as much as we can about disengagement experiences. We need to listen to the stories of those who have gone through the process and learn from them. This is especially important given evidence that the more deliberate and aware the individual is of the disengagement process, the greater likelihood of a positive outcome (Ebaugh, 1988; Levine, 1984).

Definitions of Key Terms

Social Group

To understand the term "social group" one must first understand two social processes: categorization and self-identification. *Categorization* refers to the manner whereby individuals impose order and significance on the chaos of their social worlds by placing people into general classes or categories. Rather than view each person and social

interaction in a new and individualized way, individuals tend to place others into established categories, like friend, colleague, male/female, client, teenager, and Maple Leaf's fan, to name a few (Alcock et al., 1998). *Self-identification* is the process whereby we "identify" ourselves as being like some people and different from others. Self-identification is essentially self-categorization. We place ourselves into established categories. "I am a friend." "I am a female." "I am a Maple Leaf's fan".

Social groups are distinguishable from social categories (Tajfel, 1982). Whereas a category refers to "an objective collection of people as defined by an outsider in terms of some common characteristic" (Turner & Reynolds, 2001, p. 137), social groups involve a collection of people who are emotionally invested in their group membership and are influenced by them. For example, singular characteristics as mundane as sharing space (e.g., waiting in the same line at the ATM machine), or sharing a preference (e.g., preferring navy over burgundy), are sufficient producers of social categories. Yet, it is reasonable to assume that few people feel a sense of kinship with their fellow "navy lovers" or are emotionally attached to other ATM users. Although these are social categories, they are not deemed to be important descriptors of others or ourselves.

Social groups, then, are "special categor[ies] of people distinguished by much more than mere similarities" (Alcock et al., 1998, p. 326). A category becomes a social group when meaning and importance become attached to it. Ultimately social groups provide members with an identification of themselves in social terms. Membership in social groups assists individuals in determining their place in society and subsequently how to act or behave. For example, my understanding of myself and the understanding others have of me are determined (in part) by my membership in the "female" social

group. Certain behaviours are deemed appropriate based on my female group membership, as well as its confluence with my other social group memberships, such as those related to my ethnicity, nationality, and socio-economic status. This study will focus on disengagement from social groups rather than social categories.

At any given time we belong to numerous social groups but not all of these group memberships are salient at the same time or of equal importance to us. Some memberships profoundly affect how we understand ourselves (e.g., gender, culture, ethnicity, religion, and class). Others, by contrast, seem less significant. This study will focus specifically on disengagement from social groups of significance. Bearing in mind that measures of significance are largely subjective, for the purposes of this study several characteristics of membership must be evident before the social groups can be considered significant (see also the section entitled, Sample Criteria, below). First, the individual must have a conscious understanding of membership. He or she must identify as having once been a member of the group. Usually, although not necessarily, others would have likewise identified the individual as part of the group and would have interacted with him or her accordingly.

Second, membership in the group must have reflected and supported the individual's sense of who they were. Membership would have been a descriptor, an adjective used to describe themselves (e.g., "I am Canadian," "I am a heterosexual," "I am a mother").

Third, the individual must have exhibited ways of relating to others or specific behavioural patterns typical of members of that social group. For example, these could have been formal patterns of relating as evidenced in religious communities and other

organizations (e.g., sport's teams, clubs, places or employment), or they could be informal patterns of relating as evidenced in families and circles of friends. The behaviours could include such things as wearing certain types of clothing, having certain mannerisms, and performing specific rituals.

Fourth, leaving the social group of significance must have been a momentous happening. Membership was once considered important to the individual, possibly even central to how they understood themselves and their place in the world. Leaving a social group of significance, although it may even have been "voluntary" and perhaps may ultimately lead to a positive outcome can shake both one's internal and social worlds.

It needs to be reiterated that the measure of significance attributed to membership in the social group, as well as the degree of rupture experienced during disengagement, will ultimately be subjective and case-specific. For example, some individuals can leave a social group and feel nurtured and supported. Others can leave that same group and lose everything. Hence this study will not be concerned with specific social groups, predetermined by the researcher to be "social groups of significance." Rather, the study will focus on the phenomenon of disengagement from social groups of significance that have been thus defined by the study participants themselves.

Disengagement

I have selected to use the term "disengagement" to describe leaving processes because it is a term that can embrace a variety of leavings and outcomes, and is not specific to certain types of social groups. As Corsini (2002) observed, disengagement is a broad term that denotes both a sociological and psychological process. The use of the

term "disengagement," then, is consistent with the other attempts made in this study to avert either an individual or group bias.

This study will be limited to gaining an understanding of voluntary disengagement from the rights and obligations of membership of the social group. I acknowledge that disengagement from a social group may not always be voluntary and that voluntary and involuntary disengagement are not dichotomous variables. There is a range of control and freedom inherent in disengagement and most leavings evidence elements of both. However, this study will focus on the voluntary end of the continuum. Post disengagement the previous stable pattern of interacting with fellow group members will have been ruptured. Individuals will have ceased to think of themselves or identify themselves as members of the social group. They will not use group membership as a descriptor of themselves, although they may indicate past affiliation by describing themselves as an "ex-member" (e.g., an ex-Catholic) or using the group name with hyphenation (e.g., Mexican-Canadian, male-to-female transsexual). Disengagement will have involved a redefinition of one's self and one's relationships and comprehensive changes to the individual's behaviour, values, ideas, and relationships.

CHAPTER 2

Theoretical and Empirical Underpinnings

All research is a gamble and we have to put our money on the horses we happen to fancy. Out of a big field my own inclination leads me back to crossbreds.
--JOHN BOWLBY, The Making and Breaking of Affectional Bonds

Overview of the Problem and the Inherent Challenges

When Ebaugh (1988) decided to study the disengagement of nuns from their religious cloister, she was surprised by how little literature was available about the process. Her explorations led her to conclude there is a "lack of general theory in this area" due to "academic sub-specializations" (p. 14). She noted, somewhat tongue in cheek, that the social sciences have "developed" and "matured" beyond the study of the "nuts and bolts of social life" and in the process "some very basic and fundamental realities that cut across disciplines and subspecialties" (p.14-15) have been overlooked. Ebaugh (1988) argued that "role exit," (a process she considers to be more comprehensive than but inclusive of social group disengagement) is such a "reality, a generic social process (see Prus, 1987) that is as fundamental to social life as socialization, social interaction, and social conflict" (p. 15). Since the phenomenon of social group disengagement cuts across disciplines, the theoretical underpinnings of a study on the subject need to reflect this breadth.

Many social theorists, like Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) in his book *The Leviathan*, are primarily interested in social cohesion. They try to understand how people of diverse backgrounds, interests, temperaments, values, and ideology can come together to form social groups. Their underlying question is not, "Why do some individual's leave social groups?" but rather, "Why do people form social groups or join existing social

groups at all?" These theorists are intrigued with socialization or institutionalization, a process whereby individuals are socialized to become accepted members of their communities, whether those be small social groups or society at large. Examples of such intrigue are evident in the theories of the American sociologist Talcott Parsons (1902-1979), particularly functionalist theory, in the socio-psychological understandings of society presented by C. H. Cooley (1864-1929), and the writings of the sociologist and social psychologist George H. Mead (1863-1931).

When theorists find it intriguing that people come together at all to form social groups, they can relegate to a minor or secondary interest the fact that not everyone can or desires to maintain social group memberships (Edgerton, 1978; Ebaugh, 1988). However, joining and maintaining social group memberships is one side of a dialectic; the other being the leaving or disengagement process. Yet the literature is disproportionately weighted on the side of the "joinings" and relatively silent about disengagement. For example, the focus in the acculturation literature has been on the adaptation processes of individuals and their cultural groups to the majority or host culture and not on how these same individuals and cultural groups are simultaneously (and at times reluctantly) disengaging from their homelands and traditional cultures (Berry, 1990, 1999; Phinney, 1990). This silence becomes problematic when disengagement is from social groups that once were or still remain central to an individual's identity, such as gender groups, sexual orientation groups, and families.

One of the fundamental challenges inherent in this study is maintaining a focus on disengagement. As Ebaugh (1988) argues, social group disengagement is "unique and distinguishable from socialization" (p.8) and what we know of socialization will prove

inadequate for a thorough understanding of disengagement. Hence, this study will attempt a singular in-depth probe of social group disengagement. This study is predicated on Ebaugh's (1988) contention that social group disengagement is not some "mirror opposite of socialization" but is a "unique social process" (p.7) deserving of study in its own right. To be clear, I am not suggesting that disengagement "stands alone". I would argue, in fact, that social processes seldom do. Often, as the acculturation process reveals, disengagement and engagement exist simultaneously. What I am suggesting, is that our knowledge of disengagement may have been compromised by the Hobbesian assumptions dominant in the literature that suggest (a) disengagement is of minor importance compared to engagement, and (b) what we know of engagement helps us understand disengagement.

Keeping disengagement as the primary subject of inquiry is but one of the challenges associated with this project. The other and perhaps more difficult challenge is, to use the words of Reicher (1987), to study disengagement without having "either the group disappearing into the individual or the individual disappearing into the group" (p. 172). Theories that can advance understanding of social group disengagement fall along a continuum between those that evidence an individualized approach and those that evidence a sociological approach. These are *a priori* distinctions. Neither exist in a "pure" form and each evidences at least some aspect of the other. However, knowledge of the theories which approach the extreme ends of the continuum is necessary to understand both the placement of this research within the current theoretical and empirical landscape and the fundamental assumptions, specifically around identity, which ground this project.

Theoretical Underpinnings With Respect to Social Groups

Individualized Approach to the Study of Social Groups

The individualized approach to the study of social groups is characterized by the position that nothing is qualitatively different between individuals and groups (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). The quintessential example of such an approach is Freud's (1921/1999) classical psychoanalytic group theory. It was first articulated in his book *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* and later advanced by Bion (1952, 1970). Freud sought to understand social groups by viewing them through the lens of psychoanalytic thinking. Freud's interest in social groups was deeply rooted in his desire to understand the individual and he argued that groups could be largely understood by understanding the human mind. Despite Freud's acknowledgment that groups have a "continuity independent of the individual," he believed that the group "inevitably expressed itself *through* the individual" (Munroe, 1967, p. 133).

The individualized approach reduced social relations to intrapsychic understandings. For Freud (1921/1999) social groups could be understood through the application of concepts from his classic drive theory, specifically: (a) *libido*, believed to be the psychic energy that held group members together and bound them to the group itself, and (b) the leader of the group functioning as the *ego ideal* for members. In the case of leaderless groups, the common beliefs and values of the group became the ego ideal, essentially the model of what members wish to be.

Other examples of individualized approaches include object relations theory (Ganzarain, 1989) and Kohut's (1985) self psychology. In the former, groups are viewed as the "good enough" or "not good enough" object to the individual's subject, and in the

latter groups are selfobjects (i.e., the experience of another as part of the self) for the individual members. In all cases, the emphasis is on the individual and the understanding that social groups manifest and function to satisfy the psychological needs of individual group members.

Sociological Approach to the Study of Social Groups

The sociological approach to the study of social groups is characterized by the position that there is something substantively different between individuals and groups. Although individuals are of interest to sociologists they are not viewed as spontaneous, free or autonomous beings. It is acknowledged that they can exercise some independence and freedoms but ultimately they are constrained by social situations within which they are placed (Stones, 1998). Lewin's (1951) notion that the group is more than the sum of its parts embodies the sociological view that groups have a transcendent quality that is "more" or different than the sum nature of the individuals comprising it (see Nichols & Schwartz, 2001, p. 8-9).

Some of the first to recognize the difference between individuals and groups were Freud's contemporaries, the social theorists Le Bon (1895/2002), Trotter (1916), and McDougall (1927/1939). They observed that people act differently in groups than on their own. It is indeed ironic that Freud's psychoanalytic group theory drew heavily on, but ultimately stood in sharp contrast to Le Bon's (1985/2002), *The Crowd: The Popular Mind.*

Perhaps one of the "purest" examples of a sociological approach was advanced by Durkheim (1895/1981). Durkheim was influenced by Auguste Comte. Comte recognized society as having a *sui generis* nature, a reality of its own that is not reducible to the

individuals comprising it. According to Durkheim, society is made up of a number of parts added to each other. These parts include individuals but also interactions between individuals, social structures and situations. Durkheim argued,

> Undoubtedly no collective entity can be produced if there are no individual consciousnesses: this is a necessary but not a sufficient condition. In addition these consciousnesses must be associated and combined, but combined in a certain way. It is from this combination that social life arises and consequently it is this combination which explains it. By aggregating together, by interpenetrating, by fusing together, individuals give birth to a being, psychical if you will, but one that constitutes a psychical individuality of a new kind . . . The group thinks, feels, acts entirely differently from the way its members would if they were isolated (p. 129).

The pinnacle of Durkheim's argument lies in his comment, "If we therefore begin by studying [group] members separately, we will understand nothing about what is taking place in the group . . . consequently every time a social phenomenon is directly explained by a psychological phenomenon, we may rest assured that the explanation is false" (p. 129).

Discovering the Middle of the Continuum

Thus, by the early part of the twentieth century the lines seemed drawn. Groups were understood as either substantively the same as the individuals comprising them or as substantively different. Entry into the inquiry was either the study of the individual or the study of the group. Individuals were viewed as either the sole agent in social relations or players acting out a script on the stage of life. Yet, constant in this debate, were theorists who refused to pit the intrapsychic and intersubjective worlds of the individual against the external world of the group. These theorists, largely from the fields of developmental psychology and social psychology seemed comfortable embracing aspects of both the individualized and socialized approaches. Aspects of these theories, particularly

Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, social identity theory and its close relative social categorization theory are well suited to providing the theoretical foundation for a study on social group disengagement. (Relevant aspects of these theories will be reviewed later on in this chapter.) They can illuminate the interplay between the group and the individual that occurs during the disengagement process. Also, with the focus placed equally on the individual-based and group-based aspects of identity, these theories are particularly suited to a study on social group disengagement which is a process that coincides with an identity flux associated with understandings of "we" and "me" emerging or being transformed.

Theoretical Underpinnings With Respect to Identity

What is identity? How is our identity formed and how does it change over time? How do we come to know who we are? These questions have interested academics in disciplines as diverse as anthropology, psychology, neuroscience, philosophy, psychoanalysis, religion, sociology, and social work. As Kroeger (2000) maintains, "identity is a complex entity" and "numerous perspectives have been taken in an effort to define its dimensions" (p.4). Due to the vagueness and complexity associated with the concept of identity, the perspectives that inform research need to be made explicit.

Definition of Identity and the Self

It is common for the terms "identity" and "self" to be used interchangeably in the literature. Fine distinctions may exist between the two, however, even among identity theorists the terms are used inconsistently (Kroeger, 2000). Lapsley and Power (1988) argue that the differentiation of these terms has not been helpful in advancing knowledge

and viewing them as distinct concepts has served little purpose. In keeping with these views, in this study the terms "identity" and "self" will be used interchangeably.

Most simply, identity or the self is "one's idea of who one is, how one defines oneself" (Marcia, 1993, p. 3). Although simplicity has its advantages, the definition of the self provided by Seigel (2005) is more satisfying as it elaborates on the seemingly contradictory but ultimately rich dimensions of the self that have proved relevant to this study, namely, the self as consisting of both individual and group aspects, the self as both stable and dynamic, and finally the self as serving an integrative function "draw[ing] parts of our existence together" (p. 3) to achieve authenticity and consistency. Seigel's (2005) definition is as follows:

> By "self" we commonly mean the particular being any person is, whatever it is about each of us that distinguishes you or me from others, draws the parts of our existence together, persists through changes, or opens the way to becoming who we might or should be . . . selfhood thus matters to us both as individuals and as social creatures, shaping our personal existence and our relations with those whose lives we somehow share (p. 3).

Personal and Social Dimensions of Identity

As I indicated in Chapter 1, social identity theorists make the distinction between *personal identity*, "the unique aspects of the individual's internal and private self-definition" and *social identity*, the "group based aspects of the individual's self-definition, derived from membership in and identification with social groups" (Baron, Byrne, & Watson, 2001, p. 136). Together these two aspects of identity combine to form an overall sense of self or self-concept (Byrne & Shavelson, 1996; Roberts & Donahue, 1994).

The psychoanalyst Erikson (1968) acknowledged these two aspects of identity when he spoke about the "silent doings of ego synthesis" (p. 116), and the "sense of inner

solidarity with the ideals and values of a significant social group" (Kroeger, 2000, p. 9). Similar to the social psychologists mentioned above, Erikson (1968) understood these two elements of identity as coming together to form a "configuration" (p. 163) or "integrated psychic structure" (Adams, 1992, p. 1).

Although most theorists tend to agree that identity is comprised of these two elements, the primacy that one lends to either social or personal identity largely corresponds to where the theorist (or discipline he/she represents) is located on the individualized-sociological continuum mentioned earlier. For example, psychoanalysts, ego-psychologists, object relations theorists, and self-psychologists tend to emphasize personal identity, whereas sociologists tend to emphasize social identity. Given the premise of the individualized view that no substantive difference exists between individuals and groups, theorists on this end of the continuum tend to incorporate biological and social factors into their theories with greater ease than the theorists on the sociological end can incorporate individualized factors into their theories. For example, Freud (1921/1999) acknowledged that "only rarely and under exceptional conditions is individual psychology in a position to disregard the relations of this individual to others" (p. 99). In contrast, the German philosopher and sociologist Simmel (1858-1918) argued that personal identity is not derived from any core self or inherent uniqueness. Rather, what gives an individual a distinctive identity is his/her unique combination of group affiliations. Simmel (1955, p. 140) describes it in the following way:

> The groups with which the individual is affiliated constitute a system of coordinates, as it were, such that each new group with which he becomes affiliated circumscribes him more exactly and more unambiguously ... the larger the number of groups to which an individual belongs, the more improbable it is that other persons will exhibit the same combination of group-affiliations, that these particular groups will "intersect" once again (in a second individual).

Ellemers (2002), frustrated by the time and energy spent on arguing which element of identity should be considered primary, suggested a "more fruitful approach [would be] to specify the conditions under which one is likely to take precedence over the other and with what effect" (p. 3). A persistent focus of research originating from social identity theory and self categorization theory has been on the transition from personal identity to social identity (Turner, 1982; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). This transition "from unique individual to group member" has been referred to as the "depersonalization" process (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995 p. 261). The term depersonalization does not connote a negative process akin to "dehumanization" or "deindividuation." Rather the term refers to a process whereby an individual self-identifies as a member of a social group and subsequently aligns his or her behaviour with the norms and expectations of that group. Depersonalization "transforms individuals into group members and individuality into group behaviour" (Hogg et al., 1995, p. 261).

This study sought to understand the reverse process, when a person individuates and pulls away from the social group; when social identity is diminished by personal identity. This point of inquiry is not without precedence. Tajfel (1981) argued that the group is in the individual as much as the individual is in the group (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Studies on the transition from social to personal identity demonstrate that often what individuals assume to be their unique and distinct characteristics are in fact social identities that have become integrated into their personal identities (Deaux, 1992, 1993; Smith & Henry, 1996). If the process of a member leaving a social group is distinct from the process of a social group leaving the member, it is conceivable that an individual can leave a group psychologically before they do so physically (Abrams, Hinkle, and

Tomlins, 1999). Likewise an individual could eradicate all outward signs of social group membership, adopt an identity as an ex-member of a social group, and yet continue to experience the impacts of past membership on current self-understandings. Ellemers' (2002) work would suggest that in cases such as these the concept of "social identity" needs to be considered as distinct from social group "commitment" (p. 3). These two understandings are related but can operate independently.

My research attempted to disentangle personal from social identity, and social identity from commitment. This study explored the connection between "the individual leaving a group" and the "group leaving the individual". I sought to discern if they were experienced as simultaneous or separate processes. How did ex-members integrate into current understandings of themselves, their past group membership and the social identity it procured?

Stable and Dynamic Dimensions of Identity

The personal and social elements of identity are associated with the "stable" and "dynamic" elements of the self, respectively. Juhasz (1983) contends personal identity "is the unique, individual sense of self that we have all our lives, despite enormous changes in identity through time or space" (p. 289). It is this stable or core self which "transcends, connects, and gives substance to our multiple and ever changing social identities" (p. 289). Likewise, Erikson (1968) described identity as both the experience of self-sameness and continuity over time. We can experience ourselves as having temporal continuity. We are simultaneously aware that we can and do change. The self-concept, the integration of the personal and social understandings of self (described above) is ultimately a "working self-concept" (Markus & Nurius, 1986). As Baron, Byrne, and

Watson (2001) explain, we remain "open to change in response to new experiences, new feedback, new self-relevant information" (p. 124). This research is predicated on the assumption that a relationship exists between social group disengagement and identity formation and/or transformation. How this relationship is experienced and the processes by which it unfolds are key elements of this inquiry.

Social Identity Theory. To understand the stable and dynamic nature of the self using social identity theory, one needs to understand the theory's central concepts: 1) categorization, 2) identification and 3) comparison. *Categorization*, a process whereby individuals impose order and simplification to the chaos of their social worlds by placing people into established categories (Alcock, Carment, & Sadava, 1998; Hogg & Abrams, 1998) and *identification*, a process by which we "identify" ourselves as being like some people and different from others or self-categorization were discussed in Chapter 1. The point I wish to make here is that there are many points of identification between others and ourselves which lead to multiple social group affiliations. As Hogg and Abrams (1998) explain,

> The self-concept comprises the totality of self-descriptions and self-evaluation subjectively available to the individual. It is not just a catalogue of evaluative self-descriptions, it is textured and structured into circumscribed and relatively distinct constellations called *self-identifications* (p. 24).

These "distinct constellations" of self-identifications with specific social groups account for the stable or enduring self.

Self-identifications, however, are not mutually exclusive. For example, one can be a mechanic and an historian, a homosexual and a parent. Self-identifications can be congruent at times and at other times contradictory. For example, it is seemingly

congruent for the self-identified Christian to also belong to a church community, whereas it seems incongruent for the self-identified outdoors man to spend all of his time indoors watching T.V.. Most times when self-identifications are contradictory, we consider the contradictions to be normal, if in fact we notice them at all. According to Hogg and Abrams (1998):

> This is possible because people do not *subjectively* experience the self-concept in its entirety but rather as relatively discrete *self-images* which are dependent on "context." Different times, places, and circumstances render different self-identifications 'salient' self-images. The self is thus enduring and stable, and also responsive to situational or exogenous factors (p. 25).

This response to "situational or exogenous factors" accounts for the dynamic self.

Although a measure of incongruence between self-identifications may be normative, it is conceivable that the roots of social group disengagement may actually lie in these contradictions. Circumstances can arise wherein two contradictory self-identifications are salient and the individual striving for congruency abandons one in favour of the other.

According to social identity theory, individuals derive their sense of self from self-identifying with social groups and also from the status of "their" social group compared to others. This leads us to the third aspect of the theory, *comparison* – a process by which individuals compare and contrast themselves to others. According to Hogg and Abrams (1998), social identity theorists understand society to be comprised of a "heterogeneous collection of social categories, which stand in power and status relations to one another and whose dynamics are subject to the forces of economics and history" (p. 18-19). A strong example of self-worth being connected to group status comes from the field of sports. Hirt, Zillman, Erikson, and Kennedy (1992) discovered

that the self-esteem of ardent sports fans fluctuated according to the wins and losses of "their team".

Essentially, social identity theorists (Hogg & Abrams, 1998; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) claim that an individual's striving for positive self-esteem is translated into a striving for positive group identity. This is achieved in two ways. First, distinctions between the group of which they are a member (in-group) and the groups of which they are not a member (out-groups) are identified. Thereby a group identity is established. Second, the in-group is positively compared with the out-groups, that is, the in-group is seen as superior to the out-groups in various and specific ways. Thereby, a positive group identity is established.

This process of comparison also helps explain the dynamic self. Farsides (1998) suggested that "individual mobility," individuals choosing to change their social group affiliations by moving from a "lower" to a "higher" status group, is an effective way of transforming the self and improving self-esteem. However, Farsides (1998) admits that individual mobility is not always possible especially when there are physical and psychological barriers preventing the move.

Developmental Theories. To understand the stable and dynamic aspects of identity using developmental theories one needs to understand terms that refer to the *processes* by which identity is "formed" and "transformed" throughout the life cycle (Côté & Levine, 1987). Each will be discussed in turn. *Identity formation* is a "stage-specific notion" (Côté & Levine, 1987, p. 276). It has a narrow focus referring to a specific stage in identity development, the stage synonymous with the transition from childhood to adulthood. Freud, in his psychosexual typology of human development,

referred to this stage as the genital stage. It was the final stage, following the oral, anal, phallic, and latency stages, in which adolescents redirected their sexual interests toward others and began to love in a mature way (Atkinson, Atkinson, & Hilgard, 1983). Erikson (1968) based his eight psychosocial stages of individual development on Freud's psychosexual stages. Yet his typology differed from Freud's in that he understood trust, rather than libidinal drives to be the basis of human development and he broadened the focus to include the influence of the social environment (hence *psychosocial* rather than psychosexual stages). Nevertheless, Erikson (1968) also understood identity as "forming" in adolescence after the successful mastery of the "identity versus identity confusion" crisis, stage five of Erikson's eight stages of the psychosocial development. During this stage adolescents integrated or consolidated understandings of their life thus far, their various roles (e.g., child, friend, worker, and student), future plans, societal and cultural values and expectations into a stable self-concept.

Marcia (1966) advanced Erikson's ideas about adolescence being a time for exploration of and a commitment to social roles, values, and ideology. Marcia broadened the "identity versus identity confusion" dichotomy to include four possible identity statuses (identity diffusion, identity foreclosure, identity moratorium, and identity achievement). Marcia developed an identity status paradigm by cross tabulating the dimensions of "exploration" and "commitment". The four statuses produced are considered hierarchical with the final stage of identity achievement being the most mature and complex.

The above-mentioned typologies are foundational to any discussion on identity formation. Freud, Erikson, and Marcia are pioneers in the field of identity and one must

recognize their work. However, it needs to be acknowledged that their understandings of human development held a modernist, andocentric, Eurocentric bias (Côté & Levine, 1987). Consider, for example, that Marcia's identity status paradigm drew heavily on Erikson's (1950/1963) "Reflections on the American Identity," a chapter in his classic text *Childhood and Society,* wherein Erikson argues that choice and individuality, are necessary for identity resolution. These are culturally specific values and not universal criteria for successful identity formation. Also as Côté & Levine (2002) argue, high levels of personal choice are characteristic of late modern Western society, and not of human history as a whole. Moreover, it could be argued that the stage of "adolescence" is in itself a culturally and socially specific phenomenon (Gibbons, 2000).

Identity transformation, on the other hand, is a broader term that refers to the process of identity development beginning from birth and ending in death and includes the identity stage of development. Erikson (1950/1963), for example understood elements of ego identity to "exist in some form" in the psychosocial stages preceding the identity stage (p. 271) and in the stages following the identity stage, the consolidation of identity elements was considered to be constantly transformed in response to social influences and life circumstances (Côté & Levine, 1987). This is an important point because of a tendency in the literature to misunderstand identity development theorists, such as Freud, Erikson, and Marcia, as claiming identity is something that is *achieved.* This assumption is sustained by Marcia's unfortunate use of the term "identity achievement" in his identity status paradigm (Côté & Levine, 1987). Identity is not to be considered an achievement or an inevitable "outcome" of a successful completion of the identity stage.

Rather, identity is to be viewed as dynamic and, even though consolidated, still predisposed to social and circumstantial influences.

Now that I have introduced *what* identity formation and transformation are, I would like to consider various understandings of *how* these processes occur. Freud, followed by Erikson and Marcia understood these processes as be epigenetic. Epigenesis, a term taken from the field of biology, was a reaction to the then prevailing notions of preformation. Preformation and epigenesis relate to pre-modern, 18th century notions of embryonic development (Hubert, 2005). The preformist view was that an individual with all of its parts is contained in the embryo. The embryo comes into existence all at once; all parts together at the same time. According to the performist view, the embryo was considered a microscopic adult, a homunculus that grew bigger in size but remained substantively the same. The epigenetic view, on the other hand, was that the embryo did not contain a fully formed individual but that parts of the individual developed in succession as the need arose. Epigenesists understood the successive development of the embryo to be guided by a formative drive that pushed the organism forward to achieve its potentiality.

Freud's stages of psychosexual development and Erikson's stages of psychosocial development were ground breaking in that they utilized the then current biological theories of human physical development to facilitate understandings of psychological processes. They wondered if identity was preformed, present in its totality from infancy, growing and unfolding with advancing age, or if it formed according to the epigenetic principle, with the inner world of the individual and external influences collaborating to create identity. Freud, followed by Erikson, concluded that identity formation was best-

understood using epigenesis. Whereas Freud privileged the role of intrapsychic factors in the epigenetic process, Erikson tended to view psychological and social factors to be of more equal influence. However, both rejected notions that identity was a formed entity that just needed to be discovered during the life process and instead understood identity as the confluence of inner factors, social influences, circumstances, and human drives which produced or created elements of identity, *not* present earlier.

Erikson (1959/1980) describes his understanding of the epigenetic principle in the following way, "anything that grows has a *ground plan*, and that out of this ground plan the *parts* arise, each part having its *time* of special ascendancy, until all parts have arisen to form a *functioning whole*" (p. 53). He continues,

> ...in the sequence of his most personal experiences the healthy child, given a reasonable amount of guidance can be trusted to obey inner laws of development, laws which create a *succession of potentialities for significant interaction* with those who tend him. While such interaction varies from culture to culture, it must remain within the *proper rate and the proper sequence* which govern the *growth of the personality* as well as that of the organism. Personality can be said to develop according to steps predetermined in the human organism's readiness to be driven toward, to be aware of, and to interact with, a widening social radius, beginning with the dim image of a mother and ending with mankind which "counts" in the particular individual's life. (p. 54)

It is possible to appreciate from the above quotation how typologies of identity formation, such as Freud's and Erikson's, were in some ways the inevitable result of an adherence to the epigenetic principle. If as Erikson notes above, "personality can be said to develop according to steps," it becomes both necessary and logical to map out these steps. However, one is left with the question of whether individuals actually experience identity and identity formation as a series of steps that need to be negotiated and mastered. Are the typologies helpful and creative, albeit theoretical, constructs or do they in fact correspond to lived experience? This phenomenological study of identity

formation and/or transformation as predicated by social group disengagement may provide some answers.

Marcia's (1993) work helps to situate the question. Marcia (1993) suggested identity has three aspects: structural, behavioural, and phenomenological. Freud and Erikson's typologies pertain to the structure of identity. Identity is mapped out. Stages of development are demarcated and plotted hierarchically. The girders, posts, and beams of the identity house are revealed. The behavioural aspects of identity pertain to what is empirical or observable, how "one's identity manifests itself into behaviour" (Marcia, 1993, p. 9). Marcia's (1993) work focused on the behavioural aspects of identity wherein he attempted "to search for those observable behaviours which could serve as indicators of the presence or absence of the presumed underlying structure knowing that the structure itself would never be observable" (p. 9). The phenomenological aspects of identity refer to the "experiential" components of identity, "to the individual's experience of having or not having a sense of identity, as well as to the experience of one's particular style of identity formation" (Marcia, 1993, p. 5). This study on social group disengagement is a study of the phenomenological aspects of identity. It consisted of a collection of experiential revelations pertaining to identity shifts as associated with social group disengagement. Of interest to me was how these shifts were experienced and narrated, and how meaning was derived from the experience. When approaching the data I wondered if the participants experienced themselves as once having a more or less stable or integrated self that was then radically challenged by social group disengagement or was the disengagement one of many events in a long series of events in the identity formation process.

The Epistemology of Identity

In a phenomenological study on identity it is important to consider the epistemology of identity, that is, how do we know our identity? How do we know who we are? The historian Jerrold Seigel (2005) contends that our self-knowledge has three sources or dimensions. The first is a *bodily dimension*, an understanding of self derived from our "physical and corporeal existence...housed in our bodies and shaped by our body's needs" (p. 5). At this level our sense of self ensues from such things as our outward appearance, our abilities and limitations, our biological and emotional needs, our desires, and temperaments. The second is a *relational dimension*, an understanding of self derived from our relations with others. At this level our sense of self ensues from such things as our sense of sameness with ours, "the common connections and involvements that give us collective identities and shared orientations and values" (p. 5). The third and final dimension is a *reflective dimension*, an understanding of the self that is produced by our own reflection. At this level our sense of self ensues from our abilities to put "ourselves at a distance from our own being so as to examine, judge, sometimes regulate, or revise it" (p.6).

These are not mutually exclusive dimensions. For example, our connections with others (relational dimension) can result from shared physical traits, such as skin colour, dis/ability, and size. A change in the bodily dimension can in fact simultaneously be a form of social group disengagement. Two excellent autobiographies, Frances Kuffel's (2004) *Passing for Thin: Losing Half My Weight and Finding Myself* and Lucy Grealy's (1994) *Autobiography of a Face* attest to how profound weight loss and facial

disfigurement, respectively, had social identity implications and were forms of disengagement.

I have already discussed at length the ways in which the self is relationally formed and transformed. Seigel (2005) suggests that our relations with others also serve an epistemological function. Through others we learn who we are. Cooley (1902) coined the phrase "looking glass self" (p. 184) to describe how the self is discovered through the reactions of others. Much like a mirror gives us an image of our physical bodies, so the perceptions and reactions of others give us an image of self. Cooley (1902) wrote:

> "Each to each a looking-glass
> Reflects the other that doth pass."
>
> As we see our face, figure, and dress in the glass, and are interested in them because they are ours, and pleased or otherwise with them according as they do or do not answer to what we should like them to be; so in imagination we perceive in another's mind some thought of our appearance, manners, aims, deeds, character, friends, and so on, and are variously affected by it (p. 184).

As Cooley's (1902) quotation suggests, both the actual and the perceived reactions of others lead to self-awareness. Thus, Cooley (1902) highlights both the relational, reflective, and reflexive dimensions of self-knowledge. Much earlier, the reflective dimension was articulated by Descartes (1637/1911) in his book *Discourse on Method,* "cogito, ergo sum" translated "I think, therefore I am". For Descartes, "I" and knowledge of "I" came exclusively through deductive thinking. One of the criticisms of Descartes is his exclusion of sensory experience as a way of knowing one's self (Miller, 1984). Moreover, there are studies in social psychology that suggest introspection alone is not a reliable way to know one's self because in the process of thinking we actually

change the self (Wilson & Kraft, 1993; Wilson & Stone, 1985). It seems reflectivity, then, plays a part in both the formation of the self and in self-knowledge.

The fact that this is a qualitative study using narrative analysis makes the epistemology of identity worth consideration. Participants were asked to talk about their experiences leaving a social group and the impact of that event on their self-understandings. It becomes important, therefore, to consider how these participants made sense of this momentous experience and how they knew if and how it had fundamentally changed who they were. The underlying assumption of narrative analysis (to be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4) is that through the telling of personal stories, individuals reflect, make sense of, organize, and give form, shape and meaning to the life events recounted and in so doing both reveal and create themselves.

CHAPTER 3

Disengagement Research

There is no power, Divine or human,
that can oblige a stream to flow back to its source.
--GUSTAVE LE BON, The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind

The theoretical literature that grounded this study was presented in Chapter 2. This chapter will introduce disengagement research followed by a focused review of five specific studies done on social group disengagement.

Introduction to Disengagement Research

Early studies on disengagement were ontogenic. Ontogeny is the study of the development of an organism's external and internal features from birth to old age. Like epigenesis, ontogeny was first used to understand biological development but was later applied to psychological growth (Corsini, 2002). The first ontogenic studies on disengagement came from the field of gerontology. Cummings and Henry (1961) pioneered the term "disengagement" to describe the "mutual withdrawal…between the aging person and others in the social system" (p. 14) that can typically accompany the aging process. More recently, Tornstam's (1989) theory of "geotranscendence," a reformulation of Cummings and Henry's disengagement theory, views social disengagement in the elderly as the result of a diminished reliance on social relationships for self-definition due to increased interiority and a reflective examination of the self. Other disengagement theories from the field of gerontology include Havighurst, Neugarten and Tobin's (1968) activity theory and Atchley's (1994) continuity theory. These theories are less helpful in understanding voluntary disengagement as they

associate the withdrawal of the elderly from social relationships to external causes such as declining health and social rejection, rather than choice.

Disengagement was studied more broadly when it was observed that the changes Cummings and Henry (1961) described in the elderly were equally applicable to individuals disengaging from social groups (Ebaugh, 1988). Developmental theorists started to look at disengagement as a process that not only described aging but also most life transitions, such as growing up, leaving home, marriage, and divorce (Erikson, 1980, 1985). Wright (1987) and Jacobs (1984, 1989) drew specifically on literature pertaining to life transitions, particularly marriage and marital separation, in their analyses of social group disengagement.

Jacobs (1984), in her study of disengagement from nontraditional religious movements compared the love, devotion, and sacrifice between female devotees and the male cultic leader to that of a marital union and disengagement from the group to separation and divorce. Likewise Wright (1987) argued that the exclusivity of devotion demanded by a group coupled with the group's attempts to regulate the sexual lives of members makes membership in social groups comparable to marriages and disengagement to marital separation. He observed that individuals considering disengagement can reach a point of no return after which they cannot be dissuaded from their decision to leave and "the group like the unsuspecting husband or wife, is caught off guard and is less able to mobilize defenses to stop the determined recreant" (Wright, 1987, p.72). Wright (1987) also described parallels between the "complexity of factors which contribute to marital breakdown" (p. 91) and the complexity and ambivalence surrounding social group disengagement.

Levine's (1984) research also has a strong developmental focus. He studied adolescents who joined radical groups (e.g., drug cults, therapeutic communities, ideological and religious groups, and communes) and then later disengaged from them. He concluded that memberships in radical groups are "desperate measures taken by children suffering from a painful developmental stalemate" (p. 15). The radical group affords the adolescent sufficient psychological and physical distance from his or her parents to facilitate normal adolescent development. In 90% of the cases, membership in the group allowed them to grow up and the adolescent was able to leave the group sufficiently differentiated from not only the family but also the radical group.

Focused Review of Specific Disengagement Studies

The five disengagement studies I reviewed in-depth came from the fields of psychiatry (Levine, 1984), sociology (Ebaugh, 1988), psychology of religion (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1997), women's studies (Jacobs, 1989), and religious studies (Wright, 1987). A summary description of these studies can be found in Appendix J. I chose these studies because they neither evidence an individual nor group bias and are in keeping with the social psychological and developmental theories that are foundational to this study. These studies are the closest I could find to my own with respect to purpose and methodology. I will organize my discussion of the results around the specific topics deemed relevant to my own research. These topics include: 1) the disengagement process, particularly the phenomenological aspects; 2) the impact of disengagement on identity; 3) the role of others; and 4) good outcomes. The first two topics are specific foci of this study (see Chapter 1). The second two topics are indirectly relevant. The role of others, for instance, is a topic that pertains to the disengagement process (others easing or

hindering disengagement), identity (others helping to create, reflect, and support the leaver's self-understandings) and practice implications (professional attempts to help). Data pertaining to good outcomes proved to be important in providing a foundation to the third foci of this study, practice implications. Knowledge of what constitutes a good outcome can guide the helping process and the selection of treatment interventions.

Process

Four of the five studies described the sequence of a disengagement process. Jacobs (1989) charted her findings using a three phase, fifteen stage model beginning with early member dissatisfaction with the group and culminating in the individual's complete separation from the group and the reestablishment of social bonds outside of the group. Wright (1987) focused his study on identifying the sequence of factors that set the disengagement process in motion. Levine (1984) identified three phases: "group membership," "seeds of doubt," and "the return". Ebaugh (1988) organized her data around four themes, each related to stages of the disengagement process: 1) first doubts, 2) seeking and weighing alternatives, 3) turning points, and 4) establishing a new identity. She mapped out each stage using flow charts.

Different conceptualizations of the disengagement process are evident in the above-mentioned studies. Although there are differences with respect to number of phases and the language used to describe each phase, there are commonalities as well. They each identify the disengagement process as beginning with doubts and disillusionment with the group. Depending on the reactions of the group and individuals outside of the group, the member may feel encouraged to consider leaving or may halt the doubting process. The doubts will resurface and accumulate until the individual reaches

some turning point where he or she must make a decision to stay or leave. Again this process is mediated by the reactions of others. At this point the individual may begin to relinquish social ties with group members and begin to build social ties with the "outside". Eventually the individual leaves and begins a process of "reintegration" (Jacobs, 1989), "return" (Levine, 1984), or "establishment of a new identity" (Ebaugh, 1988).

In addition to mapping out the stages of the disengagement process, the studies also made some reference to phenomenological aspects. The disillusionment phase was often accompanied by feelings of disappointment and hurt. The member may also feel anger and express open conflict with other members. After disengagement an individual would feel lonely, isolated, and experience a loss of identity. Some entered a period of mourning accompanied by anger, guilt, and fear. Following this period of mourning, many felt freedom and the desire to redefine one's self.

Dissonance was by far the most common disengagement experience reported in the literature. Because of its particular relevance to this study I will spend some time focusing on it here. Dissonance refers to a perceived or recognized inconsistency between two salient self-understandings (Prus, 1974). In these studies dissonance was reported between participants' personal and social self-understandings. Wright (1987) identified dissonance as a causal factor in setting the disengagement process in motion. He discovered that members of religious cults began to consider disengagement when their understandings of group superiority (social identity) ran counter to their personal experiences of failing to meet group ideals and their actual questioning of these ideals (personal identity).

Ebaugh (1988), on the other hand, discovered that dissonance resulted when either the group and/or the individual changed such that former consistency between the two was challenged. Group change and individual change will be discussed in turn. Ironically, social group changes sufficient to create dissonance and incite disengagement were of two types: 1) the group changing by exacting more demands on the member, and 2) the group changing by loosening its demands on the member.

In the first instance, the member experienced group change as a squeeze. As more and more demands were placed on the member, the group was experienced as oppressive and unrelenting. Several of the ex-physicians in Ebaugh's (1988) study felt the increase in bureaucratization of the medical profession altered their self-understandings from "personal healer" to "mere cogs in the wheels of a bureaucracy" (p.50). These doctors felt squeezed out of a profession that no longer supported their self-understandings.

Ironically, when a group changes by becoming more lax, dissonance is also created and members are incited to leave (Kanter, 1972; Ebaugh, 1988). These changes are experienced as a pouring out rather than a squeeze. A group that had once contained the member no longer does so. Many of the ex-nuns in Ebaugh's (1988) study decided to leave their religious orders after Vatican II. The Second Vatican Council "disrupted the isolation and totalistic way of thinking that was characteristic of orders for centuries" (p. 44) with the end result that less emphasis was placed on self-denial and more emphasis on community engagement. As nuns began to experience the openness brought about by Vatican II, they began to question whether they wanted to remain in a group that was so different from the one they had joined.

Dissonance can also arise when an individual changes and the group does not respond by accepting, supporting or accommodating these changes thereby failing to ease the dissonance (Prus, 1976; Wright, 1987). Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1997) observed that over 70% of the "Amazing Apostates" in their study (i.e., those individuals who were raised within a strong religious tradition but disengaged from it) left their church when their growing disbeliefs in the validity of the Bible, the existence of God, and certain other religious teachings were deemed irreconcilable with the positions of the group. These individuals voluntarily left their churches. It was not the case that these churches could not tolerate their changing ideas as much as these individuals could not tolerate the dissonance between their new ideas and the perceived status quo teachings of the church. Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1997) explain this dissonance in the following way. The group provided religious training, the product of which was "a strong valuing of truth and integrity" and individuals leaving the group were in the end not prepared to sacrifice these values when in their minds the group "failed the test" (p. 121). In 80% of these cases the feelings of dissonance were accompanied by feelings of guilt related to questioning the group and the religious traditions of their families. This guilt led to 10% of the participants keeping their disengagement a secret from their families.

Impact on Identity

The empirical literature outlines several of the specific challenges disengagement places on one's self understanding as well as chronicling the strategies individuals have used in their attempts to incorporate their past memberships into current understandings of the self.

Ebaugh (1988) used the term "hangover identity" to describe how one's "past identification with a social category…lingers in one form or another throughout their lives" (p. 5). Hangover identity is frequently evidenced in the adjectives former members use to describe themselves, such as "ex-Catholic", "ex-wife", "ex-nun", or "transgendered". Former membership is stamped on the current self-description. According to Ebaugh (1988), "To become well integrated and a whole person, an ex must incorporate that past history into his or her current identity" (p.4).

Levine (1984) concurs. He discovered that one of the challenges facing an individual post-disengagement is finding counselors and therapists who can be knowledgeable and respectful about the past group affiliation and help the individual integrate these experiences into current understandings. Levine (1984) makes the distinction between leaving a group and making "a return". A return requires the establishment of an identity outside of the group. Levine (1984) had individuals in his study who left a group, "resolving not to resolve" their identity issues associated with membership. Rather than trying to incorporate the past group identity into their current understandings of self, they quickly joined other groups without ever coming to any resolution.

Jacobs (1989), whose research is from an object relations perspective, makes a direct link between the degree of "dislocation" experienced by individuals who have left nontraditional religious groups and the severing of emotional ties which occurs during disengagement. Jacobs writes, "the severing of bonds leads to a reassessment of one's personal identity outside the context of an emotional relationship which had previously provided a source of ego identification for the individual" (p. 111). Feelings of

dislocation evidence the restructuring of the self that is in progress. The severing of emotional ties poses challenges for the disengaging member not only because of the loss of friendships and community which need to be grieved but also because these relationships and this particular community had formed the foundations of his or her identity.

Similarly Ebaugh (1988) reported that over 75% of her respondents spoke of "the vacuum" they experienced post-disengagement. For example, they spoke about feeling they were in a "vacuum," "in midair," "ungrounded," "neither here nor there," "like a stranger in two worlds," and "lacking meaningful points of reference" (p. 144-145). Levine (1984) identified a similar phase, which he labeled "indecision". They each understood these phases as stemming from the suspension of identity inherent in the disengagement process. For some this period lasted for only a few days. For others it lasted for several years. The vacuum experience ceased once the individual had successfully established a post-disengagement identity.

Both Jacobs (1989) and Levine (1984) highlighted the specific identity challenges faced by individuals who upon disengagement were negatively labeled or stigmatized by the social group. Several respondents in Jacobs' study were labeled by the group as "a lost soul or as a person who had lost their sanity" (p. 114). The additional challenge facing these individuals was to deal with the realization that "love and care had been contingent upon group membership and a shared identity" (p. 114). They had to come to terms with the knowledge that they had neither been loved unconditionally nor loved because of their unique characteristics and personhood.

Ebaugh (1988) reported several factors contribute to increased identity challenges post disengagement. The more personally or actively involved the member was in the group, the more identity was equated with membership. The amount of time spent in the group was also a factor as was the training and preparation time required for social group membership. Essentially the more one had invested in membership, the more central the group was in the individuals' understanding of themselves and consequently the greater identity challenge disengagement posed.

Establishing distance between themselves and the group was a strategy frequently invoked by those who disengaged from social groups. Maintaining distance either psychologically or physically eased the feelings of discomfort associated with shifting identity and the redefining of the self. Berger and Luckman (1966) were among the first to identify this strategy. They coined the word "nihilation" to refer to the process whereby individuals distance themselves from the old group to prepare the way for the legitimization of a new group.

> The old reality as well as the collectivities and significant others that previously mediated it to the individual must be reinterpreted "within" the legitimating apparatus of the new reality. This reinterpretation begins with a rupture in the subjective biography of the individual in terms of "B.C." and "A.D.," "pre-Damascus" and "post-Damascus."...Pre-alternation biography is typically nihilated *in toto* by subsuming it under a negative category occupying a strategic position in the new legitimating apparatus. "When I was still living a life of sin," "When I was still caught up in bourgeois consciousness," "When I was still motivated by these unconscious neurotic needs." The biographical rupture is thus identified with a cognitive separation of darkness and light (p. 159-160).

Altemeyer & Hunsberger (1997) observed these "biographical ruptures" in the manner in which apostates spoke about their past lives. They spoke about their past lives as one would talk about a stranger. They used words like "so naive," "unaware," "so

simple," and "gullible" as a way to distance themselves from their earlier selves (p. 115). Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1997) write,

> we accordingly sensed the momentous discontinuity in their lives, one that probably still affected them every day, as they turned themselves inside-out from devout followers to disbelievers. Like their religious counterparts, they had been "born again" (p. 115).

Jacobs (1989) viewed the anger 55% of her respondents reported feeling post disengagement as serving a distancing function. For 90% of these respondents, their anger dissipated over time, allowing them to assess their involvement in the old group in a more positive light. This anger, according to Jacobs (1989) helped respondents distance themselves emotionally from the group, rationalize their decision and "provide the necessary groundwork for redefining one's self" (p. 120) apart from the group.

Role of Others

Group disengagement occurs within a social context. The process can be mediated and influenced by the interactions and relationships the individual has with the others such that disengagement can be hindered or eased. People are involved in the beginning, when initial doubts about membership begin to stir, and they remain involved (or others become involved) over many years post disengagement. The roles others play are cast by the leaver or by others who are invested in a particular outcome (i.e., staying or leaving). For example, an individual considering disengagement can seek out individuals who can help them leave or encourage them to stay. A person external to the group can facilitate the process by helping the individual adjust to life on the "outside". Individuals within the group can set up barriers that discourage leaving. Two sociological phenomena, anticipatory socialization and cuing behaviour can also inform our learning. I will divide

this section into three sub-sections: the role of others pre-disengagement, during disengagement, and post-disengagement.

Pre-disenagagement. Ebaugh (1988) concluded that the roles others play pre-disengagement serve three basic functions. The first function is "reality testing" (p. 75). The individual considering disengagement may seek out others who can serve as a sounding board for their ideas, unhappiness, and differences in values and beliefs. The ideas can get tested, reinforced, or encouraged and potential sources of support and/or dissuasion surface. The second function is that of "enhancing the rewards for staying" (p. 77) and raising the stakes for disengagement. For example, an individual considering leaving their career might reconsider if offered a promotion. Lesbians and gays wanting out of marriages may be encouraged to have children. The third function is that of providing alternatives and/or solutions to the dissatisfaction, including the option of disengagement. Individuals performing this function offer "emotional relief" and hope for the dissatisfied member, which can counter their feelings of "stuckness".

Ebaugh (1988) discovered that anticipatory socialization during this initial period of doubt and dissatisfaction could facilitate disengagement. Anticipatory socialization, a concept formulated by Merton and Rossi (1957), concerns "the acquisition of values and orientations found in statuses and groups in which one is not yet engaged but which one is likely to enter" (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 7). The values of the new group are internalized before the individual disengages from the old group. This internalization can begin with a change in behaviour. For example, the ex-nuns in Ebaugh's (1988) study frequently changed their dress, mannerisms, and hairstyles before leaving the cloister. Similarly transsexuals spoke about self-presenting as the opposite gender prior to sex change

surgery. However, internalization can also involve the establishment of relationships external to the membership group. For example, a woman questioning her sexual orientation may befriend lesbians, frequent lesbian bars and participate in social functions within the gay community before "coming out" herself. Ebaugh (1988) discovered that many ex-nuns prior to leaving the cloister began to socialize with lay men and women and used these relationships to help them prepare for outside life. The physicians in her sample who left the field of medicine began engaging in hobbies that allowed them to cultivate friendships with non-medical people.

Anticipatory socialization, specifically the development of relationships external to the membership group, also affects the relationships one has within the current membership group. Merton (1957) observed that as individuals began to socialize more with others outside of their group, they became less interested in the attachments they had with members of their current group. According to Ebaugh (1988) fellow group members sense the "alienation and emotional distancing, and, in turn, reduce both expectations and rewards for the individual. This process further reduces the advantages the individual sees in remaining a group member" (p. 109). The decrease in attachments to the current group coupled with the increase in attachments to an anticipated group work together to ease the disengagement process. Wright (1987) reported 67% of the respondents in his study traced their desire to leave their nontraditional religious groups to a period of protracted separation from the group of three or more weeks. Time away allowed them time and opportunity to nourish their doubts and dissatisfaction. They began to socialize with people outside the group, while simultaneously impeding the socialization and commitment building processes of the membership group.

Whom the individual seeks out, befriends or confides in when considering disengagement is a factor in determining outcome, as is the response these individuals offer. Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1997) discovered that of the twenty-five (54%) apostates in their sample who sought the opinion or help from others when they began to experience doubts about membership, seventeen (68%) went to someone within their religious tradition, usually their parents, priests or minister. The help they received was unsatisfactory. It did not lessen their misgivings. However, eight (47%) did report receiving a "gentle and sympathetic hearing" from their mothers, even though the advice their mothers gave was "not ultimately satisfying" (p. 112). These individuals then solicited the input and support of people outside of their religious traditions, which began a period of "mutual groping for the truth" culminating in disengagement.

Cueing behaviour is another sociological phenomenon that can help us understand the role of others in the early stages of the disengagement process. Cues are signs individuals make either consciously or unconsciously about their dissatisfaction with group membership. Ebaugh (1988) wrote, "one of the latent consequences of cueing behaviour is that cues are noticed by other people, especially those with whom the person frequently interacts and/or are significant in the person's life" (p. 70). The reactions of these significant others to the cueing behaviour is a critical determinant of whether a person disengages, and if so, when and how. If these other people respond in a supportive way, the individual may be encouraged to leave. If these people respond in a negative or punitive way, the individual may forgo disengagement at least for a period of time. In Ebaugh's (1988) study, a police officer dissatisfied with his job began to lose interest in his personal appearance and health. After work he would drive his beat up old pick-up

truck to the beach and drink until the wee hours of the morning. His friends and family confronted him about his bizarre behaviour, suggesting that he was unhappy with his work. He broke down and admitted he was "living in hell" (p. 73). With encouragement, he left police work and started another career. In contrast, an ex-physician's cueing behaviour solicited negative responses from his wife who valued "both the prestige and the financial rewards of his medical practice" (p.75). As a result he delayed leaving medicine for many years.

Strong emotional bonds to fellow group members are a strong incentive for dissatisfied members to stay in the group. Many nontraditional religious groups create "strong affective environments" (Wright, 1987, p. 16) to discourage disengagement. These groups become "surrogate families" for their members (Jacobs, 1989; Wright, 1987). Wright (1987) discovered that the more a group could regulate primary relationships, particularly marriages, the less likely an individual would disengage. An individual in committed relationships with group members can risk being abandoned by them post-disengagement.

Disengagement. Disengagement from a social group invariably means a severing of emotional ties. One of the challenges facing the individual is learning how to relate to former group members. After the disengagement the quality of relationship between the ex-member and the former group members is irreversibly altered. One of the ex-nuns in Ebaugh's (1988) study commented, "I still have friends in the order and want to continue my friendship with them; however, for the most part these relationships changed once I left. It was difficult for me to deal with the fact that it had to be so" (p. 171). Forty percent of the respondents in Jacobs' (1989) study felt "rejected" and "ostracized by the

group members who had formerly been friends and confidents" (p. 113). Some of the groups represented in Jacobs' (1989) study formalized this rejection by shunning those who left by refusing to acknowledge them in any way.

At times it was the individual, rather than the group that was rejecting. Jacobs (1989) observed that individuals leaving groups would at times "ostracize" themselves as a "necessary act of separation," (p. 114) an act which would help them "break away" from the group and the emotional ties that bound them to the group. Some felt the need to discredit and reject former friends. Jacobs (1989) concludes, "whether such ostracism was self-imposed or initiated by the group, the overwhelming feeling of the disaffected devotees was that of loss and sadness" (p.115).

Post-disengagement. One of the ways in which ex-members begin to cope with the losses associated with group disengagement is to establish new emotional ties. This process may have already begun with anticipatory socialization. Jacobs (1989) noted that the four most common settings for the development of new social ties were: school, work, family, and membership in another group. These settings offered "social interactions and an alternative social reality on which to base a reassessment of the self" (p.121). Over 50% of the respondents in Jacob's (1989) study entered an education program after leaving the social group. Many already had peripheral relationships with outside friends, work connections, family members and during the disengagement process they made a concerted effort to strengthen these relationships. These people provided support, helped the individual cope with the losses associated with group disengagement and provided alternative worldviews and perspectives.

Wright (1987) on the other hand, observed that 40% of his sample was still "floating" (p. 75) and had not found another new group or perspective to attach to. Yet Wright (1987) acknowledged that the finding of a new support system is "critical" to help the individual cope with feelings of "alienation," "estrangement" and reduce "attitudes of resignation or cynicism towards life" (p. 76). Like Jacobs (1989), Wright observed that for those who had reconnected to something, the most common settings for reintegration were other religious groups (78%) and "rediscovering latent interests such as school and family" (p. 77).

The support of family and friends was a significant factor in influencing the adjustment process. Ebaugh (1988) wrote,

> Among those individuals who had the most difficulty in leaving a role and adjusting to a new role there is one overriding pattern, namely the absence of support. Feelings of being isolated and alone and having no support are highly related to difficulty in making the exit (p.147).

Levine (1984) noted the support of significant others was particularly effective if it had been initiated prior to disengagement and sustained post disengagement. It is not uncommon for members of "radical groups" to sever their ties to family and friends. However, Levine observed that parents could play a key role in their child leaving the radical groups if they were able to maintain contact with them. This contact impressed upon the member that primary relationships could permeate group boundaries. When the member started to show some initial doubt in the group, parents and friends could continue to play a key role by encouraging the individual to exercise his/her own judgment based on his/her growing sense of self, which ironically membership in the "radical group" helped to forge.

By comparison, Wright (1987) discovered that the more a social group could regulate and diminish social interaction with the outside world, the less likely that disengagement would occur. A group's ability to insulate members from the "outside world," so to speak, is greatly enhanced when they can limit the dependency the individual may have on the outside by ensuring that all the daily needs of the individual are provided by the group. It would seem likely that the converse is also true. Increasing dependency on the outside world and increasing social interactions outside of the group can ease disengagement.

Good Outcomes

Ebaugh (1988) suggests that a positive outcome would be one in which the individual has successfully integrated his or her past group membership into the current understanding of the self. However, she offers few indications of the achievement of such integration, except perhaps by the comfort and "naturalness" with which a person can speak about past involvement. Wright (1987) suggests successful integration involves the ex-member reflecting on all aspects of group membership, both positive and negative, and subsequently choosing to claim aspects of the experience that were positive. In Wright's (1987) study many of the former members felt "ambivalent" about their experiences. Seven percent were angry but most were ambivalent, meaning they had some regrets but also felt the experience had its value. Wright (1987) viewed this ambivalence as "deriving from the refusal to simplify a complex set of experiences, events, ideas, and emotional attachments" (p. 91). In essence, the baby is not thrown out with the bath water.

The feelings experienced by the individual post-disengagement may also be an indicator of positive outcome. Ebaugh (1988) discovered in her sample of ex-nuns that the initial experience of disengagement was "euphoria, relief, excitement, a feeling of freedom, and a sense of being released from pressures" (p. 137). Some of the initial reactions of ex-nuns in San Giovanni's (1978) study were described using words such as "exciting," "peaceful," "new," "free," "fun," and "terrific" (p. 70). Common reactions for the transsexuals in Ebaugh's (1988) study were "tremendous relief" and "finally feeling at peace with myself". Some individuals had mixed reactions. Individuals who left their occupations experienced "relief" but also "apprehension," fear, "feelings of loss and security," and feelings of being useless (p. 138-139). Other emotions were "guilt," (139-140), "relief," and "excitement mixed with fear" (p. 142).

In the above sections I have made reference to several factors, such as social support, which can help to produce a positive outcome for disengaged individuals. Wright (1987) acknowledged that the finding of a new support system is "critical" to helping the individual cope with feelings of "alienation," "estrangement" and reducing "attitudes of resignation or cynicism towards life" (p. 76). I have hinted at the role of anticipatory socialization in producing a positive outcome by "easing entrance" and "adjustment" into the new group (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 7).

Both Levine (1984) and Ebaugh (1988) discovered that length of time and the degree of deliberation were factors that contributed to outcome. The more reflective and self-aware the individual was about the disengagement process, the longer the process tended to take. Post disengagement adjustment was easier when the process was deliberate and lengthy rather than short and impulsive. Those individuals who had

disengaged without much forethought often experienced guilt and regret. These feelings complicated and hindered post disengagement adjustment.

Social groups, according to Becker (1960) can maintain conformity by encouraging members to place “side bets”. A side bet is an attribution of value to an aspect of membership that may not be intrinsic to membership. For example, a good salary may keep someone in a job they are dissatisfied with. Friends and social ties may keep an individual in a church. In these examples, the individual has placed a side bet. Side bets are rewards for membership and they can make disengagement difficult. When an individual takes time to disengage from a group they can weigh the side bets and consider alternative ways to maintain these “rewards” outside of group membership.

In Ebaugh’s (1988) study, 88% of the participants sought and carefully considered options and weighed side bets before making the decision to disengage. They were attempting to measure if the benefits of leaving outweighed the risks. This exercise prepared the individuals for the realities of disengagement while also helping them to seek out alternatives that would meet their needs. Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1997) discovered that the “apostates” in their study also weighed the costs and gains of disengagement. Costs included a “deterioration in the relationship they had with their parents,” a feeling that they had “lost their compass in life,” “lost the comfort and security that firmly held religious beliefs can bring,” feeling “isolated and confused,” feeling the “loss of being identified with a vast movement” (p. 117). The gains included: feeling they were their “own person,” freedom, able to “stake out their own identity,” feeling “more objective, knowledgeable, and open-minded” and feeling “stronger” (p. 118). When the gains outweighed the costs they felt “recompensed” (p. 118).

Strong connections are made in the literature between agency and positive post disengagement outcome. Ebaugh (1988) discovered that the feelings experienced and expressed by individuals post-disengagement were correlated to perception of control. Individuals who felt they had exercised personal agency noted feelings of liberation and relief. In particular one man said, "It felt good. It's like being a kid and walking around in a toy store with all the new opportunities that are stimulating" (p.142). Conversely some negative feelings expressed by individuals who felt the group had exercised agency by inciting the disengagement included anger, disappointment, embarrassment, resentment, shock, betrayal, abandonment, fear and self-pity.

Several studies concluded that seeking professional help was key to a successful outcome. Post disengagement, 50% of Levine's (1984) participants showed signs of emotional upheaval, confusion and depression severe enough to warrant professional treatment. He recommended counselors be knowledgeable and respectful of the former group if they wish to successfully engage the ex-member. They also need to encourage client autonomy and self-determination as these are key elements in identity development and the ex-member may not have had opportunities to develop them in the group.

Ebaugh (1988) thought professionals could play significant roles throughout the process. During the phase "initial doubts," counselors can help individuals become aware of options and provide a forum wherein they can express their misgivings. They can also engage the client in weighing pros and cons of disengagement. Knowledge of the process can help a counselor normalize clients' experiences each step of the way and help them prepare for upcoming stages. Finally, post disengagement, a counselor can help a client work through negative emotions like depression, listlessness, and confusion.

Conclusions

Earlier I argued that this study was exploratory in nature. After a review of the literature I gained greater specificity with respect to what was known about social group disengagement and the ways in which this particular study could build on existing knowledge. This awareness helped me approach my research questions with greater focus and intention with respect to the following areas:

1. **Congruency** – I began to conceive of the relationship between personal and social identity as one that could be explained using terms of congruence and incongruence. These terms allowed me to focus my understanding of the identity related implications associated with disengagement as notable changes in one's experiences of identity congruency. I then wondered whether these changes in congruency would parallel the stages of the disengagement process and if they could be mapped accordingly.

2. **Disengagement as a social process** – Given the existence in the literature of several "disengagement maps" I wondered how or if my research would offer anything new with respect to process. I determined that if I too discovered common themes, events and stages, my research would, at the very least, offer additional support and reliability to existing studies. However, I became aware that the theoretical lenses through which I was viewing social group disengagement, namely developmental theory and social identity theory, were unique, increasing the likelihood that I would discover something "new."

3. **Implications for direct social work practice** – I discovered that none of the existing studies came from within the field of social work and none delineated the

specific ways in which helping professionals could be helpful to individuals who were going through a disengagement process.

CHAPTER 4

Methodology

By starting the story
The story tells you how
To go on and how to look back
--MARILYN DUMONT, green girl dreams Mountains

Rationale for Using Qualitative Methods

According to Locke, Spirduso, and Silverman (2000), the use of qualitative methods must be reconcilable with "the demands of the question" (p. 93). There were several demands of my research question, which led me to select qualitative methods. Each "demand" will be discussed in turn.

First, as a phenomenological study the "demands of the question" required that the subjective experiences of those who have left social groups be accessed and understood. It is virtually impossible to access rich and complex data pertaining to experiences via surveys, questionnaires, and experiments. As Haußer (1983) noted, the use of existing ready-made research instruments in identity research has failed to capture subjective experience, an element considered vital for the understanding of identity development. Also, the use of a quantitative method would presume foreknowledge of the relevant variables to be measured and a testable hypothesis -- things I cannot claim. As Wright (1987) observed, there is a complexity of factors and ambivalence surrounding social group disengagement, which make quantitative research methods difficult.

Ironically, this study draws on ideas from the social identity tradition, which has historically been firmly wedded to experimental social psychology (Hogg & Abrams, 1998). Despite the voices within social psychology that have challenged the scientific

method as the best way to gain understanding of social relations and social phenomenon (see for example, Gergen 1973, 1982; Goffman, 1959; Wundt, 1916), the social identity tradition remains largely unapologetic about their "faith in...competent and carefully conducted experiments" (Hogg & Abrams, 1998, p. 9). However, many of the underlying premises of social identity theory are consistent with a constructivist paradigm. For example, the subjective meanings derived from our social group memberships, the fluid and fluctuating nature of social identity, and the contextually bound nature of identity salience, are all ideas consistent with a constructivist paradigm, which views reality as created and mediated through the processes of social interaction.

Second, this research was largely exploratory and, as Krauss (2000) contends, qualitative methods are well-suited for such exploratory research. Patton (2002) agrees:

> Qualitative inquiry is particularly oriented toward exploration, discovery, and inductive logic. Inductive analysis begins with specific observations and builds towards general patterns. Categories or dimensions of analysis emerge from open-ended observations as the inquirer comes to understand patterns that exist in the phenomenon being investigated. (p.55-6)

As I argued in Chapter 2, there is a lack of knowledge specific to social group disengagement as a unique social process, and due to the penchant of the social identity tradition to engage in experimental research, also a lack of scholarship drawing on the subjective experience of identity shifts and negotiations. Thus the research territory is new and the method exploratory.

Finally, qualitative research allows for purposive or nonprobability sampling, which affords the opportunity to acquire rich and complex data from selected "experts." Given the inherent difficulty in determining a population of "social group disengagers" from which to draw a simple random sample sizable enough to be representative, the

smaller sample size equated with qualitative research was indeed attractive. In fact, finding sufficient and suitable participants proved to be one of the most difficult and time-consuming aspects of the research.

Design

Interview Design

Patton (2002) suggests there are three general qualitative interviewing strategies: the informal conversational interview, the general interview guide approach, and the standardized open-ended interview. These three approaches "differ to the extent that interview questions are determined and standardized *before* the interview occurs" (italics in original) (p.342). I chose the general interview guide approach, which requires the researcher to sketch out broad topic areas he or she would like each participant to respond to *prior to* the commencement of the interviewing process. This approach allowed me some freedom in the wording and sequencing of questions and some variance in the overall structure and flow of each interview while also affording assurances that specific subject areas were covered in each interview. Certain areas proved more pertinent to some respondents than others and the flexibility built into the interview guide approach allowed me to delve into each area according to its relevance for that particular participant. A final strength of the interview guide approach was the opportunity it provided for unanticipated topics and issues to emerge.

The interview guide (Appendix A) was produced after a review of the theoretical and empirical literature applicable to the study of social group disengagement. This review was accomplished through the completion of the comprehensive paper, a requirement of the Ph.D. program. The general subject areas were selected according to

the purpose of this study and the broad research questions the study attempted to answer. The broad categories included:

- A description of the social group
- Experiences of membership
- A recollection of understandings of personal and social identity during the time of membership in the social group (including temporal and social comparisons)
- Description of events leading to disengagement
- Experience of disengagement
- Outcomes of disengagement
- Current understandings of self (including temporal and social comparisons)
- Current social relationships (including current relationships with social group)
- Role of others in aiding or hindering the disengagement process (including professional and non professional roles)

Data Collection

The data for this study were collected using two in-depth, open-ended interviews with each research participant using a general interview guide (see Appendix A). The first interview focused on gathering information about the social group from which the research participant disengaged. Questions specific to the nature and structure of the group were asked as well as questions pertaining to membership experiences. The participants were asked to recall understandings they had of themselves while a group member and the role group membership held in their self-definition. The second interview focused on the disengagement experience itself, as well as associated outcomes. Participants were asked questions pertaining to current self-definitions, how they were achieved and to what effect. They were asked about their current status with

respect to the social group and whether past membership in the group continued to affect their current understandings of self. Each interview was 1-2 hours in length. The interviews were conducted in locations that were deemed safe and comfortable and selected by the research participants. I interviewed five participants in my office at Wilfrid Laurier University, four participants at their place of employment, five participants at the home, and two in undisclosed locations.

An effort was made to have a short period of time (1-2 weeks) between the first and second interviews. During this time the first interview was transcribed and rudimentary coding and analysis begun. The 1-2 week period allowed the participant time to reflect on the first interview and to incorporate these reflections into the second interview. A copy of the transcript of the first interview was given to the participant prior to the second interview. The participant was encouraged to make note of his or her reflections pertaining to the interview and to share these with me. Many did. It was anticipated that few study participants would have had the opportunity to reflect on their disengagement experiences to the extent that this study demanded. Hence it was important to allow the study participant time to reflect on the first interview before embarking on the second.

The rationale for using a two-interview design was three-fold. First, as I have already argued, identity has both personal and social elements. If I was to understand the group-based aspects of the individual's self-definition, I needed to understand the social group from which these definitions were derived. Hence the first interview was primarily devoted to understanding the social group from which the individual disengaged. This

was a critical component to this research as it allowed me to keep both the individual and group in focus.

Second, again as I have argued, identity has both core/stable and dynamic elements. I was interested in collecting data pertaining to current as well as earlier identity states. The first interview with its focus on the social group and the individual's past membership was an attempt to "snap shot" the individual's earlier self-definitions. The second interview with its focus on the disengagement experience and present functioning was an attempt to "snap shot" current self-definitions. However, I did not wish to merely capture these states in isolation but to show their connection to each other and the process that led from one to the other. As still photographs can show movement when flashed in rapid sequence or a video film can show a still photograph when the film is paused, the two interview design offered greater opportunity to capture both the dynamic and stable natures of identity than a single interview would have. Third, the two-interview design enhanced the rigour of the study by *prolonging the engagement* I had with each participant and affording me opportunities to *member check.* Each of these strategies will be discussed in greater depth below.

Sampling Strategy

Nonprobability or purposive sampling tends to be the norm in qualitative research (Berg, 2004). Purposive sampling, as the term suggests, refers to the selection of research participants from whom data related to the purpose of the research can be accessed (Patton, 1990). As Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993) write,

> Central to naturalistic research is purposive sampling . . .because the researcher's major concern is not to generalize the findings of the study to a broad population

> or universe but to maximize discovery of the heterogeneous patterns and problems that occur in the particular context under study (p. 82).

This study benefited from the purposeful selection of "experienced" and "expert" voices. I was able to interview individuals who had not only experienced social group disengagement but also had the ability and desire to reflect on these experiences and engage in dialogue with me about them. Attempts were made to select participants who were insightful, reflective, self-aware, and receptive to answering "probing" questions. As Patton (1990) argues, "the logic and power of purposive sampling lies in selecting *information-rich* cases for study in depth" (p. 169).

Even though the use of purposive sampling may be "the norm" or even inevitable, it is still necessary to justify the particular purposive sampling strategies which were employed. The nature of this study, with its focus on "momentous" leavings from "social groups of significance," demanded a *critical case sample*. Rather than attempting to understand a broad range of leavings (for example, voluntary/forced, inconsequential/momentous) from a variety of social groups (significant/insignificant) this study held a specific focus on the more extreme or critical leaving experiences. The critical case sampling strategy consisted of picking participants who had experienced extreme leavings with the implicit understanding that "if the information is valid for critical cases, it is also likely to be true of all other cases" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 200), although perhaps in a less profound or visible way.

I decided to have as much variety as possible with respect to the types of social group represented. I have three rationales for this decision. First, one advantage of using multiple group types was that I could control for factors unique to particular social

groups. For example, having selected leavings from both professional groups and religious groups I could control for factors such as fears of divine retribution, which may be unique to leaving a religious group, and the contributing effects of a loss in income and status, which may be unique to leaving a professional group. Hence, I was able to develop an understanding of common disengagement experiences as well as the experiences that were unique to leavings from specific types of social groups.

Second, there is a strong precedence for multiple group representation in existing disengagement studies. Levine (1984) studied disengagement from drug cults, communes, religious and ideological groups, and therapeutic communities. Although these groups could all be considered "radical" there is evidence of range and variety with respect to belief, social structure, and membership requirements among the groups represented. Ebaugh (1988) studied the "role exit" experiences of ex-nuns, transsexuals, and other "exes" such as individuals who have left occupational roles, familial roles, and stigmatized roles. Although there are studies that have focussed exclusively on disengagement from religious groups, these studies have not had one particular religious group as the object of study. For example, Jacobs (1989) studied disengagement from charismatic Christian groups, Hindu-based groups and Buddhist groups. Wright (1987) researched disengagement from cult movements which included the Children of God, Hare Krishna, and the Unification Church. I agree with the rationale Ebaugh (1988) provides for multiple group presentation in her study - that commonalities exist that make the "social process definable" (p. 2) irrespective of group differences.

Third, a particular emphasis on one type of group would be limiting and work against the aims and purpose of this study. This study had as its purpose to study social

group disengagement, particularly the experiences of individuals who have disengaged from a social group. It was not the stated purpose to study social groups but the disengagement phenomenon. Also the study does not have as its focus "religious group leavings" or "cultural group leavings," but leavings in a broader sense.

Sample Size

Patton (1990) writes:

> *There are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry.* Sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what's at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources (emphasis in the original) (p. 184).

Sample size also depends on the richness of the data provided by the participants. As Patton (1990) reminds us, "Piaget contributed a major breakthrough to our understanding of how children think by observing his own two children at length and in depth. Freud established the field of psychoanalysis based on fewer than ten cases" (p. 185).

However, some guidelines with respect to sampling size do exist. Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend a sample size "to the point of redundancy" (p. 202). They deem sampling "terminated when no new information is forthcoming from new sampled units; thus *redundancy* is the primary criterion" (emphasis in the original) (p. 202). Glaser & Strauss (1967) describe this point where no new information is being gathered as saturation.

That said, I hoped to have a sample size of 10-15 participants, representing 3 - 5 social groups. In fact, the final sample included 16 participants (9 females, 6 males, 1 transgendered) representing 9 types of groups and 13 specific groups (see Chapter 6). Fifteen of the participants were interviewed two times, each interview lasting on average

1½ - 2 hours in length. One participant was interviewed once but the interview lasted for three hours. Hence, the data for this project totalled 31 interviews, approximately 55 hours of audiotape, and over 1,500 pages of transcripts. This proved sufficient for saturation.

Recruitment Strategies

When I began this research I knew of three individuals whose experiences of leaving a social group intrigued me. Two of these individuals were referred to me by a faculty member who knew of my dissertation topic, the third was a former colleague. After my research proposal was approved I approached these individuals, explained my project to them and asked if they would be interested in participating. Each met the sample criteria and was prepared to participate.

I then used *snowball* or *chain sampling* techniques to recruit additional research participants. I asked my three initial participants, faculty at Laurier, my community contacts in the Kitchener-Waterloo area, colleagues, and peers to provide me with information that could help me locate and recruit additional participants. In the space of six months I received a total of twenty-two referrals, ten of which (including my initial two referrals) met the sample criteria and agreed to participate.

The final participants were difficult to recruit because I was seeking variety (divergent cases) with respect to group type and length of time since disengagement. In specific I was looking for individuals who had left an extremist group, such as an outlaw motorcycle group or street gang, individuals who had changed their gender, and individuals who left their cultural group. At this point most of my participants had disengaged from their social group at least ten years prior to my interviews with them.

Hence I was also looking for individuals who were temporally closer to their disengagement experience. It took me over four months to find my final participants. I sent numerous letters (Appendix F) and emails (Appendix E) out to organizations that worked directly or indirectly with individuals who fit the profiles I was seeking. I made cold calls to several journalists and authors who had written disengagement accounts of individuals that I was interested in meeting. I also attended a conference knowing that one of the presenters fit a particular profile.

One of the challenges using a snowball technique was in maintaining confidentiality. I did not want names of individuals or details about their disengagement experience bantered about by the well-meaning people who were helping me recruit participants. My concern was rooted in my desire to maintain ethical standards and also in the knowledge that disengagement disclosure does not occur in all cases (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1997). In fact, as several of my participants revealed, full disclosure could have endangered their lives. Hence the "well-situated people" (Patton, 1990, p. 176) who sent me referrals were given my contact information and a brief summary of my study, and a list of the sample criteria. They contacted the individuals they thought would meet the sample criteria and encouraged them to contact me directly, which several did. If the individual consented, his or her contact information was passed on to me and I took the initiative to contact them using a telephone script (Appendix D).

The snowball technique led to many dead ends. I conducted multiple screening interviews with individuals who in the end didn't fit the sample criteria. It proved to be a time consuming method of recruitment, but satisfying, as in the end I believe I

successfully recruited individuals who were insightful, articulate, diverse, and committed. Their responses were thoughtful, the data rich, relevant and informative.

Sample Criteria

Each research participant met the following criteria:

- At one point he or she identified as a member of the social group. Usually, although not necessarily, others had also identified the individual as a member of the group and consequently interacted with him or her accordingly.
- Membership in the group reflected and supported self-understanding. Membership was central to his or her identity.
- He or she exhibited ways of relating to others or specific behavioural patterns typical of members of the social group.
- Leaving the social group was voluntary. Leaving was a momentous experience and posed identity challenges.
- He or she no longer considered him or herself to be a member.
- The disengagement experience was still accessible and relatively fresh in his or her memory yet sufficient time had elapsed such that he or she had opportunity for reflection.

The potential participants were informed of the sample criteria and were asked to confirm if the particulars of their experience met the sample criteria. This self-screening of participants was considered important as measures of "significance" for a social group and "momentousness" for the leaving experiences are subjective attributions. Once the potential participants indicated they met the sample criteria, I asked them if they would be willing to talk to me about these experiences. I informed them of the probing nature of my questions and indicated that participation would require a measure of insight, critique, and reflection. I also informed them of the confidential nature of the research (and its

limits), and possible benefits and risks associated with this project. They all signed the Informed Consent Statement (Appendix C).

Data Analysis

Selection of the Method of Data Analysis

Initially, I intended to analyse the data using grounded theory. Several insights during the research process changed my mind. The first insight occurred during data collection. I experienced a structural incongruence in my interviewing strategy. By intention, the sample was quite diverse. I had desired and actively recruited individuals who represented a variety of disengagement experiences, had left different types of social groups, and were at different stages in the disengagement process. From early on I felt torn between following the interview schedule (thereby controlling, at least to some extent, the manner in which participants "packaged" their experiences) and allowing participants more free reign. I wanted a diverse sample, yet by sticking to the interview schedule I was simultaneously trying to make the data uniform. This tension dissolved when I began to understand the data not as "answers to my questions," each participant responding to the same open-ended questions, but as "stories," each participant having a unique story to tell.

This key insight altered the manner in which I conducted the interviews. I became less reliant on the interview guide and more interested in participants' stories and how they chose to tell them. My understanding of my role as an interviewer also changed. I began to think of myself as a passenger in a horse drawn carriage, rather than the horse leading the way, confident that either way I would arrive at a suitable destination. I would direct the interview by giving a subtle pull on the reigns but I ceased to consider myself

its driving force. I still asked questions, engaged in dialogue and discussed my emerging analysis with participants. Interviews continued to be a compilation of different types of discourse (for example, facts, answers, analysis, and discussion) but the personal narratives became my primary interest. I tried not to fragment stories with needless interruptions (or questions) or force the sequencing of the story to comply with the sequencing of the interview schedule.

That I was engaging with the data as one would with stories was evident in the interview transcripts. Many transcripts consisted of large blocks of text with little dialogue between me and the participant. Often just a sentence or two from me, that slight pulling on the reigns, would be enough to initiate the next segment of the story or a new one based on a different theme or aspect of the participant's larger experience. In reading the transcripts I also noticed that I began to use phrases, such as "That is a remarkable story!" or "Isn't that the story of your life?" that were indicative of my understanding of data as story.

The second big insight occurred during data analysis. After transcribing each interview I would "deconstruct" the transcript using specific coding procedures (open coding, axial coding, and selective coding) and analytical tools (memos, diagrams, and matrixes) as outlined in Strauss and Corbin (1998). After coding approximately one third of the data set (11 interviews) in this manner, I became discouraged. The procedures felt mechanical and prescriptive. I found they didn't allow me to "see," "hear," or understand the data in the manner or depth I wished. In fact, I found the procedures were getting in the way.

I noticed that participants told their stories with care and intention. They created depth and colour by providing me with essential background information, taking time to create a scene or explain a point that initially seemed tangential. At times I would ask a question and was told by the participant to "wait". The answer to the question would come later after certain other details were explained or revealed. I noticed that the participant needed to take control over the sequencing of the events in the story. Likewise, the aspects that were highlighted and the particular incidents that were remembered or forgotten (Brockmeier, 2002) were significant. The manner in which the story was told seemed as important as the content itself. I suspected that what seemed to be an embellishment, segue, or meandering was, in fact, essential to my understanding. Yet it was precisely these things that were being lost or fractured by the grounded theory coding processes. As Riessman (1993) explains

> Respondents (if not interrupted with standardized questions) will hold the floor for lengthy turns and sometimes organize replies into long stories. Traditional approaches to qualitative analysis often fracture these texts in the service of interpretation and generalization by taking bits and pieces, snippets of a response edited out of context. They eliminate the sequential and structural features that characterize narrative accounts. (p. 3).

These two insights, understanding data as story, and appreciating the risk of losing and fracturing stories through rigorous and prescriptive coding processes, led me to conclude that the grounded theory approach was not well-suited to my particular project. I needed a form of qualitative analysis that took as its object the story itself. I then began to explore narrative analysis, particularly the work of Riessman (1990, 1993, 1994), Fraser (2004), and Daiute and Lightfoot (2004). This reading lead me to my final

insight - narrative analysis is a method particularly suited to the study of human experiences and identity.

An anthology of short stories by such notable North American women as Alice Walker, Joyce Carol Oates, Flannery O'Connor, and Alice Munroe is fittingly titled, *We Are the Stories We Tell* (Martin, 1990). In the volume's introduction, editor Mary Martin writes,

> To articulate experience, to give language to otherwise inchoate perceptions, is always empowering and liberating. To write the truth about all sorts of experience is both the fruit and the wellspring of freedom and knowledge. (p. 7)

In the interview process, participants told me their stories, the truth of their disengagement experiences, giving them form and meaning and ultimately, as I discovered, in the telling, both revealed and created themselves. This revelatory and constructive relationship between story and self as overtly expressed in the title of the anthology *We Are the Stories We Tell* is likewise supported in the academic literature.

Riessman (1993), a sociologist who used narrative analysis to study how men and women make sense of personal relationships and divorce, concluded; "individuals become the autobiographical narratives by which they tell about their lives" (p.2). She adds: "the self can be embodied in a narrative" (p. 3). The psychologist Bamberg (2004) explains "identity and the self are narratively configured," hence "narratives are a good way to analyze selves and identities" (p. 332). Likewise psychologists Rosenwald and Ochberg (1992b) write,

> How individuals recount their histories – what they emphasize and omit, their stance as protagonists or victims, the relationship the story establishes between the teller and the audience – all shape what individuals can claim of their own

> lives. Personal stories are not merely a way of telling someone (or oneself) about one's life; they are the means by which identities may be fashioned. (p.1)

Finally, from the field of social work, Laird (2001) touches on the relationship between narrative and the self while simultaneously alluding to the relationship between personal and social self-understandings. Laird (2001) argues that understandings of self are socially constructed and that the meaning of being male or female, for example, is

> fashioned, in varying cultures, through language, social discourse, the stories we tell about ourselves, and the stories that are told about us. These sociocultural stories tell us what we are like and what we are meant to be like, how we are to think, with whom we should choose to be, and even how we do and should speak. In reciprocal and circular fashion, these narratives both reinforce what already is and create it anew, as we speak our lives within the constraints of prevailing discourses" (p. 271).

A model of using stories to understand life transitions was set by King, Scallon, Ramsey, and Williams (2000) in their research on the subjective well-being and ego development of parents of children with Down syndrome. They argued that the analysis of stories was particularly suitable for studies on life transitions because "irrevocable alterations in our lives require us to define the very meaning of our existence, to seek out new sources of purpose, and to reassess our priorities" (p. 510). They added, "We use stories to make sense of experience, to bring order to perceptions, and to attach ourselves to various sources of meaning" (p. 510). Although King et al. studied involuntary versus voluntary transitions and had participants write their stories versus tell them, their use of content analysis of life transition narratives confirmed for me the appropriateness of using a narrative analysis for a study of social group disengagement.

Description of Narrative Data and Narrative Analysis

A narrative is a story that can consist of either spoken or written words. The central premise of narrative analysis is that human beings are by nature storytellers and we use stories to help us make sense of our lives (King et al., 2000, McAdams, 1993). Riessman (1993) defines a narrative as "talk organized around sequential events. A teller in a conversation takes a listener into a past time or 'world' and recapitulates what happened then to make a point" (p. 3). She goes on to describe narratives as "information storage devices" (p. 2) and "meaning-making structures" (p. 4).

Narrative analysis is the examination of specific units of text (stories) "historically and culturally...and/or...how they are composed structurally" (Riessman, 1994, p. 69). The stories are considered to be "observable" and "describable" data that lend themselves to empirical analysis (Popp-Baier, 2001, paragraph 2). The researcher, being equally interested in content, form and meaning, is in essence juggling three balls. As Riessman (1993) explains, narrative researchers need to determine what the participant is saying and also why the story was "told *that* way" (p. 2). Finally they must examine the interpretations and meaning the participant has derived from the events revealed.

Narrative analysis draws on the research traditions of ethnography and textual criticism yet it is markedly different. Each of these traditions can incorporate stories into the data set but consider them to be "realistic descriptions, different only in format to other scientific descriptions" (Riessman, 1993, p. 4). By comparison, narrative analysis, views stories as "representations of a lived experience and are subject to change and interpretation" (Gilbert, 2001, p. 225). Stories are considered evolutionary. They can

change with each telling because they are subject to factors such as audience and the storyteller's continuous experience (Gilbert, 2001). Hence stories are subject to one's temporal self-understandings, meaning how the storyteller understands him or herself today will determine, in part, how they have made sense of and tell of past events.

Methods of Narrative Analysis

Like many traditions within qualitative research there is no single or right way of doing narrative analysis (Gilbert, 2001). Accordingly, it is incumbent on me to disclose the methods I employed and the steps I undertook in the data analysis process. I began by isolating the narratives from other forms of discourse. Although the personal narratives became my primary interest, all forms of discourse were identified and analyzed. I coded the data twice. First, I coded the entire data set using specific coding procedures (open coding, axial coding, and selective coding) and analytical tools (memos, diagrams, and matrixes) as outlined in Strauss and Corbin (1998). During this process I simultaneously identified the personal narratives and gave each one a title, such "I am a survivor," "I am my history," and "Being the best." I grouped them according to common themes and in some cases, identical titles. I then placed them in a separate coding report. Once the entire first round of coding was completed, I went back and analysed the personal narratives a second time using the methods described below.

Before I describe these methods I will explain how I was able to isolate the personal narratives from the transcripts. I used several criteria. Linguistic criteria such as an identifiable beginning, middle and end helped me identify a unit of text. I also looked for "entry and exit talk" (Jefferson, 1979, cited in Riessman, 1993) to help me discern where a story began and ended. The classic example of entry and exit talk is, "Once upon

a time...and they lived happily ever after". Not surprisingly, I did not find those exact phrases in my data set, but I did find numerous other examples of entry and exit talk such as, "It is a long story. How much tape do you have?" concluded with "Well that was that." Another example, "It was 1987 and what happened was...." concluded with "That's it".

I also identified narratives by cast (protagonist, antagonist and "extras"), plot lines and culminating events (Brockmeier, 2002). Often, I found it helpful to have the content of the narrative guide me. A narrative could be identifiable by a common theme, the explanation of a singular event, and the elements of "predicament and solution" (Brockmeier, 2002, p. 33). I looked for sequential structure - an opening event followed by another and another and concluding with a culminating event, a moral, or summary statement. Some narratives were not chronological but were more "topic-centred" (Riessman, 1993, p. 17). In these instances I looked for a common theme or argument that held the narrative together.

My method of analysing the narratives themselves consisted of a further interrogation of the data with a series of questions that I deemed consistent with the premise of narrative analysis. I paid equal attention to content (What is the storyteller telling me?), form (Why did he or she tell it that way?), and meaning (What is the point or moral of this story?). I highlighted all evaluative clauses, the times when the storyteller "[stood] back from the unfolding action and tells how he or she has chosen to interpret it" (Riessman, 1993, p. 20). I also let the purpose of my study guide my questions, paying particular attention to the experiences of disengagement, the descriptions of associated

feeling states, the revelations of self and transitions in self-understanding, and the factors that eased or hindered their process.

Central themes and story-lines were distilled from each participant's narratives. These themes and story-lines were "tested" against the participant's larger story. I asked myself if the finding still made sense when it was viewed within the context of the participant's overall story. If it did then I would test this finding against the narratives of the other participants. Did the finding help me to understand their stories? Did it still make sense? Did the other stories convey similar themes or meanings? This type of analysis led to numerous readings and re-readings of each transcript.

A significant challenge in the analysis phase of this study was determining how to present the findings. I was concerned that the people would disappear (not a desirable scenario in a study on identity), events would merge, and stories get lost. Like many narrative analysts, the challenge became one of voice. I found Riessman's (1993) words helpful,

> We cannot give voice, but we do hear voices that we record and interpret. Representational decisions cannot be avoided; they enter at numerous points in the process, and qualitative analysts...must confront them (p. 8).

I tried to preserve participants' voices to the best of my ability by identifying each with a pseudonym that I used to reference their words. These pseudonyms were the result of my deliberate attempts to represent the individual in an authentic way. For example, I chose the gender-neutral name Chris for the study participant who, born female has come to understand himself as transgendered and does not feel exclusive membership in either the female or male social group. I chose the Biblical name Hannah for the participant who left her old order Mennonite group but Christian faith and spirituality continue to

play a central and self-defining role in her life. Like the Biblical Hannah, this participant has also experienced a transition from emptiness to joy.

In presenting the sample (Chapter 5 and 6), I chose to compliment statistical data with story. I tried to preserve the identity of each participant by introducing them using a brief narrative. The decision to do this was difficult to make as I worried that the narrative itself might identify participants. For that reason I removed and altered some details that proved irrelevant to my analysis but may have been identifying.

Standards of Rigour

Qualitative studies by nature are inductive and rooted in a social constructionist view of knowledge (Hoshmand, 2005). Hence they are often subjected to criticisms that the findings lack "trustworthiness" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 294). Patton (1990) contends that these criticisms are often rooted in a bias towards large random samples and experimental designs and a general misunderstanding regarding purposeful sampling. As a result, "some qualitative researchers maintain that the canons or standards by which quantitative studies are judged are quite inappropriate for judging the merits of qualitative studies" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 266).

Qualitative researchers have tried to counter concerns regarding trustworthiness by waging what appears to be a semantic war. Rather than speak about "truth," the words "perspective" and "knowledge," or to be more precise "perspectives" and "knowledges," are used. Rather than use the "conventional terms," such as internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity, the qualitative researcher uses the corresponding terms of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, as Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain, these terms are not

> introduced . . . to add to naturalism's mystique or to provide it with its fair share of arcane concepts, but to make clear the inappropriateness of the conventional terms when applied to naturalism and to provide alternatives that stand in a more logical and derivative relation to naturalistic axioms (p. 300-301).

Ultimately, as Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain, the issue of trustworthiness boils down to whether the researcher can "persuade his or her audiences (including self) that the findings of the inquiry are worth paying attention to" and "worth taking account of" (p. 290). Meeting the four standards of rigour mentioned above become the means of such persuasion. Each of the four standards will be defined below and the specific strategies I used to meet them will be discussed.

Credibility

Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993) define credibility as "the compatibility of the constructed realities that exist in the minds of the inquiry's respondents with those that are attributed to them" (p. 30). I used two strategies, *prolonged engagement* and *member checking*, to enhance the likelihood that credible findings and interpretations would be produced.

Prolonged Engagement . Prolonged engagement refers to the "investment of sufficient time" to achieve various purposes such as "testing for misinformation introduced by distortions either of the self or of the respondents, and building trust" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 301). My use of a two-interview design prolonged the engagement I had with each participant. The proposed 1-2 week time span between interviews did involve a period of engagement longer than that of a single interview and hence increased the likelihood of credible findings. As it turned out, I achieved longer periods of engagement with three of the participants. These individuals had recently

disengaged from a social group (within the past year or two) and still considered themselves to be in the midst of the process. These individuals by their own initiative maintained periodic contact with me after the second interview to update me on their process, their ongoing experiences, and emerging sense of self. As the interviews were completed in 2004 and the final write-up completed in early 2007, I was able to follow these stories and extend my engagement with these three individuals for a period of 2 ½ years. It should be noted that in all three instances these participants provided me with formal consent to have the content of these follow-up conversations and emails included in the data set.

Ironically, I was also able to prolong engagement with individuals by "connecting" with their past selves. Two of my study participants are published authors who wrote books about their disengagement experiences; two others wrote about their experiences in academic papers. These materials were provided by the participants and they encouraged me to read them. The written material provided me with these individuals' earlier understandings of disengagement and sense of self that at least in a vicarious way, extended my involvement, by achieving a past connection to these individuals. I used these written accounts to corroborate and augment my interview data and increase credibility but I couldn't reference them directly as that would reveal the identity of these participants.

Member Checks. Member checks are a process "whereby data, analytic categories, interpretations and conclusions are tested with members of those stakeholder groups from whom the data was originally collected" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314). Although completed throughout the duration of the data collection phase, member checks

were specifically undertaken during the second interview. During the second interview, I had the opportunity to vet my analytic categories, early observations, and interpretations arising from the first interview. This allowed the research participant to respond by validating my understandings as "adequate representations of the [participant's] own (and multiple) realities" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314), amend misunderstandings, and provide additional information. The 1-2 week period between interviews could also have "stimulate[d] the [participant] to recall additional things which were not mentioned the first time around" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314). The audio-recording of the interviews allowed for the member checks to be on record and incorporated into the ongoing analysis to further increase credibility and minimize the potential for the researcher misunderstanding or misrepresenting the participant's reality.

During the course of writing the dissertation, I was able to vet aspects of my final analysis with six participants, including the three mentioned above who initiated prolonged engagement with me and three others with whom I initiated contact. With respect to the latter three individuals, I initiated contact because I had some specific questions about their experiences and during my time with them they agreed to reflect on my aggregate analysis and offer their opinions.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent that the findings of a study can be applied to other contexts and people (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It would be both satisfying and relevant if I were to know that the findings of this study could be extended beyond the specific study participants as one of my research questions concerns whether social group disengagement could, in fact, be considered a social phenomenon. My small sample size,

typical of qualitative research, made it difficult but not impossible to reach such a conclusion as I did employ strategies to increase the transferability of my findings.

First, using *purposive sampling* I tried to achieve a diverse sample with respect to the types of social groups and the specific social groups represented, the structure of these social groups, the manner of joining, gender, age, dis/ability, and sexual orientation of the participants, length of time in the social group, and length of time since disengagement. I reasoned that if common themes and experiences emerged from within a diverse, albeit small sample, it would seem likely that these commonalities would extend beyond the sample.

Second, in the presentation of the research findings I provide *thick descriptions* of the individuals, situations, and contexts in which the findings held true. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain,

> Whether they [the findings] would then hold true in some other context, or even in the same context at some other time, is an empirical issue, the resolution of which depends upon the degree of similarity between the sending and receiving (or earlier and later) contexts (p. 316).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) conclude,

> If there is to be transferability, the burden of proof lies less with the original investigator than with the person seeking to make the application elsewhere. The original inquirer cannot know the sites to which transferability might be sought but the appliers can and do (p. 298).

Through the intentional use and selection of participant quotations, and quantifying data using percentages, I aimed to achieve a level of transparency that would enable others to make a "transferability judgment" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316).

Dependability

In quantitative research findings are considered reliable if they can be replicated in subsequent studies and/or if other researchers working independently from each other reach similar conclusions using the identical data set (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This notion of reliability assumes that reality is stable and accessible, an assumption that is inconsistent with the naturalist paradigm. In fact, as Patton (1990) explains, qualitative methods are often used precisely when it is determined that "no acceptable, valid, and reliable quantitative measures exist" (p. 130). Hence, "dependability" rather than "reliability" is the standard by which qualitative research is measured. Dependability takes into account the ever-changing context in which the research occurs (Trochim, 2006).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue, "Since there can be no validity without reliability (and thus no credibility without dependability), a demonstration of the former is sufficient for the latter" (p. 316). Certainly, the strategies I employed to enhance the credibility of the research (i.e., member checks and prolonged engagement) would likewise enhance dependability. However, I agree with Lincoln and Guba (1985) who conclude that employing the standards of credibility to satisfy dependability claims addresses the issue in "practice" but not in "principle" and ultimately "a strong solution must deal with dependability directly" (p. 317).

One such solution would be to replicate the study (do it a second time with a different sample) and/or to have a co-investigator who would collect raw data and conduct preliminary analysis independent of myself. In the former case the findings of the second study could be compared with the first, and in the latter the findings of one

investigator compared with the other. In each instance, the existence of common findings could be used to support a claim of dependability. Given that this is my doctoral research neither of the aforementioned options were open to me.

What I did instead was vet the raw data and my preliminary analysis of my first two interviews with the Chair of my committee. He offered feedback regarding my interview style, ensuring me that I was not leading the participant and that I was indeed collecting the type of data I intended to collect. He also reviewed my preliminary analysis and confirmed that he too saw evidence of the themes and ideas that I had observed. After I had completed seven interviews with seven participants I vetted my analysis with the entire committee and a similar process occurred.

Use of Nonreactive Measures. Another strategy I used to enhance both the credibility and the dependability of the findings was the use of *nonreactive measures*. Reactivity refers to "the response of the researcher and the research participant to each other during the research process" (Paterson, 1994, p. 301). In this particular study, the relationships formed between the participants and myself during the in-depth interview process and the subjective nature of the sample selection and data analysis made reactivity a significant consideration. As Webb, Cambell, Schwartz, Sechrest, and Grove (1981) explain,

> Interviews . . . intrude as a foreign element into the social setting they would describe, they create as well as measure attitudes, they elicit atypical roles and responses, they are limited to those who are accessible and will cooperate, and the responses obtained are produced in part by dimensions of individual differences irrelevant to the topic at hand (p. 1).

Maxwell (1998) concurs, "the interviewer has a powerful and inescapable influence on the data collected; what the interviewee says is *always* a function of the interviewer and the interview situation" (italics in the original) (p. 92).

Webb *et al.* (1981) argue that when interviews are supplemented by other methods of data collection the methodological weakness of one is offset by the other. My main concern in using interviews as the sole source of data collection was the likelihood that participants would react to me in the interview process and inadvertently tell me what I wanted to hear (or what they assumed I wanted to hear) and/or alter their stories so that they could reveal themselves to me in the most favourable light. I was likewise concerned that I would react to the participants and hear what I wanted to hear and not what was actually being said. I worried that my questioning might inadvertently influence how the participants told their stories and the meaning they derived from their experiences. In the analysis phase I worried that I would be tempted to highlight the data that confirmed my emerging understandings and selectively ignore the data that did not. This type of reactivity and researcher bias left unchecked would have reduced both the credibility and the dependability of the study.

According to Taylor and Bogdan (1984), nonreactive measures (i.e., measures that are neither under the researcher's nor the participants' influence) "are designed to minimize or eliminate the researcher's effect on the people and the settings being studied" (p.117). After consulting an inventory of nonreactive measures (Webb *et al,* 1981), I chose as my nonreactive measure existing sources of data, namely published memoirs, autobiographies and other non-fictional accounts of disengagement.

Throughout the research process I intentionally sought out and read autobiographical accounts of disengagement experiences (see Appendix K). Reading these non-fictional accounts proved to be of immense interest and value. Initially they helped me prepare for the research project itself, making me more sensitive to particular disengagement experiences, increasing my intrigue and commitment to the project, and affirming for me the topic's significance and relevancy. During the proposal phase, I found these non-fictional accounts to be helpful in the formulation of the interview guide. During the data collection phase, I relied on these accounts to help me prepare for interviews. They also enabled me to become informed about leavings that I was not able to capture in my sample. For example, an individual leaving professional sports, individuals leaving extremist groups (Neo-Nazi movement and magical orders), a religious cult, and geographic and cultural leavings, particularly of visible minority groups. During the data collection and analysis phases I compared my interview transcripts (reactive measures) with the autobiographies (nonreactive measures) to control for possible researcher bias, to minimize the impact my preconceptions and interview guide may have had on the data.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the degree to which the findings of a study can be supported or collaborated by others (Trochim, 2006). The method I used was the *inquiry audit* whereby the processes of data collection and the resulting product, (i.e., the raw data and the analysis), are scrutinized (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The processes of data collection, such as the two-interview strategy and the interview guide were used consistently with each participant. Each interview proceeded in much the same manner.

This process was transparent and replicable. I maintained records consisting of my coding reports, analytical maps and tables, and other "data reconstruction and syntheses products" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 319) as a way of confirming and supporting my analysis. Hence it was possible for me to provide evidence of how and why I arrived at the conclusions that I did.

Limitations

A limitation of the design concerns the possible inaccuracy of the participants' understandings of their past selves in relation to their present selves. There is a tendency to perceive one's current self as "happier" (Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Bulman, 1978) and better "adjusted" (Woodruff & Birren, 1972) than one's past self even when there is little to no evidence to support this claim and when no real change is apparent. Wilson and Ross (2000) suggest that "people sometimes exaggerate their personal progress by being too critical of their past performances" (p. 929). The risk in using temporal self-appraisals in this study is that participants may negatively exaggerate their understandings of themselves prior to disengagement and inflate their post disengagement adjustment in an effort to "justify" the leaving. The coming together of past self-bashing and present self-praising may result in findings which magnify the degree of rupture disengagement produced in the research participants' lives and heighten the complexity of identity transitions.

This limitation would be of greater concern were it not for the "fact" that the stated purpose of this research is to advance understanding about the constructed realities of the research participants and not the production of verifiable facts. The intention of this project is not to elicit "accuracy" but to understand subjective experiences. However,

an attempt was made to augment the participants' temporal evaluations with social evaluations. Wilson and Ross (2000) observed that individuals tend to use temporal comparisons when they wish to positively evaluate themselves and social comparisons when they wish to accurately evaluate themselves. By coupling social comparison questions with temporal comparison questions the trustworthiness of the data was enhanced.

CHAPTER 5

Narrative Introduction to Sample Participants

We are what we remember. . .perhaps. . .we are also –preponderantly – what we forget.
--MARGARET ATWOOD, *Alias Grace*

As this is a narrative study I decided to introduce each participant by telling their story albeit briefly. These narratives are the products of a balancing act – balancing my need to introduce the reader to each participant, their identity and story, with the participant's right to anonymity. Hence some identifying details have been omitted in this chapter but may appear in the following chapter in a tabulated form where they cannot be directly linked to a specific participant. In the interests of brevity I selected and synthesized the details I deemed to be foundational and relevant to the purposes of the study. I have included the participant's own words whenever possible.

Religious "Cult"[1] Group Leavings

Claire

Claire grew up as a third generation Jehovah's Witness. As a teenager, she had some misgivings about the organization. Although she did, upon occasion, openly question the organization, she generally found that her questions were responded to in an open and encouraging manner. The elders often gave her answers that were satisfying. However there were a few occasions when she was reprimanded by the elders for "inappropriate behaviour," such as going to the public library and reading material that was not officially sanctioned and having friends who were not Jehovah's Witnesses.

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[1] Each of the two participants who left the Jehovah Witnesses labelled the group a "cult," primarily because of their experiences of ego destruction (i.e., "brain washing") while members. As this is a narrative analysis, and it is important that I use the participants' words and reflect their understandings and experiences as accurately as possible, I have included the word "cult". However, it should be noted that most religious scholars (see, for example Bowker, 1997) do not consider the Jehovah Witnesses to be a cult because the group lacks the primary characteristics of a cult such as small membership, a charismatic leader, and an emphasis on mystic experience.

Despite these things, Claire became a full-fledged member through baptism at the age of 15. She had a genuine enthusiasm and commitment to the organization. At the age of 18, she married another Jehovah's Witness.

At the time of her marriage the organization was predicting the end of the world in two years time and young couples were discouraged from having children, as it was believed these children "would all die at Armageddon." Claire and her husband wanted children so they decided to go against the organization's wishes. They had three sons, whom they raised as Jehovah's Witnesses.

In keeping with the values and beliefs of her faith, Claire did not work outside of the home. She remained active in the organization, spending over five hours each week in meetings and services and up to fifty hours a month proselytizing door-to-door. Claire's commitment to the organization began to wane when her marriage deteriorated. Her husband was disfellowshipped (i.e., the group formally terminated his membership) because he was "caught smoking." As a result, Claire lost status within the organization. At this time, her husband, who had been physically and emotionally abusive, threatened to kill her. When Claire expressed her real fear that she may be killed, the elders flippantly asked her, "What kind of flowers would you like on your coffin?" The elders' blatant disregard for her safety and the safety of her children triggered Claire's slow disengagement from the group.

Claire left her husband and raised her three sons as a single mother. She began to work outside the home and eventually was able to buy herself a car and later a home. She began to attend fewer and fewer meetings and to do less and less proselytizing. She stopped raising her sons as Jehovah's Witnesses and secretly began to celebrate birthdays

and Christmas. Claire's disengagement was prolonged because of her desire to remain in contact with her mother. If she had left outright she would have been "disfellowshipped" by the group and all ties with members, including family members would have been severed. Like Sean, when Claire's mother died it was a bittersweet moment, associated with both liberation and loss. Currently, Claire has a very successful career and enjoys her life. Her children are full-grown now and none of them remained in the Jehovah's Witness organization. Claire remarried several years ago. She is not affiliated with any religious organization.

Laura

Laura grew up in a non-religious home but always considered herself "to be a spiritual person." As a child, she attended church even though the rest of her family did not. At the age of 12 she became "disillusioned" with church and stopped attending, but it left a "void" in her life. After high school, Laura got an entry-level position at a bank that held opportunity for advancement. She was quite lonely as many of her friends from high school had moved to pursue educational or employment opportunities elsewhere.

A year after graduation, Laura bumped into an old high school friend who invited Laura to spend the weekend at her house. This friend's mother was a Jehovah's Witness and Laura, not knowing anything about the organization, was quite intrigued. She soon began to study to become a member herself. She was attracted to the organization because it offered hope ("hope for living forever on the earth") and certainty ("I didn't have to wonder anymore"). Laura also enjoyed the friendships and feeling she belonged to a community. The group filled the spiritual and social voids in her life. Laura proved

to be a quick study and within six months she became a baptized member of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Upon the advice of the organization, Laura quit her full-time job. She got a less prestigious part-time job so that she could devote more time to proselytizing door-to-door. Laura was shy and she found proselytizing difficult, yet she described herself as committed and enthusiastic for the first three years of her membership. She then began to see a level of dishonesty and hypocrisy within the organization that troubled her. She saw elders who were self-serving and not leading by example. They would argue with each other and many did not seem happy or enthusiastic. A significant event leading to Laura's disengagement happened in this early period of her membership. She was sexually molested by an older female mentor within the organization. She was accused of being "a willing participant" and was disciplined by way of a process called "private reproof," which involved her not being allowed to participate in meetings and to proselytize. Laura was devastated.

Shortly after Laura met and married her husband, who was also a Witness. Her marriage was difficult from the beginning. The family's tight financial situation was further taxed by the birth of two children. Laura's husband's behaviour became erratic and it was discovered that he had a mental illness. The Jehovah's Witnesses consider psychiatric medication to be "evil". Laura knew that divorce was also prohibited. She felt trapped. In desperation, she went against the organization by giving her husband an ultimatum – "either receive professional help or I will leave you." He responded by going to a psychiatrist and taking medication, which unfortunately proved ineffective. He became more controlling and Laura described herself as "exhausted" and "wearing down

mentally". She became suicidal and had thoughts of killing her children. She approached the organization asking for help and, much to her surprise they suggested that she leave her husband, which she did. After a year and a half separation Laura and her husband reconciled but things quickly spiralled out of control. Laura became suicidal again and had thoughts about killing her children. She separated from her husband for a second time and shortly afterwards he committed suicide. She moved out of the area and tried to build a new life.

To support her family, but going against the organization's wishes, Laura took a full-time job and began to take courses. Her social world expanded and she gained financial independence. The challenges of full-time work and raising her children as a single mother while also trying to keep up with her obligations within the organization, left Laura exhausted. She asked the organization for some relief and was denied. This led Laura to take matters into her own hands and she stopped attending meetings.

Laura was a Jehovah's Witness for thirty years before she voluntarily left the organization ten years ago. By leaving voluntarily, Laura has not been shunned by her friends, her two adult children and their spouses and children, all of whom have remained Jehovah's Witnesses. However, even now if it were to be discovered that she was behaving in a manner inconsistent with the organization's teachings, she could be "disfellowshipped" and shunned. Consequently, Laura remains cautious. She took a risk in participating in this study because disclosing details about the organization and herself to an "unbeliever" (as I would be considered) would not be sanctioned. For that reason, Laura and I had to use extreme caution in our communications with each other and our actual interviews were done in a safe and secret location.

Religious-Cultural Group Leavings

Hannah

Hannah was born and raised in an old order branch of the Mennonite Church. Values of the group included humility, community, pacifism and separation from "the world". The group opposed the use of modern technology. Education was discouraged beyond grade 10 and Hannah indicated her career "options" were limited to being a wife and a mother. Hannah described her social life as "preset". She was not allowed to meet with friends socially during the week. However, she did go to a public school, which allowed her to make some friends and connections with the "outside world."

Old order Mennonites have distinctive forms of dress. While a member, Hannah wore a "covering" which consisted of a plain dark dress, an apron, and cape. Her hair was never cut. It had to be parted in the middle, worn in a bun and covered with a bonnet or "prayer covering." Hannah indicated that her dress had to conform to the group's expectations "right down to the dart."

Hannah credits the group for providing her with a strong sense of belonging and feelings of being taken care of. However, her desire for higher education and her reluctance to become a wife and mother were in sharp opposition to the group's expectations. The group was patriarchic and hierarchic in nature. Parents were held responsible for their children's compliance to group expectations and if children deviated the parents could be disciplined. Hannah remarked, "My parents didn't have individual rules about what we could and couldn't do. The church had very, very strong control." She added, "There was also, for women at least, the sense of always being watched by other people, both your peers and people older than you; they were always watching."

Hannah left the group at the age of 19. Several of her older siblings had voluntarily left several years earlier. Her parents and her two younger siblings were pushed out of the group six months prior to Hannah's voluntary leaving because her father had refused to comply with one of the prohibitions against modern technology (he had a radio). Hannah decided to stay and she made a commitment to herself to be the best old order Mennonite she could be. After a few months she realized she could not sustain these efforts. Yet she remained in the group "because all of her friends were there".

Young people in the old order tradition are expected to be baptized in their late teens. By this point Hannah had no intentions of making this formal commitment to the group because her theology and values were irreconcilable with those of the group. Hence, as she approached the end of her teen years, she had to make a decision to either be baptized or leave the group. When her friends started to pull away, the social and the emotional benefits of membership diminished and Hannah knew it was time to leave.

Hannah described her disengagement process as "painful" and "slow." For many years she struggled with depression, which she attributed to her transition out of the group and to sexual abuse she had experienced within the group. Hannah is currently completing a doctorate degree. She is single and childless by choice. She attends a modern Mennonite church.

Faith

Faith was born and raised in the Christian Reformed Church (CRC), a group she described as having "both a religious affiliation and a cultural affiliation and a world and life view that was all encompassing". Her parents were post World War II Dutch immigrants. Faith's early life revolved around the church. She attended a private

parochial school associated with the church. She attended church services twice each Sunday and had weekly catechism instruction. Her social life consisted of attending a girls' club and later a youth group, each affiliated with the church. Faith's home life included Bible reading and prayers four times a day.

Faith's access to the "outside world" was quite limited until she attended a public high school. It was there that she found teachers who considered her "smart" and who nurtured her academic development. She described herself as a "voracious reader" and through her reading she became exposed to feminism, psychology, politics, and world and life views that were different from those espoused by her CRC community. Faith's parents were opposed to her achieving higher education, as it would cause her "to lose her faith." Her parents were also hoping Faith would marry a "Dutch boy" and remain in the community. They worried that advanced education would ruin her marriage chances.

Faith believes her family and her membership in the CRC kept her grounded and provided her with stability, community, and belonging. However, she also described the CRC as limiting and controlling. Faith had numerous questions about the theology, doctrines and practices of the church but she was actively discouraged, and in several instances publicly humiliated, for asking these questions. She was in constant friction with her father and rebelled against his patriarchic views. Much like Hannah, Faith had a desire for higher education that was discouraged and she sought to have more options in life than being a wife and mother. Also similar to Hannah, Faith described membership in the group as including "a sense of being watched. Like big brother is watching . . .there was a security in it but there was always a sense too of being watched and judged." Even

so, in her early teens, Faith voluntarily became a full member of the group in a commitment ceremony known as Public Profession of Faith.

Faith grew up in a large family and she is the only member to have left the CRC. All of her siblings married CRC members and are raising their children in the CRC community. All her nieces and nephews attend the church affiliated schools. Faith stopped attending the CRC on a regular basis when she went to university but she officially left the church when she was in her mid-twenties. She has not joined another religious group but does describe herself as a very "spiritual" person. She was married for a brief period of time to a non-member of the CRC and she has a child from that union.

Cultural Group Leavings

Mark

Mark was born in Canada, the oldest child of American immigrants. Mark grew up feeling he didn't culturally fit in either Canada or the United States. Mark's parents, poor themselves, were interested in social justice for the poor. Mark grew up in a black inner city community that was rife with poverty and violence. He was aware that he didn't fit in because of his skin colour (he was "one of the few" white people in his school and community) and because he was gifted academically and had good grades. In his teens, Mark and his family moved to a large, affluent city in Ontario. He was struck by the whiteness of his peers and how he now "fit in" with respect to skin colour. Yet he continued to feel like "one of the few" because his family was poor. His values of social justice and his dislike of consumerism, name brand clothing, and the emphasis placed on owning things, set him apart from his high school peers.

These feelings of not fitting culturally due to differences in values, appearance, and citizenship, came to a head in university when Mark fell into a deep depression. After taking a year off school, he returned to university, changed his major from business to psychology and finished his degree. Mark faced "another bout of depression" in graduate school. He was in an internship and was making good connections with affluent and powerful people within his chosen field. He was making good strides in his career but it was coming at a cost. Mark noted, "That was a time of realizing that I was good at playing a role because I had seen it. I knew it inside and out. I could play the role . . . but it was killing me to do that." Mark's depression lifted when he came to the realization "I need to be who I am." But it took several years after that realization before he found his place culturally.

After being in his career for a few years, Mark had an opportunity to go to Latin America. Locally, he was involved in a few social action efforts but he had a sense "that [Latin America] was where the social justice would take me". He was profoundly changed as a result of this trip. He met and married an American woman who worked in Latin America, a woman who shared his cultural and social values. He visited the area once more before he and his wife settled there for an extended period of time.

Mark, his wife and two children have lived in Latin America, the United States and Canada. Mark is a dual citizen (Canadian and American) but identifies as more Canadian than American. He feels less affiliation with Western North American values of independence, wealth and consumerism than he does with the economic values and resource sharing he was exposed to in Latin America. Mark has found peace by intentionally disengaging from the dominant culture. He calls it "mindful living" and it

includes, among other things, the decision not to own a car, to live on a limited income, to volunteer in his downtown community and, as Mark describes somewhat tongue in cheek, to raise his children to be "anti-suburban".

Territorial -Socioeconomic Group Leavings

Sean

Sean grew up in a remote, insular, out-port fishing village that had a population of 180 people. Sean described his ancestors as loggers and fishermen who had for generations "liv[ed] from the land . . . a subsistence lifestyle, in debt to merchants." The fishing village was only accessible by water but by the time Sean was born a gravel road existed. The nearest service center and doctor's office were a 45-minute drive away.

Sean's father was a violent man who was both feared and loathed in the community. Sean witnessed his father degrading and torturing his mom. On numerous occasions, Sean's father threatened to kill his mother, siblings, or Sean using a loaded gun or knives. His father severely abused Sean both physically and sexually. Sean recalls living in abject poverty, dressing in used and inadequate clothing and the few toys he owned coming from the village dump.

Sean grew up the youngest of eight children. His mother was twelve when she first met his father and thirteen when she had her first child. Each of Sean's siblings left the family in their early to mid-teens to escape their father's abuse. Some of Sean's brothers left for menial labour jobs in other parts of the country. His sisters moved in with their boyfriends or friends' families in neighbouring communities. Most of Sean's siblings married in their mid to late teens. None of them finished high school. The

siblings' early absence from the home meant that Sean and his mother were left to bear the sole brunt of the abuse.

Sean was told repeatedly by his father that he was "stupid." Due to the violence in his home and his learning disabilities, which were as yet undiagnosed, Sean did not do well in school. As a result, he began to internalize his father's belief that he was stupid. His school life was also plagued by social isolation. Sean had few friends. His low self-esteem was augmented by the facts that he was overweight, had poor hygiene, was poorly dressed, and had "the worst hair cuts."

Sean credits his escape from this lifestyle of violence, isolation and poverty to several individuals in his community who nurtured him, tried to protect him, and fostered in him a desire for higher education and achievement. Sean's mother, despite the violence tried to nurture Sean and encourage him but her own lack of education and oppression left her unable to guide or support him academically. The early death of Sean's mother, although tragic, was a catalyst in his disengagement as he admits it would have been impossible for him to leave the community knowing his mother was alone and unprotected from his father. Like Hannah, Sean's disengagement was slow and painful and complicated by childhood trauma. Sean barely made it out alive because of his father's threats to his life and his own nearly successful suicide attempt.

After his mother's death Sean moved to a neighbouring community and lived with his older sister where he completed high school. He then moved to an urban area to attend university. Currently Sean is in graduate school. He has worked and lived abroad. He does not consider any specific location to be his "home" but he does have many friends and family members with whom he feels at home.

Beth

Beth grew up in a small town in the heart of rural Ontario. She became pregnant at age 17 and married at age 18. She described her first marriage as a "stupid thing to do." After the birth of her second child, the marriage dissolved. Her ex-husband received full custody of the children and Beth took it hard. She found it excruciatingly painful to visit her children but not be able to live with them on a day-to-day basis. She decided to move away for a while to sort things out. While away she discovered she was pregnant. She returned to the area to establish a life and a home with the father of her child, who became her second husband. Meanwhile she discovered that the time away had proved immensely helpful. She returned in much better shape mentally and found herself able to cope with the custodial loss of her oldest two children and she was resolved to be an involved and committed non-custodial parent.

Early on in the relationship, Beth's second husband became abusive. Beth had grown up in a "difficult" family and her first husband had also been abusive. She thought it was manageable and perhaps even typical of marriages. However, as a family they went through several difficult periods due to Beth developing a serious and life threatening illness and her husband's mother dying of cancer. Beth's husband responded by drinking heavily and using drugs. The abuse escalated but Beth again considered it manageable and normative given the stresses the family was under. She considered herself able and prepared to handle it.

By all appearances the family was doing well. Beth and her husband were respected members of the community. They both grew up in the area and their families and many of their friends continued to live there. Beth and her husband owned several

businesses. As such, they had significant ties to the business community. They owned a large home in a "good" area of town.

All that changed when Beth was severely beaten by her husband. Unlike the previous beatings, this time he threatened to kill her. After her children left for school and without any forethought, Beth decided to leave. She left with the shoes on her feet and little else. She went to the local women's shelter and several staff accompanied her to her children's school and they successfully brought the children into the shelter.

In leaving her husband, Beth disengaged from her community, her occupation, and she lost all of her friends, and social and business connections. She lost many of the things that had once defined her: her marriage, her business success, her century home, her garden, her books (she was a book collector and had a substantial first and limited edition collection), and her involvement and status in the community. She indicated that in leaving her husband she lost a lot of material possessions but adds, "To put my finger really on everything I lost it was probably largely a sense of myself."

Beth has received full custody of her three youngest children and she remains active in the lives of her oldest two children. Being a mother is one identity she is proud of and has maintained. Currently Beth is trying to rebuild her life. She has made new social connections and is considering going back to school. Her ex-husband continues to threaten her life and at the time of this interview she and her children were in hiding.

Sexual Orientation Group Leavings

Hillary

Hillary grew up in Ireland, the only child of wealthy Catholic parents. She attended private schools, took dance and elocution lessons and had expensive holidays.

Hillary's father physically abused and threatened to kill Hillary's mom. On more than one occasion Hillary woke up in the night to her mother's screams for help. Hillary's father had once been a butcher and during one of these violent night time rituals he held his butcher's knife to his wife's throat while telling Hillary in graphic detail how he would cut her mother up like a slaughtered animal. This image haunts Hillary to this day. Hillary and her mom went to the Catholic Church for assistance but were turned away because of a sentiment that abuse didn't happen in wealthy families.

Hillary had her first lesbian experience at age 15. Given her strong Catholic values, she assumed she was "dirty" and "evil". She was raped at age 18 and shortly thereafter started dating her future husband. Hillary had plans to go to university but they were quickly shelved by her father, who refused to pay for her education, and by her own unplanned pregnancy. Hillary married because "it was the right thing" to do and because there were few options in Ireland at that time. Abortions were illegal and raising a child as a single unwed mother was socially frowned upon.

Hillary tried to make her marriage work by focusing on her children, taking courses when she could, and becoming involved in her church. However, she became disillusioned with the Catholic Church and started to feel that her children, all daughters, would have few opportunities in Ireland. Hillary and her husband made the decision to immigrate to Canada.

Prior to immigrating Hillary claimed, "I no longer knew who I was." She described herself as living and making decisions solely for the benefit of her daughters. But once in Canada, Hillary began to feel more alive. She enrolled in university. She stopped going to church and felt less controlled by Catholic doctrine. Hillary began to

address the problems in her marriage, which not only led to her and her husband's separation but also to her eventual realization that she was not "evil" or a "failed heterosexual" but, in fact, lesbian. When Hillary first started to date women she tried to be discrete because she wanted to give herself time to feel comfortable with her new self-understandings before telling her children. Unfortunately, a co-worker "outed" Hillary, which forced her to disclose her orientation to her family before she felt ready.

Hillary continued her studies and currently practices social work in the small town where she lives. She lives with her female partner and together they parent Hillary's children.

Victor

Victor had his first sexual experience with a male when he was nine years old. It was a mutual and consenting relationship with a friend of the same age. This relationship continued until they were both 17. At this point, Victor had no understanding of himself as gay. He understood his sexual behaviour with his friend as "fooling around" but not reflective of his orientation. Victor admits, "I had at that time no understanding of what gay meant and it certainly didn't match anything that was connected to me." In high school, Victor dated girls and was sexually active with them. On several occasions he was taunted for being gay and he recalls reacting with intense anger and denial. In university, Victor had a one-year relationship with a woman whom he cared for deeply. The relationship ended due to several factors but they continued to be friends.

Several years later, Victor met a woman, Alex, and they had a "summer fling." During this same summer, Victor had his first adult sexual experience with an adult male. He admits being confused and not being able to understand his behaviour or himself. By

summer's end, Victor and Alex discovered Alex was pregnant. Victor went into "shock mode" and was determined to do the right thing. He and Alex get married and he was committed to being a good husband and father. Victor admits he "buried" the sexual experiences he had with men and "there was no processing". He felt numb but had no understanding of why.

After several years of marriage, Victor had a "nervous breakdown" and was hospitalized. He was out of touch with reality, depressed and he had physical health problems. With professional help and family support he came to the conclusion that his marriage was unworkable. He began living on his own, sharing custody of his child with his ex-wife. He felt his life was back on track. He returned to university but after a brief period of time the pressures of school drove him to seek counselling once again. His therapist happened to be openly gay and Victor responded very adversely toward him. Victor became extremely agitated and anxious in sessions and during one session he started to dissociate. This event marked the beginning of Victor's coming out process. Victor has been openly gay for the past ten years. He has a male partner and they share joint custody of Victor's child with Victor's ex-wife.

Mary

Mary grew up in a religious home, where strong values were placed on family and community. When Mary entered her teen years, she was depressed and at times suicidal. She understood the source of her depression to be an underlying feeling she did not fit in and did not belong. She responded by keeping very busy and by being over-involved in school and church activities. She developed intense relationships with a few of her close female friends and "felt abandoned" when they eventually married. She sensed that

"something was not quite right" but had "no understanding of what was wrong". Mary went off to college for a year before settling back in her home community and marrying a man she had dated in high school.

Mary and her husband had three children and became immersed in church and family life. Mary continued to over achieve, became active in numerous projects and committees and she began fostering children through the Children's Aid Society. To all appearances, Mary and her husband had a model marriage. They had three children, a beautiful home, a successful business and were pillars of their church community. But Mary continued to suffer from depression and she had severe headaches. After the birth of her third child, Mary went to counselling and began studying at university. It was through these two avenues that Mary gained greater self-awareness and came to understand herself to be lesbian. It took her two years for Mary to come out to her husband and another two years before they separated. When her children were younger she shared custody with her ex-husband. She currently lives in a committed relationship with her female partner.

Gender Group Leavings

Chris[2]

As a child, Chris was a "tom boy." She could not recall ever identifying as a girl. She liked "boy's sports" and chose to dress in unisex clothing or her older brother's hand-me-downs. She was often mistaken for a boy because "there was the assumption based on the clothes and based on the activities that I was doing that I was a boy." Chris

[2] In keeping with Swenson's (2006) recommendations for appropriate and respectful pronoun usage with transgendered individuals, I will use pronouns that are consistent with Chris' self-understanding at the period of time in question. Hence I will use female pronouns (she and her) when referring to Chris in her earlier life and male pronouns (he, him, and his) to refer to Chris since his decision to transition.

ran into significant difficulties when she entered school. Some teachers prevented her from entering the girl's washroom, assuming she was a boy. Chris would at times go into the boy's washroom and be told to get out.

At age eight or nine, Chris recalls "wishing, really, really, wishing I was a guy." Prior to this age she thought she might magically change into a boy but by age eight or nine she realized her gender would never change, at least not "naturally". This was the age when she understood that neither "male" nor "female" were meaningful categories for her. This "feeling has remained consistent."

Puberty "was terrible" for Chris for a number of reasons. Her mother died of cancer when she was thirteen years old. Chris developed an eating disorder and essentially "starved herself for about eight months." She has few memories of this period of time and finds it impossible to distil how much of her eating disorder was related to "gender stuff" (perhaps an unconscious effort to maintain an androgynous body and stave off the external markers of femaleness; breast development, and menstruation), and how much was related to the trauma of her mother's death. To complicate matters, Chris had a twin sister and separating from her and establishing a singular identity was difficult.

In her early twenties, Chris came out as "lesbian" and her relationships and sexual discoveries were "good distractions" for a while. Although Chris became quite intrigued with gender illusionists and people who "played with gender," she didn't make any direct connections between them and her own gender understandings. However, when studying for her Master's degree Chris came to a "cognitive" and "theoretical understanding" that she was transgendered. For the next three years she did a lot of reading and self-exploration. She befriended people who had transitioned and spoke to them about their

experiences and self-understandings. She also spoke to other friends and her female partner to determine their reactions and gauge their support. It was a period of time wherein she worked through and achieved self-acceptance. After achieving both internal and external validation that a gender change was indeed the right decision for her, Chris made the decision to transition.

Last year Chris began his transition. His dress, mannerisms, and presentation are male. He takes testosterone. His voice has lowered and he has other bodily changes as a result. He will be officially changing his name to something more masculine. He plans to have chest surgery and a hysterectomy, but those are the only gender reassignment surgeries he is considering at this point.

Heather[3]

H. was born intersexed, meaning he had both male and female reproductive organs. Upon the advice of the physician and with a "little bit of stitchery here and there" H.'s parents determined to raise him as a boy. H. was never told he was intersexed until the age of 11, when he began to menstruate and develop breasts. He found the news and all the pubescent changes to be extremely traumatic and he was unable to cope. H. ran away from home for periods of time, began using drugs and alcohol, and was "hooking on the streets". H.'s parents divorced when he was 12 and, at the age of 15, H. and his sister witnessed the death of their father in a freak accident. This event proved to be very significant in H.'s development, as he became determined to become the man he thought his father would have wanted him to be.

[3] To avoid confusion I will use the initial H. and the pronouns he and him to reflect the participant's gender understandings prior to the transition and the name Heather and the pronouns she and her to refer to her current gender understandings.

For the next seven to eight years, H. engaged in hyper-masculine activities. He played competitive sports and took steroids to make his body appear more masculine. Although extremely bright (H. was always in the gifted programs at school), his marks plummeted in high school as he tried to cope with the multiple traumas he had experienced. Hence, after high school, going to university was not an option and instead H. joined the army and became a "model solider".

However H. was finding it harder and harder to live as a male. While posted abroad, H. chose to leave the base on weekends when he was not on duty. When away, he would dress as a woman and go to lesbian bars with female friends. It was on one of these weekends that H. was spotted by a fellow soldier who reported him to his army superiors. When H. got back to the base he was locked up in jail, interrogated, tortured and sexually assaulted over a period of seventeen days after which he was discharged from the army.

H. returned to Canada and began to study at university. He "lived a double life," cross dressing and presenting as male on campus, but living as a woman at all other times. During the first year of graduate school, H. described his life as "no longer working" for him. He fell into a catatonic depression and spent time in a psychiatric hospital. When Heather left the hospital, which was sixteen years ago, she began to live exclusively as a woman. Three months before my interviews with Heather, she had sexual reassignment surgery. Heather lives in a common-law relationship with another woman. Together they parent two children.

Occupational Group Leavings

Brian

Brian grew up in a supportive Catholic family. He had several uncles who were priests and as a child he was intrigued with their lives and he desired to become a priest himself. In high school and university, Brian became involved in his local parish and he received praise for his work. This stood in sharp contrast to other areas of his life, specifically sports and academics, which were a struggle for him. By this point Brian knew he was gay and he reasoned it "would be safe" to be a priest. He admitted,

> If I became a priest it would be a way that no one would question my sexuality. It would not have to come up because priests don't get married. They don't have sexual relations with people.

After getting an undergraduate degree in philosophy and theology, Brian entered a Catholic seminary and studied for the priesthood. Brian had misgivings about entering the priesthood and also some tensions with other priests and bishops due to their attempts to have him to conform and "be like everyone else." Nevertheless, Brain was ordained. He enjoyed his first few years as a priest. He liked helping people and he was relatively happy. However, as the years progressed, Brian began to resent the church's control over his life. Resentments and problems began to build until one day Brian "snapped." He had an emotional breakdown and, in the process long-repressed memories of child sexual abuse perpetrated by a priest began to surface.

Brian decided to take a year off to sort out some things in his life. He reported his sexual abuse to the authorities with the sole intention of preventing his perpetrator from assaulting other children. Unbeknownst to him there was an ongoing investigation of this

priest and Brian's testimony proved crucial in leading to the priest's arrest and conviction.

After his year hiatus, Brian returned to the priesthood. Within three years things became rocky again. Brian went for counselling and came to the realization he was not happy and "he wanted to get on with his life." He made his final decision to leave the priesthood on the day he discovered that the priest who sexually assaulted him as a child had died. He was then able to put the abuse behind him and move on to new chapter in his life. After leaving the priesthood Brian went back university and he is now a social worker. He does not consider himself Catholic and he has not entered a church for over nine years.

Dorothy

Dorothy grew up as the eldest of three daughters in a loving and supportive family. Her parents placed a strong value on education and hard work and Dorothy grew up confident she would one day pursue post secondary education and have a career. In high school, Dorothy did not have any specific career plans but since she loved sewing she decided to study fashion, which at that time was still a female dominated career.

After graduation, Dorothy's first job was for a clothing company working in fashion retail. She was a hard worker and she thrived on challenges. She rapidly advanced in the company, becoming involved in various dimensions of fashion retail, including purchasing, sales, shipping, and distribution. She loved her job and developed close relationships with her co-workers. Given that she was single and childless, Dorothy chose to put a high emphasis on her career and it defined her life and identity.

Eight years after entering the field, Dorothy became disillusioned. She had advanced as far as she could within the company and a recent transfer to a "sister" company was unsatisfactory. Her new boss was threatened by Dorothy's experience and competence and Dorothy found that her opinions and advice were no longer solicited. Dorothy's self-esteem eroded. She began to consider a career change and she started to explore options through a women's employment agency. Then, with no apparent warning, Dorothy came into work one day and was told she was fired and she had to leave the premises by noon. She was immediately offered positions at other clothing companies, all of which would have been promotions. But Dorothy turned each of them down.

Dorothy recognizes that even though she was "fired" (i.e., an involuntary leaving) by declining these jobs she was voluntarily leaving the world of women's fashion. Dorothy admits she had wanted to move on and her boss actually did her a favour by firing her. In hindsight, Dorothy wonders if her growing sense that her career was no longer a fit for her may have been reflected in her job performance and was a factor in her firing. Dorothy had such strong values related to work, career, and financial independence that actively "choosing to leave" would have been hard for her to justify. It was made especially hard by the fact that the country was in a financial recession at that time and unemployment rates were high.

After her job loss, Dorothy spent six months in limbo trying to sort out what she wanted to do. She described this period of time as "very scary" but also "liberating". She went through a grief process and had to come to terms with her eroded self-esteem and loss of occupational identity. She struggled financially living, well below the poverty

line. She hooked up with a women's employment agency and found they helped her cope with the emotional impact of her job loss and identity related issues.

It took Dorothy six months before she decided on a new career in electronic engineering. Electronics represented a huge change in her occupational path as she was now entering a science related field and one, unlike fashion retail, that was male dominated. It took Dorothy a year to get herself ready for her educational program and three years to complete it. She worked in the field of electronics in various capacities, including teaching. Along the way she became quite passionate about addressing the discrimination women experience working in trades and technology. She got involved in a national organization and worked in Ottawa trying to make inroads with government officials and Ministers. This work dovetailed with her interests in recruiting more women into the trades and ultimately led to her current position as Executive Director of a women's employment agency.

Extremist Group Leavings

Trevor

Trevor grew up in a "dysfunctional home". He is a third generation alcoholic. Trevor was abused and recalls "being alone and afraid a lot". As a young child, Trevor was very intuitive and in arriving home after school he could often accurately predict the type of "war zone" he was about to walk into by the way the car was parked in the drive way or the way the curtains were drawn in the living room. Trevor had some psychological testing done recently and his scores for intuition were unusually high. Trevor wonders whether his intuition is a natural ability or if it developed out of necessity, to enable him to survive in his home. Either way, his intuition is a central

theme in his overall story. It is what allowed him to be successful in organized crime. It led to him to being noticed and to be recruited by an outlaw motorcycle club and ultimately it enabled him to know when it was time to leave it.

In his teens, Trevor got involved in drugs, alcohol, and petty crime. After numerous thefts and break-ins, Trevor was eventually caught and about to receive "serious jail time". However, as a self-described "master of manipulation," Trevor successfully argued before a judge that the sources of his crime were his addictions and hence he needed to be placed in a treatment center instead of going to jail. Trevor was kicked out of the treatment center and again he manipulated the system to end up in an outpatient treatment program instead of jail, all the while continuing to use drugs and alcohol. However, to his surprise, Trevor actually started to "come clean" in the outpatient program. He described this transition as the "first change" in his life and his first disengagement. He left all the "people, places, and things" that supported and enabled his alcohol and drug addictions and he tried to start his life over.

After a short while Trevor chose to frequent "stripper bars" as a way to meet women, "hang out with strippers" and "make money". From his earlier crimes, Trevor had established a reputation of being "solid," meaning he wouldn't "rat" on others when confronted by authorities. This reputation and the fact that he didn't use drugs or alcohol himself drew the attention of drug traffickers affiliated with a notorious biker gang. Initially, Trevor was asked to "hold drugs for them," but as Trevor proved discrete and reliable, they began offering him more dangerous and lucrative assignments. Trevor started to traffic drugs, "moving" 4 –5 kilos of cocaine per month and netting up to

$25,000 per month for himself and a sizable amount more for the biker gang. He also started numerous money laundering operations.

Trevor loved the money and the perks his lifestyle afforded. He described himself as "addicted to the adrenaline, sex, and money". He was gaining a reputation of being a tough guy and he used his biker connections to intimidate people. However, he started to become fearful when he was asked to step things up from drug trafficking to holding illegal weapons. There was talk that he was going to start a "puppet club" in his city for the biker gang and "if it lasted a year and we didn't get killed or blown up, we would eventually become the real thing." Trevor started to become increasingly concerned about his own physical safety. Trevor made his decision to leave when a guy from another outlaw motorcycle club made it known that he wanted to kill Trevor. They were involved in a turf war – fighting over the ownership of drug trafficking rights in "their city". Fortunately for Trevor, the man who threatened his life was incarcerated for killing someone else before he could follow through on his plans to kill Trevor. While in jail, the man committed suicide. When Trevor heard about the suicide he initially felt elation and relief. After that "the shock and the scare of having someone want to kill for real started to set in . . . [and] I knew there would be others". He observed, "Underneath the whole player lifestyle of women, money, and adrenaline – this was adrenaline I couldn't handle. I didn't want to handle. If we get back to that sense of self, I knew one thing for sure, I couldn't kill somebody".

Trevor left the world of bikers and organized crime. This was his second disengagement and his second attempt at starting a new life. Recalling lessons learned from his first transition, Trevor left all "people, places and things". He relocated and for

the past five years has been trying to hold down a job and lead a law-abiding life. He has had numerous set backs and challenges and has suffered several emotional breakdowns. Part of his "recovery" involves the painful acknowledgement that he exploited women while a "biker" and that he manipulated, threatened, and hurt others. It has been hard for him to incorporate his past into his current understanding of self. Yet he remains committed to examining himself with brutal honesty, as he understands such honesty as the only way to move forward and develop his identity.

Dis/ability Group Leavings[4]

José

José's story involved two momentous disengagement experiences. The first was non-voluntary. In his teens, José was a promising young musician when he contracted meningitis that left him partially deafened. His hearing fluctuated for several years before deteriorating completely. He moved from the hearing to the deaf world. José went through a period of intense denial such that he continued to audition for singing and guitar playing jobs and he enrolled in college to study music. The constant rejection and failure forced José to confront his hearing loss. He went through a grief process characterized by depression, and the use of alcohol and cocaine.

Eight years after becoming deafened, José made his first connections with the deaf community and culture. He joined a deaf social club and felt a greater sense of belonging there then he had among hearing people. At the deaf social club he met a deafened woman. They married and had a son. He began to learn American Sign Language (ASL) and he started leading self-help groups for late deafened adults. José

[4] Following the typology of Kummen (2003), one of the leavings I captured in my sample was that of "disabled" to "abled". However, I put the word "abled" in quotation marks because José described his self-understandings as transitioning from "deafened" to "cochlear implantee". He still identifies as disabled.

also joined a deaf 12-step program but withdrew when it became evident his self-understanding as related to his deafness differed from other group members. For them deafness defined them, and created and shaped their identity and social worlds. For José, deafness was a "deficit," something that cut him off from others. He found the group unable or perhaps even unwilling to understand his feelings of loss and isolation.

José's understanding of self as related to his hearing loss was an evolving process. Initially, he denied he was deaf. Later, he spoke of himself as "a hearing person trapped in the body of a deaf man". He described himself as a "half-breed" stuck between the hearing and the deaf worlds but not part of either one. Within the deaf community, he felt like "an outsider." Because he learned ASL as an adult, he could not sign as fast or as fluently as those who had learned from birth. He compared his experiences to that of immigrants who learn the language of their host country; "If you have an accent or fumble for the right word you are marked a 'foreigner' and you will never be accepted as 'one of us'". He ultimately began to understand himself as "deafened" rather than "deaf." The former term refers to individuals who acquire deafness in adulthood after having been acculturated into the hearing world, whereas the latter term refers to those who have never been able to hear and have been acculturated into the deaf world. Likewise, associations and self-help groups for late deafened adults were a better fit for him than groups for the deaf.

José's second disengagement was voluntary when, twenty years after he became deafened, he received one of the first 22-channel cochlear implants (CI). José does not now identify as "hearing" but instead as a "cochlear implantee." He can function easier in the hearing world than before and he is able to comprehend sound, hear music, and

engage in direct conversation. He can also hear his own voice, which allows him to control its pitch, tone, and volume. However, his "hearing" will always depend on the functioning of his CI processor. He cannot "hear" in crowded and noisy rooms and he cannot determine the directionality of speech. He continues to rely on methods such as ASL, lip reading, the TTY, and his Blackberry to communicate effectively. Hence, he does not consider himself to be "hearing."

After receiving his cochlear implant, José went to university and received an undergraduate degree and later a graduate degree. After six years of marriage, José and his first wife divorced. José remarried and has an eight year old daughter from that union. His second wife is also deafened and has a cochlear implant. They have raised their daughter to communicate using verbal speech and ASL.

Summary

To allow the reader to keep track of the sixteen study participants and their stories when reading the upcoming analysis, I have provided the following table as a quick reference and summary.

Table 1: Summary of Participants and Social Groups

Name	Type of Social Group	Specific Group	Time in Group	Time Since Disengagement
Claire	Religious	Jehovah's Witness	37 years	13 years
Laura	Religious	Jehovah's Witness	30 years	10 years
Hannah	Religious-Cultural	Old Order Mennonite	19 ½ years	25 years
Faith	Religious-Cultural	Christian Reformed Church	27 years	22 years
Mark	Cultural	Western-Northern	25 years (approx.)	10 years (approx.)
Sean	Territorial Socio-economic	Remote out-port community with subsidized economy	18 years	11 years
Beth	Territorial Socio-economic	Middle class, business owner in small urban center	31 years	14 months

Name	Type of Social Group	Specific Group	Time in Group	Time Since Disengagement
Hillary	Sexual Orientation	Heterosexual	34 years	9 years
Victor	Sexual Orientation	Heterosexual	27 years	10 years
Mary	Sexual Orientation	Heterosexual	37 years	12 years
Chris	Gender	Female	30+ years	16 months
Heather	Gender	Male	22 years	16 years
Brian	Occupation	Priesthood	11 years	10 years
Dorothy	Occupation	Women's Fashion	8 years	24 years
Trevor	Extremist Group	World of Outlaw Bikers and Organized Crime	4 ½ years	5 ½ years
José	Dis/ability	Deafened Adult	20 years	14 years

CHAPTER 6

Description of the Sample: The Participants and Social Groups

Tell me what company you keep,
And I'll tell you what you are.
--MIGUEL DE CERVANTES, Don Quixote de la Mancha

This chapter is divided into two sections: the first section provides demographic information about the research participants, the second, descriptive information about the social groups from which they disengaged. This information was obtained from The General Demographic Information Form each participant completed prior to his or her first interview (see Appendix I), and from information disclosed during the interviews.

This chapter does not offer a bald presentation of the sample demographics but attempts to highlight the ways in which specific demographics bore significance for the participant with respect to either his or her self-understanding or the disengagement process. As Riessman (1993) explains, a narrative analysis does not separate content from the form in which it appears. While compiling the demographic and descriptive information, I continually asked myself: Why did the individual highlight this particular bit of information? Why did he or she describe him or herself in this way? What relevance does it hold for him or her? These probes helped me discern the possible meaning that lay behind the bare "facts". In doing this type of analysis I discovered that certain story lines related to the sample were of more importance than others either because of their frequency or their explanatory qualities. In this chapter I will take notable detours to delve into four such story lines which are: 1) ethnic and cultural identity, 2) education, 3) family of origin configuration, and 4) abuse.

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample Participants

Table 2 presents a summary of the demographic characteristics of the sample participants. Further information about each characteristic listed in the left hand column of Table 1 follows after the table. The demographic characteristics were not of equal importance with respect to increasing understanding about social group disengagement. The degree to which each characteristic was delved into is indicative of its overall significance.

Age and Gender

Two participants in the sample had as the foci of their interviews their disengagement from a gender group. Heather was born intersexed but her parents upon the advice of their doctor raised her as male. In her early twenties, Heather "lived a double life" for several years, before she exclusively lived and identified as a female. Heather had sex reassignment surgery three months before her interview with me. Chris was born female and now identifies as transgendered. Chris plots himself somewhere in the "space between the two poles of male and female." Chris takes testosterone and dresses as a male and has contemplated sex reassignment surgery but as time goes by feels less of an "urgency" to have the procedure done.

> Some people would say I am hedging in terms of the gender neutral thing but I would not regard it as hedging so much as that being the reality, being able to occupy certain spaces and also my reality of being raised female, then switching to something that is more male. I am never going to occupy one or the other in terms of how I am seen. I think at this point I have lost the urgency as I once did of being seen as one thing or the other.

Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of the 16 Sample Participants

Age and Gender	**Age:** Mean: 43 years Median: 44 Range: 29-58 years Modes: 38, 49, 50 years	**Gender**: 9 Females 6 Males 1 Trangendered	
Ethnic and Cultural Group Membership	**By Birth:** 13 Canada 1 United States 1 Ireland 1 England	**By Citizenship:** 12 Canadians 2 Dual Citizens (American/Canadian) 2 Unknown	**By Identification**: 12 Canadian 1 Irish-Canadian 1 Spanish-American-Canadian 1 Dutch-Canadian 1 American-Canadian
Sexual Orientation	7 Heterosexual 4 Lesbian 2 Gay 1 Bi-Sexual 2 Unknown		
Education	**Highest Level Achieved:** 1 Doctorate degree 9 Graduate degrees 2 Undergraduate degrees 3 College diplomas 2 High school graduates	**Areas of Study:**[1] 5 Social Work 3 Ministry/Religion/Theology 3 Psychology 2 Sociology 2 English Literature 4 Science (Nursing; Couple and Family Therapy) 1 Criminology 1 Social development Studies 1 Fashion 1 Secretarial 1 Property Management	
Occupation[2]	5 University Students (studying either Social Work or Ministry) 4 Social Workers 3 Counsellors/Psychotherapists 3 Helping Professions (Clergy, Child and Youth Worker, Executive Director of a Social Service Agency) 1 Property Manager 1 Library Clerk 1 Writer[3] 1 Bus Driver 1 Unemployed (Former Small Business Owner)		
Understanding of Self as Member of a Minority Group	1 Cultural Ethnic 2 Cultural Religious (former memberships) 1 Disabilities 6 Lesbian, Gay, Transgendered		

[1] Numbers add up to more than 16 because several participants had multiple areas of study.
[2] Numbers add up to more than 16 because one student worked part time and one participant had two jobs
[3] Three of the participants are published authors but only one identified as a writer.

Ethnic and Cultural Group Membership

English was the first language spoken by fifteen of the participants. One respondent was bilingual (French and English). All participants were white with either an Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-Celtic heritage. Three of the sixteen participants were "foreign born." This ratio of 1 in 5.34 for this study is close to the ratio of 1 in 6 for all of Canada (Statistics Canada, 2002a, 2002b).

Ethnic and cultural identity refers to "an individual level of identification and experience of ethnicity, in which individuals share a *real* or perceived common origin, and a 'distinct' culture that presently exists or existed in the past" (Chiu, 2003, p. 39). Of the four who identified as hyphenated Canadians, the Irish-Canadian was the only participant in the sample who also identified as belonging to an ethnic or cultural minority group (see below). Isajiw (1999) suggests that multiple ethnic identities are common in our contemporary world due to migration and inter-marriage and as Leman (1999) argues this is encouraged in multicultural and multiethnic countries like Canada.

In addition to the three immigrants in the sample, four individuals indicated they were the children of immigrants making a total of seven participants (44%) who considered immigration to be a significant factor shaping their understanding of self and feelings of acceptance and fit in Canadian society. Although immigration is a type of social group disengagement it was not one of the leavings specifically captured in the study. However, Mark's interviews focused on his disengagement from a cultural group and Faith and Hannah spoke about their disengagement from religious-cultural groups.

Numerous studies suggest that one's self understandings are radically altered through an immigration process (e.g., Thomas and Znanieki, 1927; Fitzpatrick, 1972;

Moore, 1970; Rodriguez, 1987, cited in Ebaugh, 1988). In fact, as Ebaugh (1988) explains, the concept of "marginal man" originated in case studies of immigrants and "portrays the immigrant as an individual caught between two cultural worlds" (p. 13). Certainly the theme of immigration and associated feelings of marginality was a strong theme running through the stories of these seven participants and hence I will devote some attention to it now.

For Faith and Victor, the experiences their parents had in their home country and the circumstances surrounding the immigration experience shaped the way they were raised and the values that were instilled. Both Faith and Victor's parents immigrated to Canada after World War II. During the war they had suffered and lost a great deal. As Victor explains, his parents "literally came with nothing:"

> I think that [our parents living through the war] really influenced the way we were brought up. We had to eat everything on our plate. We couldn't waste. We had to save, save, save because they had nothing in the war.

Victor's paternal grandfather died when his dad was five years old. During the war "because there wasn't enough food. . .in the city they lived in, the family was dispersed". Victor attributes the childhood messages he received about what makes a good man to his father's deprivation, difficult wartime experiences, and intense desire to be a financial success here in Canada.

> My dad didn't have a father so he didn't have a role model. When he came to Canada he saw the best way to be as work for your family and bring in an income, which means I didn't have a father because I only saw my father in church on Sunday for an hour and then he was back at work…my father not having a father and being raised during the war impacted him, which caused him to raise me in a particular way, which affects me still today in my relationship with my son.

Victor "revolted" from the "cultural effects" of striving for financial gain and achieving business success by studying liberal arts in college and not allowing his work to prevent

him from spending time with his son. Yet he admits, "my heritage played a major role in my understanding of self".

After immigrating to Canada, Faith's parents became actively involved in a religious-cultural group comprised of first and second generation Canadians of the same ethnic and cultural background. There were two factors that complicated Faith's ethnic and cultural self-understandings. First, as Faith explains:

> I left a group that had both a religious affiliation and a cultural affiliation and a world and life view that was all encompassing. So it was impossible to know where family and culture, ethnicity, day-to-day functioning, and church and religious beliefs, where one ended and the other took off. . . In terms of not knowing where the religiousity and the culture was connected, it often seemed that how one was to be in the family, which I have now come to see as cultural and ethnic practices, they were made to sound as if they were church rules and that God would want it that way. If you didn't do it that way then you were going against God.

Faith's understanding of her ethnic and cultural roots was entangled in her religious affiliation and her family relations. Hence her disengagement from the religious group meant that she simultaneously severed her ethnic and cultural ties and ties with her family. Only with a great deal of conscious effort and years of therapy has Faith been able to disentangle the threads and remain disengaged from her religious-cultural group while reconnecting to her family and to a lesser extent with her ethnic and cultural identity.

A second complicating factor for Faith was the view her parents instilled about the inferiority of Canadians. Faith was not allowed to mingle with her Canadian friends at school or with the Canadians who lived in the neighbouring farms.

> For myself, I had [Canadian] friends in high school. But if I were to say, "I want to have Sheila come over for a party" or "I would like Sheila to sleep over," my parents would say, "No". They would say, "Why don't you have Margarita from church come. She would be a nice girl to have". I would say, "No, I want Sheila

> to come." They would say, "Yah, but we don't know those kind of people so well, you know." So it wasn't that they were mean about it. It was just made very, very clear to me that you did not do that. Or for instance, they would talk about, "Did you hear that that girl, she went out with a Canadian boy. I feel sorry for those parents". So you got the feeling, Oh my God! Do not ever go out with a Canadian boy.

Disengagement from her religious-cultural group was understood as leaving a group of superior status and joining one of less status. Much like a gay or lesbian may need to deal with internalized homophobia when they come out, Faith had to acknowledge the impact these anti-Canadian messages had on her cultural understandings.

José, the son of a Spanish father and a white American mother spoke about "growing up negotiating two ethnic identities" and never feeling like he fit with either group. His white American friends would call him a "spick" and his Spanish friends would denounce his American heritage. After immigrating to Canada, he continued to feel like an "outsider." He recalled a couple of people pejoratively commenting, "Oh, he's SO American, so American". He felt their intentions were to "emphasize a separation" between him and themselves.

Mark is a dual citizen (American and Canadian). Like José, Mark felt he had to negotiate his two identities. When he was with his American cousins, "being Canadian meant being different". His American cousins had access to all sorts of material things whereas Mark and his family living in Northern Alberta did not have access to or value these same things. Yet, in Canada Mark also felt different because his American citizenship implied to his Canadian friends that he and his family were not tough like real Canadians. For example, Mark's father was a Lutheran minister. When Mark's parents first immigrated to Canada they discovered that the furnace in the parsonage was broken. When they complained to the elders of the church they were told, "You are just

American. You are not used to this yet". Mark learned that being Canadian meant, "not letting the elements defeat you" and not complaining. Although he could see the humour in some of his experiences, ultimately, Mark's narrative conveyed how painful and real feelings of not fitting can be. In his early twenties, Mark became "deeply depressed". He attributes his depression to his inability to find "groups of people that he was part of".

It is important to place the participants' feelings of not fitting within the context of them being invisible minorities. At no time did these participants suggest that they were the objects of blatant discrimination and prejudice. These individuals could appreciate that their feelings of being "outsiders" were largely internal experiences and qualitatively different than the experiences of visible minorities. Yet as Frable (1993) argues, "marginality is a psychological reality, not just a statistical one" (p. 94). It was important to these participants that they conveyed to me not only their feelings of marginality but also the meaning they had derived from these feelings and the role they held in shaping their identity. Three themes emerged.

First, these individuals experienced a measure of dissonance when their feelings of not fitting in Canadian society were juxtaposed by outside appearances that they did. As Isajiw (1999) explains, ethnic and cultural identity includes both internal and external aspects. Internally, by states of mind and emotional responses these individuals did not feel part of dominant Canadian society. Yet externally, by their physical appearances, language and behaviour they did blend. These feelings of dissonance were consistent with feelings of also not fitting in other social groups due to such things as low socio-economic status, disability, cross-gender identification, sexual orientation, family dysfunction and abuse. Although the most intense feeling of not fitting was associated

with the social group from which they eventually disengaged, it was not singularly associated with that particular group. Rather it was a compounded feeling that had its origins in their cultural and ethnic understandings.

Chris' story of not fitting serves as a good example. As a child, Chris felt different because his father was an immigrant and his mother died when Chris was very young. Chris told me:

> I think I became aware that there are different ways that people don't fit in. I think that understanding is something that both my experiences of my mom's sickness and death separated me from people in my peer group but also the fact that my dad was an immigrant. I think my level of feeling distinct, separate or alone – there were enough people around me that I knew who also struggled for different reasons. For a number of reasons these became the people I hung out with. So not necessarily the "in" group, and of course my perception of "in" group was that they had it all together. But I tended to hang out with the other people who didn't seem to have it all together, like people who came from single parent families, people from the reservation, and people whose fathers were out of work because of alcohol problems.

Chris concluded these peers "tended not to reinforce my specific difference but did reinforce that difference was okay". When as an adult, Chris first came out as "queer" and later as "trans" it was possible for him to trace these seeming unique experiences of being different due to cross gender identification to the familiar childhood feelings of difference due to cultural and ethnic identification and early parental loss. Perhaps it was also comforting for Chris to recall the positive messages he received from these childhood peers - "difference is okay" and one does not have to be a member of the "in" group to have community.

The second theme, as intimated in Chris' account, was that these seven participants were ultimately able to find meaning in their experiences of not fitting. They came to appreciate that not fitting had its advantages. For Hillary, not fitting meant she

was free from the confines and rigidity of the dominant group and their harsh judgment of her. Hillary's immigration to Canada allowed her to "rewrite the script". In Ireland, she felt constrained by familial, religious, and social expectations. She said, "I was afraid I would lose my dreams, that I would not be able to fulfill those dreams as a married woman in Ireland in those days". Coming to Canada "was a passport out". It was an opportunity to leave her marriage that was "in shreds," and to come out as a lesbian. Hillary did not consider these things possible in Ireland where it was still considered "shameful to leave a marriage" and to openly live in a lesbian relationship unthinkable.

> That was one of the reasons I decided to come here [to Canada]. I really didn't know whether I could put up with that [the stigma] over in Ireland. It was easier [in Canada] but it was still difficult. Society [in Ireland] didn't make it easy at all. It [separation and divorce] was not supported. Through the process people would say, "So and so up the road...." And that person was ostracized by the community. Shunned almost.

Hillary concluded, "immigration had a big impact". As a newcomer to Canada she felt less bound by societal expectations and opinions. She admits she "was slowly not caring what the community thought". This decrease in concern gave her the freedom and independence she needed to change her social group memberships.

A third theme was that the experiences of marginality were ultimately incorporated into these participants' self-understandings. They stopped wrestling with their difference and instead embraced it and claimed it as part of themselves. As the stories of both Mark and Chris reveal, acceptance of self was possible when the social categories that had once defined their difference were deconstructed. For example, Chris, not fitting in either the male or the female category decided to live in the "space between the two poles of male and female". Mark's "deep depression," rooted in his inability to find "groups of people that he was part of," lifted when he began to worry less about

fitting in and more about being true to himself. He deconstructed the categories of culture and ethnicity. Although he identifies as more Canadian than American, he ultimately understands his ethnic and cultural identity in the following way:

> I think my culture is actually more the common culture of the world. I think there is a sense that I am more in sync with what is happening in the world. Culture here is an aberration . . .[I am] more in touch with the impact of economics and resource sharing and more in solidarity with most of the world in terms of culture now.

In the end Mark and Chris created their own social categories – categories that would, of course, include them.

In summary, the narratives of the seven first and second generation Canadians in my sample suggest that ethnic and cultural identity is a central constituent of the self regardless of whether the individual's ethnic and cultural background is visible or invisible. A second conclusion one can draw is that a successful way of coping with dissonance and feelings of not fitting is to transform marginality, a negative categorization, into uniqueness, a positive categorization. Third, this transformation was not merely a coping strategy but evidence of a fundamental shift in self-understanding that, in several instances, eased and perhaps even paved the way for the momentous disengagement experience that lay ahead.

Sexual Orientation

Close to half (7/16) of the study participants indicated they were lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, and/or transgendered (LGBT). Two of the individuals, who identified as lesbian, also identified as transgendered. Of the seven participants who indicated they were heterosexual, two acknowledged that they had at least one sexual encounter with someone of the same gender. The final two individuals did not disclose their orientation.

The seemingly high representation of LGBT participants in the sample (44%) needs some explanation. Admittedly, it is difficult to determine the percentage of homosexuals in Canada. Estimates fall somewhere between a high of 10% percent, a figure first cited by Kinsey (1948) that has since been popularly but not statistically accepted as accurate, and a low of 1% as reported in the 2003 Canadian Health Survey carried out by Statistics Canada (Globe and Mail, 2004). Either way, my figure of 44% is considerably higher than what would be considered "typical" of the general population.

There is a simple explanation for this phenomenon. My sample was not intended to be representational but was a select sample. One of the social group leavings I intentionally selected was that of "coming out" as gay or lesbian after having understood oneself, or at least lived as though one understood oneself, to be heterosexual. Three participants, one gay man and two lesbian women fit this profile. The remaining four participants who also identified as LGBT discussed other social group leavings in their interviews. Needless to say, their sexual orientation was also a key component of their self-understandings, as it is for all of us. Their "coming-out" experiences were significant plot lines in their overall narratives and at times were interwoven with the momentous leaving which was the foci of their interviews.

Education

Participants were highly educated. Perhaps not surprisingly, the two least educated individuals were also two of the youngest participants in the sample and were the closest temporally to the disengagement experience (14 months and 5½ years). They each felt their understanding of self was still very much in flux. Hence they had general

intentions of pursuing higher education but had not made definitive plans, as they were still unsure about who they wanted to be and what they wanted to do.

Education was a leading theme in all sixteen narratives. This research supports the truism that education is the route to "becoming who you want to be when you grow up". However, this study also revealed there are integral connections between education and the disengagement process.

Four participants recalled at a young age having an insatiable desire for education while belonging to families and social groups that actively discouraged it. They were made to feel that their desire for education was wrong, and in some cases evil. Against great odds these individuals struggled to achieve their education and they suffered a great deal in the process. In pursuing their education, some participants were alienated by their families; others endured financial reprisals.

Pursuing education was difficult for other participants as well, although for different reasons. Both Mark and Heather were individuals who did extremely well at school and could be described as "gifted". However, each of them withdrew from university because of emotional and psychological distress related to their disengagement experiences and associated identity transitions. Mark returned after a year's absence but Heather did not. Sean and Brian also struggled at school. Like Mark and Heather, Sean admitted it was very difficult to do well at school because of emotional and psychological distress, which in Sean's case was rooted in extreme familial abuse and neglect. He received continuous messages from his father that he was "stupid" and Sean began to believe him. Brian had learning disabilities that prevented him from doing well in school. Part of the disengagement process for Sean and Brian involved transforming negative

categorizations of "stupid" and "learning disabled" to positive categorizations of "smart" and "academically successful". This transformation occurred through hard work, determination, and the support and encouragement from teachers and friends.

This study suggested that advanced education could increase the chances of social group disengagement. In fact, many participants were actively discouraged from higher education by their former social groups precisely because the group feared with advanced education the individual would leave the group. This proved to be an accurate and realistic fear. Five participants indicated that in the process of achieving higher education their understanding of self changed, as did their impressions of the social group. They became aware of different life and identity options outside of the group. They also began to challenge the groups' understanding of normalcy and truth.

Six individuals used education as the means by which to disengage. Sean left his geographic community and an entire way of life when he entered university. Dorothy and Brian pursued higher education as a way of leaving unsatisfying careers and transitioning into new ones. Hillary, Claire, and Laura gained greater financial independence as they achieved more education, which allowed them to decrease their dependence on the group and eventually enabled them to leave.

Advanced education also proved essential in achieving a good disengagement outcome. Twelve participants went back to school and achieved either their university degree or college diploma subsequent to their disengagement from their social group. Postsecondary education allowed these participants to explore new ideas and test out their emerging selves. As their understandings of self changed, these participants found friends and developed social support networks that could support their new understandings. They

began to evaluate themselves against different sets of norms and standards. Insomuch as they had been made to feel abnormal, different, evil, deviant, or rebellious in their former groups; they now felt normal and "mainstream". Through academic achievement their confidence and self-esteem increased, a fact supported by earlier research done by Riessman (1990) and Ebaugh (1988).

By and large, the areas of study chosen by the participants were in the social sciences (psychology, sociology, criminology, and social development studies) and helping professions (social work, nursing, counseling, and ministry). Most participants chose their final area of study after disengaging from their social group. Interestingly, several participants indicated that early educational goals (and associated self-understandings) had been derailed by their former social group membership, leading them to pursue alternative goals. Once they left the social group they found themselves returning to their earlier educational goals and were surprised to discover they remained salient. For these participants social group disengagement did not facilitate a new understanding of self as much as a rediscovery of an earlier self that had lain dormant for many years.

Occupation

A disproportionate number of participants in the sample (12/16) were either helping professionals or were training to become them. This statistic is explainable given the recruitment strategies I employed. I used *snowball sampling,* beginning with my own community and academic connections. I worked in the Kitchener-Waterloo area as a social worker for approximately ten years before returning to university to pursue my doctoral studies. Hence many participants were in some way either connected to the

social work field or the academic institution where I am completing my studies. There is little evidence to suggest that the high number of helping professionals in the sample is attributable to the subject or purpose of this study. In other words, it is impossible to conclude that individuals who have disengaged from a social group are more likely to become helping professionals than individuals who have not. That said, in several instances participants admitted that having gone through a momentous disengagement process themselves prompted them to help others going through similar experiences. For example, Chris left a gender group and now counsels transgendered individuals. Faith left a religious cultural group and now helps others as a "spiritual counselor". Victor, who came out as "queer," and Mary who came out as lesbian, devote a large proportion of their clinical practice to clients from the LGBT community.

Membership in a Minority Group

Eight participants (50%) identified as a member of an ethnic, cultural, or minority group. In addition, two participants identified as having once belonged to a minority group prior to their disengagement experience. Edgar & Sedgwick (2004) define a minority group as

> a social group which is in a numerically inferior position to others within society, and consequently is susceptible to suffering at the hands of majority opinion. The term 'minority' can often signify an inferior social position or marginalized interests in virtue of a lack of power when it comes to having one's views or interests voiced. Likewise being in a minority (especially in the context of being an ethnic minority) can lead to states of inequality and misrepresentation (p. 240).

Minority group membership, as this quotation reveals can pertain to either a numerically inferior position and/or a socially inferior position as evidenced by a lack of power and voice. Minority status is always determined by way of comparison. An individual belongs to a group that is numerically *less than* or has *less power than* another social group. It

should be noted that membership in a minority group can be subjective. Individuals can consider themselves to be a minority even if others may not consider them such. These differences are explainable as the individual who identifies as a minority may be comparing himself/herself to a different reference group than the others who identify the individual as having majority group membership.

Mary's fluctuating experiences of minority and majority group memberships reveal this complexity. Mary spoke to me about her "coming out" as lesbian in her early-mid adulthood. When I asked her if she identified as a minority she replied, "it depends on who is doing the defining". Mary grew up as a Mennonite. She understands Mennonites to be a religious minority in Canada, but as she explained, "the group was major for me". For all of her childhood and her early adulthood it was all she knew – it was her religion, her social world, her culture, and her way of life. Despite the fact that women comprised half of the group, she identified as a minority within the group because as a woman she lacked power, voice, and opportunity. When Mary "came out" as lesbian, she lost even more power, credibility, and status within the Mennonite community and she eventually left. As a lesbian, Mary knows she is in the minority compared to heterosexuals. However, with respect to social status Mary feels she is in a majority position. She feels empowered and respected. She feels she has a voice within her current social circles and within her LGBT community.

Only one participant an Irish-Canadian woman, identified as belonging to an ethnic and cultural minority group. Her reasons for doing so were as follows:

> As for feeling like a minority – I am often reminded that I sound Irish and of course from time to time people ask me to speak more slowly. Sometimes I feel that they suspect that I have ADHD [Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder] but yet when I am in Ireland I blend right in. . . So I have felt minoritized by some

> comments and felt "othered" because I come from the other side of the ocean. I just feel like an immigrant sometimes. I have particular cultural experiences that set me apart.

Perhaps not surprisingly, six of the seven individuals who identified as LGBT indicated they belonged to a minority group. Their stories were particularly poignant in revealing the association between minority status and suffering. It is impossible to quantify suffering and I should perhaps refrain from such an attempt; however, there did appear to be a direct association between those who identified as belonging to a minority group and the amount of suffering they had endured. This association was evident for those who identified as lesbian, gay and transgendered as well as for those who identified as belonging to a minority group due to disability, culture, and religion.

For some, the transition discussed in the interview involved a shift in minority or majority group membership. They may have once identified as belonging to a minority group but no longer do so, or they may now identify as belonging to a minority group not having done so prior to their transition. For example, Hannah and Faith indicated they had identified as a minority in the past due to their former cultural-religious group membership but after disengaging from these groups they no longer identify as minorities. Victor, Mary, and Hillary contended they were part of the majority group when they lived as married heterosexuals with children. Now that they come out as lesbian or gay, they identify as belonging to a minority group. Heather who had lived as a male for over half of her life, revealed that being a woman has resulted in a loss of privilege and status.

Family of Origin

Eleven participants reported coming from intact families, six of whom described their family of origin in a positive light using terms like "supportive" and "nurturing." The remaining five used pejorative terms like "abusive," "dysfunctional," "alcoholic" and "problematic." Five participants experienced family break-up during their childhood, two because of parental separation or divorce, two because of parental death, and one because of parental divorce followed by parental death.

Three participants, Chris, Sean, and Heather experienced early parental loss and coincidentally all three were in their early adolescence (aged 12 or 13) at the time of their parent's death. This is the stage Freud (1905/1962), Erikson (1968), and Marcia (1966) associated with identity development. Not surprisingly then, for each of these participants the parental loss at this developmental juncture altered the trajectory of their self-understandings.

For Chris, his mother's death postponed his self-understanding as transgendered. Her death coincided with the onset of puberty and his attempts to cope with "gender stuff." To complicate matters, Chris' mother "was excited about the possibility of the changes" whereas Chris "felt horror." After her death Chris developed an eating disorder, which in hindsight may have been in part an unconscious attempt "to stop some of the changes that came along with puberty" (e.g., menstruation and breast development) and in part a grief reaction. At the age of 18 Chris gained control of his eating disorder and started to explore his sexual identity (i.e., orientation), which by his own admission "became a distraction for awhile." It was only after he had achieved a period of stability that Chris, in his late twenties, was able to consider himself as transgendered.

The untimely death of Heather's father affected the timing of her understanding of self as a woman. After her father's death Heather engaged in hyper- masculine activities, such as competitive hockey, soccer, and she joined the army. She also took steroids to develop a more masculine body. She did these things in an attempt to please her deceased father, to live and act as the son she thought he would have wanted. Part of Heather's journey towards self-acceptance has involved her reconsideration of her earlier notions of what her father may have wanted. She has come to appreciate that had her father not died he might have been just as proud and supportive of her as a daughter as he would have been of her "as a son."

Sean's mother's death by cancer when he was twelve years old was sad and traumatic but it also brought about his liberation. Sean grew up in an extremely violent home inciting all of his seven older siblings to leave home in their early-mid teens. Sean felt he needed to stay to protect his mother from his father's violence. Slightly before her death Sean was tentatively considering a life outside of the insular community in which he lived. It was poignant that Sean was able to tell his mother of his plans to pursue higher education and leave the community before she died. Although she had a Grade 3 education and little understanding of life beyond the community, she was able to give him her blessing and support and catch a glimpse of the man he would eventually become.

For both Sean and Claire their placement in the sibline of their families was of significance. Claire, the oldest child in a single, mother-led family delayed leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses because she felt an obligation "not to hurt mom." For Claire, the need to spare her mother the grief she would experience if Claire left the group was

associated with her understanding of self as a first-born. Neither her younger brother nor sister, each leaving the Witnesses in their teen years, felt the obligation to protect their mom in this manner. As indicated above, Sean, the youngest in his family had a similar sacrificial desire to stay in his social group to protect his mother. In both Claire and Sean's case they attributed their comparatively prolonged membership in the group to their placement in the sibline even though paradoxically Claire was a first-born and Sean a last-born.

A change in family configuration proved to be a theme in Hannah's narrative as well. Even though she did not experience parental loss *per se* she did experience the loss of her primary caregiver, a woman to whom she was attached. In the Old Order Mennonite community it is common for families to have many children. Young women, discouraged from formal schooling beyond grade 10 are instead encouraged to become live-in nannies and domestic aids to help mothers look after their numerous children and keep house. These arrangements are also viewed as opportunities for young women to learn domestic and parenting skills in preparation for their future roles as wives and mothers. Hannah was looked after by such a young woman, who became her primary caregiver. Hannah bonded to this woman and was devastated when she left unexpectedly. She recalls, "No one ever realized what that did for me." Hannah contends that this earlier loss set the tone for how she would cope with future losses, including her disengagement from the Order Mennonite group. She explains it as follows:

> When anyone leaves me I can get into a really, really bad state. But if I do the leaving then it's okay. . . I learned in counseling, for many, many, many years, and I remember one counselor saying, "The way you deal with change is you slam doors shut and never look back."

Abuse

Abuse was a common theme in participants' disengagement stories. A total of 11 participants (75%) experienced at least one form of abuse. Four participants (25%) were abused as children by one or both of their parents. Three of these four participants were physically abused, one of whom was also sexually abused. Three of the four also experienced persistent psychological abuse perpetrated by a parent (i.e., name calling, belittling, and threats of physical harm) and two were child witnesses of severe and prolonged domestic violence. These narratives were distressing insomuch as they revealed childhoods that were fraught with tension and suffering. Two of these participants experienced and witnessed horrific abuse that involved the repeated use of knives and guns.

These narratives of childhood abuse underscore how abuse can damage, erode, and even thwart identity formation. A specific finding of this study is that the disengagement experiences of these individuals were, in fact, complicated by negative self-understandings and in some instances a lack of self-understanding (i.e., having no sense of self) that were the direct cumulative result of childhood abuse. These stories suggest that identity formation requires stability and a freedom from fear as it was only after these individuals felt safe and valuable that they could begin to develop an enduring sense of self. In several instances achieving safety required social group disengagement.

In three instances, participants joined a social group as a way to escape the violence and chaos in their families. Laura found the Jehovah Witnesses to be a comforting and stable pseudo family after experiencing the disruption caused in her home by her alcoholic father. Trevor was able to escape his feelings of low self-worth,

loneliness, and desperation by joining the bikers, who provided him with "employment" and admired his "business sense." Hillary married as a way of achieving stability in her own life and creating stability for her children. She noted,

> I hadn't had a happy home life . . . My family of origin had a lot of family violence. I witnessed a lot of that. It was because of that, that I wanted to ensure that my baby had the best possible opportunity. That was a real motivator for me.

Participants also disclosed abuse outside of their family of origin. Seven individuals (44%) were sexually abused by someone outside of their immediate family. Four participants were sexually abused by members of their religious group; two as children and two as adults. One participant was molested by his babysitter and another was date raped. The seventh participant was tortured and raped in prison. Five participants, four women and one man, were physically abused by their spouse.

In some cases, the abuse was the means by which the social group acknowledged and perhaps also "disciplined" the individual for not "fitting" and conforming to the group's norms. For example, Faith was publicly humiliated for questioning one of the theological tenets of her group. Heather was severely beaten and tortured when her gender dysphoria became known to her army superiors.

These narratives of abuse outside of the family of origin underscore the role extreme and sustained abuse can play in both damaging and impeding identity development. These individuals had to "undo" ingrained negative self-understandings as worthless or stupid in their attempts to arrive at a healthy self-understanding. It should also be noted that the abuse suffered within the group became a motivating factor in disengagement. It was seldom the primary factor in leaving but it was significant nonetheless. Participants who were abused while members of their former social groups,

struggled to reconcile the fact that the social group that had once defined them, failed to value, respect, and safe guard who they were as individuals.

Characteristics of the Social Groups

As indicated earlier, this study is based on the assumption that we derive our social identity from our memberships in social groups and hence disengagement from these groups has identity implications. As this research had as its purpose the study of the disengagement phenomenon in a broad sense I did not limit the study to specific social groups and associated leavings (for example, religious groups and religious group leavings or gender groups and gender group leavings). Likewise, the identity shifts that accompanied the disengagement processes were also of multiple types.

Types of Social Groups and Specific Social Groups Represented in the Sample

I relied on Rummens' (2003) understanding of *types of identity* and *specific identities* to guide my selection of social groups.

According to Rummens (2003)

> There are many types of identity, each of which reflects a unique criterion that may be used to differentiate between the individuals or groups, or alternatively to establish or reinforce commonality among or within them. These different criteria include: sex, gender, age, generation, sexual orientation, dis/ability, socio-economic (class), occupation, culture, ethnicity, race religion, nationality, language, ideology, and territorial allegiance, among others (p. 13).

Rummens (2003) makes the distinction between these various *types of identity* (gender, sexual orientation, and so on) and *specific identities*, which consist of the range of classifications within the broader type (for example, male, female, and transgendered for gender identity; heterosexual, homosexual, and bi-sexual for the sexual orientation type identity, and so on). In a general way, the social groups represented in the sample correspond to Rummens' (2003) typology of identity. The disengagement processes,

however, correspond to a transition from one specific identity to another within the same type. Thus, disengagement from a sexual orientation group would correspond to a transition from one specific identity (e.g., heterosexual identity) to another specific identity (e.g., homosexual identity). Table 3 presents the types of social groups and the specific social groups represented in the sample.

Table 3: Types of Social Groups and Specific Social Groups

Types of Social Group (Number of Participants From the Group)	**Specific Social Groups**	
	Predisengagement	**Post Disengagement**
Religious "Cult" (2)	• Jehovah's Witnesses • Jehovah's Witnesses	• "Disassociated Member" & Christian • "Disassociated Member" with No Religious Affiliation
Religious-Cultural* (2)	• Old Order Mennonite • Christian Reformed Church	• Liberal Mennonite • No Religious Affiliation
Cultural (1)	• North American	• Global Culture –"Culture of the World"
Territorial – socieconomic* (2)	• "Remote out port fishing community subsidized economy (multiple generations of welfare recipients)" • Life time member of small town community, small business owner with numerous social and business connections	• Urban, educated, middle class; works and lives internationally • Lost home, business, severed all social connections; currently in hiding (due to threats on her life)
Sexual Orientation (3)	• Heterosexual • Heterosexual • Heterosexual	• Gay • Lesbian • Lesbian
Gender (2)	• Male • Female	• Female • Transgendered
Occupational (2)	• Priesthood • Fashion Industry (Female dominated occupation)	• Social Worker • Electronics (Male dominated occupation)
Extremist (1)	• Outlaw Motorcycle Club (Underworld Crime)	• Law Abiding Citizen
Dis/ability (1)	• Deafened Adult	• Cochlear Implant User

* Indicates an intersecting social group.

Rummens (2003) also spoke about a phenomenon she termed *intersecting identities*, which occurs when types of identity or specific identities "consistently inform or influence each other" (p. 17). After a long period of constant intersection a new identity is formed. Likewise social groups can be intersecting. Several participants disengaged from intersecting social groups that are identified on Table 2 with an asterisk. In sum, the sample included a total of nine different types of social groups and thirteen specific social groups.

Levels of Organization

In addition to obtaining a heterogeneous sample with respect to type of social groups and specific social groups, I also obtained variety with respect to the levels of organization within the selected social groups. Some groups I have labeled *institutional groups*. Their identifying features include an internal bureaucratic structure, an established chain of authority, and set rules guiding and controlling the behaviour of members. In my sample, the religious, religious-cultural, occupational and extremist groups are institutional groups. By comparison, the other groups in the sample I have labeled *non-institutional groups*. These include the gender, sexual orientation, dis/ability, cultural, and territorial –socioeconomic groups. Individuals become members of non-institutional group by virtue of sharing a common characteristic with their fellow group members and by attaching meaning and importance to this characteristic. Although there may be recognized patterns of behaviour attributable to the shared characteristic (e.g., members of a homosexual social group have sexual relations with a same sex partner) there are no formal structures that distinguish one group from another.

Five of the thirteen specific groups in the sample could be described as *totalist groups*. I created this term by blending Goffman's (1961) understanding of *total institutions*, places like mental institutions and prisons where groups of people live and are cut off from the outside society, and Lifton's (1961) concept of *totalism*, a term he used to describe ideological movements, organizations, and social groups that seek total control over human thoughts and behaviour. In this study *totalist groups* refer to social groups that have permeated all aspects of the individual's life and restricted access to the "outside world".

In some instances the group willfully controlled access to the outside world by imposing sanctions on members who were influenced by or had contact with the outside world. In other instances, outside access was discouraged rather than prohibited. Totalist groups in the sample included: the Jehovah's Witnesses, Old Order Mennonites, the Christian Reformed Church, the Outlaw Motorcycle Club, and the priesthood.

To provide some illustration, two participants' descriptions of the totalist nature of their former social groups are presented here. Brian, who left the priesthood, described how his occupational group controlled his private life and his private spaces.

> You are in the rectory, which is the priest's house and you don't own anything there except the clothes on your back. . .the chair you sit in, the fork you use, the TV you watch, it is not yours. . . even the bed you sleep in, 15 other priests slept in this bed too. You want your own space. You want to mark out your own territory.

Brian spoke about the messages he received about the "fraternity of the priesthood," messages about how priests stick together because "lay people just don't understand". Brian was encouraged to take vacations with other priests, to associate socially and recreationally with other priests and to conform with respect to his dress.

Hannah described her life as an Old Order Mennonite as having "a preset social life". She was not allowed to go out in the evenings or to communicate with friends during the week. Education past Grade 10 was "considered unnecessary and perhaps detrimental". The church had "very, very strong control," determining how she dressed, how she parted her hair, her marriage and employment "options," and her mode of transportation. She was not allowed to have a television or a radio. If Hannah tried to break any of the church's rules her parents would be disciplined and would be told to bring Hannah back in line or they themselves "could face being kicked out of the group".

Membership

There was also variety in the sample with respect to the manner in which participants joined their social groups, the length of time they were members, and the length of time since their disengagement (see Table 3). The length of time participants spent in their social groups ranged from 4.5 to 37 years, with a mean of 22 years. The length of time post disengagement ranged from 14 months to 25 years, with a mean of 12 years.

Six individuals were born into their social groups. Five were members of their social groups "by assumption," meaning it was assumed they were members of the social group. They lived and behaved as though they were members even though they may have experienced incongruency between their own self-understandings and their social group membership. For example, three individuals lived as heterosexuals before coming out as gay or lesbian. They each married and had children from these unions. Although they had some suspicions that they were not heterosexual these were deeply buried.

Table 4: Membership

Length of Time in the Social Group	• 0 – 5 years • 6 – 10 years • 11 - 15 years • 16 - 20 years • 21 - 25 years • 26 - 30 years • 31 – 35 years • 36 - 40 years	1 1 1 4 2 4 1 2
Length of Time Since Disengagement	• 0 –5 years • 6 – 10 years • 11 - 15 years • 16 - 20 years • 21 - 25 years	2 6 4 1 3
Method of Joining	• Birth • Assumption • Joining (by choice) • Joining (without choice)	6 5 4 1

Four members chose to join their social groups. They initiated their memberships and went through the necessary membership requirements. For example, Laura joined the Jehovah's Witnesses after extensive Bible Study and training. Her membership was formalized through baptism. One participant, José, became a member of the deafened community "without choice" after an illness left him with profound hearing loss.

CHAPTER 7

The Process of Social Group Disengagement – Phase One

The self is not something ready-made, but something in continuous formation through choice of action.
- -JOHN DEWEY, Democracy and Education

In attempting to describe and map the disengagement process, I worried about placing an order and simplification on experiences that were lived messy and raw. I feared the categories and stages I chose would seem rigid and imposed. Earlier (in Chapters 2 and 4), I argued that self-understandings are dynamic and "truth" is subjective. Now, in this chapter, I seem to contradict these assertions by codifying idiosyncratic experiences of change. This seeming contradiction and my associated fear require explanation.

I began this study with the question of whether disengagement would proceed linearly, steadily moving an individual from Identity A, an understanding of self as a group member, to Identity B, a new understanding of self. I also wondered whether individuals would share common experiences and stages in their disengagement processes, as opposed to each participant having more distinct experiences. The results of this study indicate that the answer to each of these questions is a qualified "Yes". In telling their individual stories, participants ascribed order and meaning to their experiences that proved surprisingly similar to the stories of their counterparts. Participants did experience disengagement as consisting of a series of events or stages with a definable beginning and end and they shared many common experiences along the way.

These findings, consistent with previous studies (Ebaugh, 1988, Jacobs, 1989), suggest that social group disengagement is a distinct life process with identifiable features and chronology. Hence, it seemed both possible and necessary to plot these results. It is also significant that common themes emerged with respect to the sequence of changes in self-understandings as related to social group disengagement. However, as I will argue in Chapter 9, these changes can be more accurately described as spiral–like processes rather than linear ones. This discovery that identity transitions can follow a sequence lends credence to the epigenetic principle of identity transformation. The results of this study support Erikson's (1959/1980) contention that identity develops according to "steps predetermined in the human organism's readiness to be driven forward" (p. 54).

Despite these commonalities, I am hesitant to claim that disengagement is a standardized process for two reasons. First, not everyone went through every stage (although most did) and there was some variation in the sequencing of the stages. Also, for some participants the stages were not as distinct as they were for others. There was an overlapping of stages and a blurring of the boundaries between stages. Also there seemed to be little consistency in the length of each stage. Some participants moved quickly through stages that others took years to negotiate. Second, the "new" self-understanding wasn't necessarily new, but in most instances involved an acceptance of an earlier (i.e., pre-membership or early membership) self- understandings that had been either repressed or denied. These two points explain my hesitancy in plotting the disengagement process. Yet, I could not ignore the commonalities and hence feel justified in aggregating participants' experiences.

The findings related to the disengagement process will be organized using three successive phases: 1) Pre-disengagement, 2) Disengagement, and 3) Post-disengagement. With the exception of the first phase, which only contains one stage, each phase will be broken down into multiple stages according to the common storylines that emerged paying particular attention to: a) characteristic features, b) common experiences, and c) the meaning participants attributed to the stage. Each stage will be introduced using a table (described below) that appears at the beginning of the relevant section.

Although the disengagement process has been plotted in previous studies (Ebaugh, 1988, Jacobs, 1989), this study is unique in that the data has been organized according to a different set of principles. Ebaugh (1988), relying on the work of sociologists Merton and Rossi (1957) and their understandings of social statuses and roles, organized her findings "in a natural history fashion. . . according to the major events that emerged as significant in the course of the [role] exit process" (p. 34). Jacobs (1989) used an ego psychology framework and organized her findings according to the stages associated with the severing of libidinal ties between a member and the group and between the member and the leader of the group. In this study, the disengagement process will be organized according to the participant's sense of fit between him and herself and the group, largely determined by the degree of congruency between individual and social identity.

Phase One: Pre-disengagement (Membership)

One of my first tasks in plotting the disengagement process was to determine where the process began. Previous studies (Altemeyer & Hunsburger, 1997; Ebaugh, 1988; Jacobs, 1989) have located the starting point of the disengagement process in the

initial doubts and questions an individual has about his or her membership. I have positioned the starting point earlier; in group membership itself (i.e., prior to the participant having any thoughts of leaving) for two reasons. First, this is where participants began their stories. These descriptions of membership helped me understand the group-based aspects of their past self-understandings (social identity) and provided me with a baseline from which to gauge the extent of their identity transformation. Second, it was during group membership that the seeds of disengagement were sown.

Table 5: Pre-disengagement Phase - Membership

Common Characteristics	Common Experiences	Meaning
1. Participant identifies as a member of the social group and others recognize them as such and interact with them accordingly. 2. Membership reflects and supports his/her self-understandings (to the extent that these are formed and cognizant). 3. Behavioural and relationship patterns are typical of group membership. 4. Limited access to the outside world. 5. Sense of self and understanding of fit in the group is largely derived from intragroup comparisons.	Experiences vary according to the method of joining the group (i.e., the more choice a participant had in becoming a member, the more positive the recollections of membership and the greater the sense of individual and group congruity).	• Disengagement makes sense in retrospect (Feelings of difference arise before the difference is desired or groomed and before disengagement is considered). • Past group affiliations and past self-understandings become incorporated into current understandings of the self.

Common Characteristics

Perhaps not surprisingly, three of the five characteristics of the pre-disengagement phase are identical to three of the sample criteria. These characteristics include: 1) the participant identifies as a member of the social group and interacts accordingly, 2) membership reflects and supports the participant's self-understandings, and 3) the

participant exhibited behaviours and relational patterns consistent with group membership. Although these were sample selection criteria, I trusted in a self-screening process. It was reassuring to discover that this process was effective and the three sample criteria related to social group membership were, in fact, met. The first three characteristics are discussed together, and the other two characteristics of this phase are then discussed separately.

Characteristics 1-3. While a member of an old order Mennonite group, Hannah wore the covering and followed the rules and dictates of the church. She indicated "the average person on the street would have identified me as an Old Order Mennonite," a statement supported by her bitter recollection of tourists wanting to take her picture because they found plain people to be an "oddity." She considered her self to be an old order Mennonite and she derived positive identity from her family's reputation of being "upstanding" in the community. Likewise, Claire and Laura dressed modestly according to the dictates of the Jehovah's Witness organization. They faithfully attended the five weekly meetings, including Sunday gatherings at the Kingdom Hall, and proselytized door-to-door. The elders and the dictates outlined in the group's publications (*The Watch Tower* and *The Awakening*) guided their behaviour. Both Claire and Laura identified as "one of Jehovah's Witnesses" and internalized the values and beliefs of the group.

H. identified as male and he participated in what he understood to be "masculine" activities, such as hockey and joining the army. As a teen, he took steroids to build muscle mass and to appear more masculine. Trevor indicated his haircut, dress, associates (outlaw bikers), hang-outs ("stripper bars"), and his occupation ("moving drugs") identified him as a member of the organized crime world. For Beth and Sean, their

residency in their communities and their socio-economic status were identifying factors. Brian and Dorothy's visible performance of the duties specific to their occupations were external markers of their group membership. José's hearing aids, use of sign language and his voice identified him as deafened.

For some participants, identification with their social groups was less obvious. They assumed they belonged to the social group largely because they didn't know that other social group memberships were available to them. In the absence of such knowledge they were left to assume that the social group they found themselves in accurately defined them. For example, Victor, Mary, and Hillary assumed they were heterosexual. They grew up in families and within religious and cultural contexts that considered homosexuality to be deviant and encouraged traditional marriage and parenthood. Growing up, Hillary never heard the word "lesbian" whereas Victor had an understanding that "gay" referred to "a disgusting act" but he did not connect the word "gay" to himself and his own behaviour. Likewise Chris, not knowing that individuals could identify as transgendered, assumed she was female.

Notably these four individuals were less inclined to adopt the behavioural and relationship patterns typical of their social groups than the other participants. They recalled their earlier selves being confused as to why they found it difficult to act like others in their social groups. For example, both Victor and Hillary indicated they had same sex relations that were satisfying but perplexing and sexual relations with individuals of the opposite sex that felt forced and mechanical. Chris felt more comfortable dressing in her brother's hand-me-downs than in dresses or skirts. She would sometimes use the boys' washrooms at school but had difficulty explaining to teachers

and peers why she was inclined to do so. Interestingly, it was also evident that other people had similar difficulties discerning these four participants' social group memberships. For example, relatives and peers frequently questioned Victor's sexual orientation and Chris was often mistaken for a boy.

Limited Access to the Outside World. This fourth characteristic of the pre-disengagement stage was, in some cases, an intentional state of affairs with the social group actively restricting contact. Mennonites and Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, consider the outside world to be a threat to the purity of their lifestyle, values, and beliefs. People outside of these social groups (labelled "outsiders" by Old Order Mennonites and "nonbelievers" by the Jehovah's Witnesses) are suspect. As Hannah explains, according to the old order Mennonites,

> Outsiders . . . are probably not going to heaven. They have chosen to live well on this earth therefore they will not experience eternal life in the hereafter. So while they [Old Order Mennonites] would never ever be brash enough to say that you [the interviewer] are going to hell, it is what they believe in their hearts.

Likewise, Claire describes the limited contact she had with the outside world as a Jehovah's Witness in the following way:

> We didn't have friends from the outside as we were growing up. They were outside of that organisation. If you were one of Jehovah's Witnesses you associated with those people [Jehovah's Witnesses] at all times. Because we were always taught that people in the "world" were really not to be associated with because they were really doing Satan's work. We were taught to ostracize them and keep away from them.

There were several strategies that the represented social groups used to restrict contact with the outside world. Friendships with "outsiders" were discouraged. Strict controls were also placed on access to outside knowledge available through the media, books, the internet, and, in some instances, public education. As Faith explains,

> So the world came in on television but in a very filtered way as my parents watched everything that we watched . . .We didn't have a record player or anything like that. Music was not a big part. Christian music was always considered better than anything else. I never saw a movie until I left home at age seventeen. I never had a pizza. Even the eating of something like a pizza would be considered somehow wrong or vaguely I feel guilty because it wasn't what we ate.

The group also restricted members' contact with the outside world by keeping them so busy that they didn't have time to ponder it. Claire explains, "So they fill your life with so much that you don't have time to even visualise what the rest of the world is doing." Like Claire's experiences with the Jehovah's Witnesses, Beth also recalled being kept so busy she didn't have time to consider alternatives.

> You sit there and OK, the floors aren't meeting [my husband's] standards so you become the best floor cleaner and it was this huge, never-ending list. And every time you met what you thought was the criteria, something else just got slipped in there. And I was working insane, insane hours by the end of it between the house and the kids and the business. . .I think that's probably why I stayed with him for so long, is you get caught up in it. I was so busy. I didn't have time to think about leaving him or anything. I was just too damn busy. . .and tired. You really didn't have time to sit down, or at least I didn't, to sit down and assess whether life around you was right or not because you were too busy. You always felt you were 14 steps behind the game and you were always constantly trying to catch up. There was no end in sight.

It would be inaccurate to assume that it was only the religious groups in the sample that actively restricted their members' access to the outside world and took a negative view of "outsiders". Trevor's experiences in the organized crime world suggest that "outsiders" (i.e., law abiding citizens) are viewed as weak and dull. It can be deemed senseless to work 9:00 – 5:00 for pittance when, as Trevor explained, a lack of conscience and a propensity for crime can lead to "a softer and easier way."

Wolf (1991), in his research on outlaw bikers, discovered that some club members act as "gate keepers" or "border guards" to reinforce "the boundaries between the club and outsiders" (p.200). Wolf (1991) discovered that by limiting access to the outside, the

club could "make the subcultural image exotic and exploit the popular myth of out-law biker prowess" (p. 200). Trevor's experiences reveal that bikers and the organized crime world are similar to the religious groups in the sample in so far as they view the outside world as a threat to their lifestyle, values and beliefs. Hence, they take an adversarial view of the outside world, particularly law enforcement officials. Like the religious groups mentioned above, the outside is viewed as a power that must be fought against.

Limited access to the outside world did not always occur through the intentional actions of the group. Just as often access was limited due to inadvertent circumstances. Sean's world, for example, was limited by geographic isolation and poverty. When he was growing up, his family didn't have a vehicle, T.V. or radio. As he explains, "My world view was my immediate confines, that two kilometre long community with 180 people was my world". Beth explains that her isolation was related to the domestic violence. Efforts were made to conceal the abuse from outsiders by limiting social contact.

Given how school could bring the outside world in, it is not surprising that some social groups actively tried to limit its influence. Faith attended an elementary parochial school affiliated with the CRC. At the age of seventeen Brian was encouraged to attend a "very clerical" Catholic Seminary in Ireland, rather than "be corrupted" by getting his undergrad degree at a secular university. Claire recalls having her public school education influenced by the Jehovah's Witnesses. For example, she was only allowed to use Watchtower publications as references for school assignments. She adds,

> The only time you'll see it [outside world] is when you go to school; if you're old enough to go to work, then at work. But going to school, even at school, we had to, I remember standing outside when they would sing the national anthem and did the Lord's reading of prayer.

<u>Importance of Intragroup Comparisons to Sense of Self.</u> Participants' senses of self being largely derived from intragroup rather than intergroup comparisons. Intragroup comparisons occur when an individual compares him or herself to other members within the social group (in-group), whereas intergroup comparisons occur when an individual compares him or herself to members of other social groups (out-groups) (Hogg & Abrams, 1998). When outside access is limited, it is difficult to obtain a sense of self in relation to the outside world and instead one defines one's self in relation to fellow group members. The in-group becomes the reference group and thus the individual measures his or her "fit" in the group by comparing him or herself to what they know about other members and their experiences. If they feel different than others, they scramble to explain these differences using the language and terms of the in-group.

Hillary, in comparing herself and her marriage with other women and what she knew of their marriages, determined she was a "failed heterosexual" and "sexually rigid," rather than lesbian. Victor understood his childhood consensual sexual relationship with a boy the same age as himself to be "abuse," rather than homosexual behaviour. Beth considered the physical and psychological abuse she received from her husband as "normal" as she had been abused by her first husband as well and had also witnessed domestic violence growing up. Finally, Faith described for me how her self-understandings were formed by viewing herself through the lens of the values and beliefs of her in-group.

Catherine: Did you ever appraise yourself according to their [CRC] values …
Faith: (jumps in) Always!
Catherine: …and think, "I am deviant," or "I have something wrong with me," or…
Faith: (jumps in again) Constantly!

Catherine: Did that become part of your understanding as well, that sense of difference and a sense of perhaps being less than because of that difference?
Faith: Yes!! Yes!! One of the things that I was taught from a very early age is not to think too highly of myself. "Who do you think you are?" That was said to me more times than I can count. "Who do you think you are Faith? You think you are so smart?" I was, but I thought that was really bad and wrong. In fact, I recall in my first year of university praying on my knees beside my bed over and over and over again one line of a prayer, "God make me humble. Please make me humble." So I considered my doubts and my questioning and my anger, even though it was a social justice kind of anger, I considered all that to be wrong and bad. . . I very much considered it arrogance. Who was I to even have those thoughts? Although I felt so schizophrenic because at the same time I constantly wanted to balk against it and say, "This is not right. This is not fair," and fight with my father and at the same time thinking, "How can a good Christian talk to her father that way? How can a good Christian be so angry? How can a good Christian be so arrogant and think that she knows better?"

Common Experiences

A key finding of this study is that the experiences of membership varied according to the manner in which the participant joined the group. As I indicated in Chapter 6, participants joined their social groups in one of four ways: 1) actively choosing to become a member, 2) birth, 3) assumption, or 4) having membership thrust upon them. The more choice the individual had about joining the group, the more positively they viewed membership (see Table Five). On the one end of the spectrum, those who voluntarily joined their social group spoke the most positively about their experiences, particularly with reference to their first couple of years of membership. Comparatively, on the opposite end of the spectrum, José, who became a deafened adult through illness (involuntary joining), had the most difficulty adjusting to membership and identifying positive experiences. For the two groups between these two ends of the continuum, members who were members by birth spoke more positively than members by assumption. The experiences of each group will now be discussed in greater detail.

Table 6: Experiences of Membership as Related to Method of Joining

Positive ◄────────────────────────────────► **Negative**				
Type of Joining	Voluntary Joining	Members by Birth	Members by Assumption	Involuntary Joining
Participants	Brian Laura Trevor Dorothy	Hannah Sean Faith Claire Beth Mark	Hillary Victor Chris Mary Heather	José
Main Story Lines	"I made a good decision to join this group. It is a good fit for now but if that ever changes I can leave."	"I am having some good experiences and some horrible experiences in this group. However, I am not prepared to destroy the good in ridding myself of the bad."	"I am bewildered. I don't feel like I fit into this group as well as others seem to and I am not sure why."	"I don't want to belong to this group. Initially I was angry and bitter about membership but now I feel a bit better as I have found others who have membership experiences similar to mine."

Voluntary Membership. The four individuals who voluntarily joined their social groups each described a period of several years where membership was experienced as largely positive. They derived a measure of happiness and contentment from belonging. Their recollections of membership revealed a certainty that they had made a good decision to join a group that, in the early years especially, turned out to be a good fit for them. Brian recalled his first few years as a priest as being "comfortable and familiar." He discovered that he "liked helping" and he felt validated and bolstered by the praise and attention he received for doing a good job. He couldn't recall ever having a strong sense of "Yeah! "This is me!" yet he was reasonably content. Laura was utterly committed to the Jehovah's Witnesses during her first few years of membership. She indicated that she was "confident" she had "found the answer" she was looking for. The group filled the social

and spiritual voids in her life and she found herself "comforted by all the beliefs". Trevor's first few years in his social group brought him the respect he was craving. His childhood was characterized by fear and abuse, but his affiliation with the bikers gave him a sense of power and the ability to intimidate others. He felt less afraid. Dorothy described her early years in her occupation, as "enjoyable." She felt respected and was confident she could grow and advance.

Interestingly, only one of these four assumed their memberships would be long term. Perhaps the fact that these individuals had voluntarily joined their social group led them to feel in control of the timing and circumstances of their disengagement as well. Brian recalled that on his ordination day he had reasoned, "If this doesn't work, I'll leave". Trevor said he "knew from the start" he would want out of the group at some point. Dorothy assumed she would some day move on to another career. Laura was the only participant who joined a group convinced she had found the 'truth" and optimistic that membership would bring her lifelong happiness.

Membership by Birth. The participants who were members of their groups by birth were quite balanced in their recollections of membership. These individuals had many painful and traumatic memories of membership (Sean, Beth, and Hannah, for example, were physically and/or sexually abused by one or more members within their group) yet this group of participants was by far also the most generous in attributing positive qualities to the group. These participants, to use a worn phrase, did not "throw the baby out with the bathwater."

Beth thought her life in her territorial-socioeconomic group was "normal" and she enjoyed being busy and productive. Hannah recalled having an "extremely strong sense

of belonging" in her Mennonite community and being content to "go along with what was being taught." She added:

> There was comfort in knowing that if anything happened to me or my family the community would look after it, no questions asked. So if there was a health crisis, if there was a death in the family or your house burned down, you knew the community was going to come over and rebuild your house or take care of medical bills. You did not have to worry and so there was a lot of safety to that group and that was certainly a consideration when I left because where is my safety net if everything falls apart? When I was there I knew that we were well cared for.

Sean was "embarrassed" about his poverty and he suffered immensely yet he contended, "The community was such a great big space and it was my world." Sean grew to appreciate the rugged landscape and the close proximity of the water. He acknowledged that there were people in the community, "my angels" who cared for him and helped him. Faith described her childhood as "rooted" but not happy. The two words she used to sum up her membership experiences in the CRC were "security" and "guilt". She contended that life in the group kept her "grounded." Her life felt "managed and secure and I knew what to expect." However, she also hastened to add, "My experience of membership in that affiliation was almost always feeling guilty. It was very difficult to assuage it in any way."

Claire recalls feeling the Jehovah's Witnesses were "right" and initially feeling proud of her affiliation with the group. Now she feels she was "duped" by the group but maintains, "There are lots of good people" in the organization and she credits the group for helping her to be tolerant of difference. Claire also humorously credited the group for helping her to advance her career because the training and experience she received proselytizing door-to-door helped her to be assertive and not to settle for "no" as an answer. She concluded, if you need "closeness" and "to feel part of an organization,"

"there is no better one than the Jehovah's Witnesses for giving you that feeling of belonging. If you follow the rules, if you do what you are supposed to do and if you get the right contacts in there, you'll be part of the group." However she warns, "You can never get out of it. That's the only thing. You can't get out of it nicely."

Although Mark experienced membership in his cultural group as always being on the periphery of the group, "one of the few," he credits his family for helping him place a high regard on social justice, education, and family ties. He feels he was taught to critique dominant culture and was encouraged to be true to himself. He recalled "enjoying a lot [of things]. . . but not being content."

Membership by Assumption. If there was one word that could sum up the membership experiences of this group of participants, it would be "bewilderment." These individuals had some positive experiences of membership but these were coupled with nascent feelings of not fully belonging and puzzlement as to why this was so. The happier memories of membership were often described as a form of ignorant bliss. Hillary's story offers a wonderful illustration of the experiences typical of this group of participants.

Hillary grew up feeling different from her peers but hard pressed to determine the reasons why. In her attempts to understand herself she would latch on to various explanations. She wondered if her sense of difference was related to her accent, which was considered more "posh" than that of her peers. Perhaps it was because of her higher socio-economic status, or her desire for higher education. The fact that she was an only child made it difficult for her to understand her peers and their interests in "childish games". Could this explain her discomfort? Hillary started having epileptic seizures as a child; perhaps this is what set her apart? Ironically, in her mid teens, Hillary had a sexual

relationship with a woman yet she did not consider her sexual orientation to be the contributing factor. Her ambivalence and confusion are wonderfully illustrated in her account of her wedding day.

> I do remember the day of my marriage and the wedding. I was all dressed up. I felt I was all dressed up and nowhere to go. It didn't feel right. They played the music three times and I froze at the back of the church. I didn't want to go [down the aisle]. My father turned to me and said, "You have to." I said, "No, I don't want to." He said, "You need to do this . . . you need to." So (ex-husband) turned around. I could see the front of the church. The doors were open. I was looking up the aisle to the front of the church . . . I thought it was the beginning of the end of my life. . . I felt they should have played a funeral march.

Members by assumption spoke about having physical and emotional displays that seemed unexplainable at the time. These included such things as constant headaches, depression, episodes of unprovoked anger and crying bouts. For example, when Victor was preadolescent, a few of his cousins suggested he was gay. Victor felt unable to either confirm or dismiss these suggestions. "I couldn't do anything with it except get angry . . . I remember at the time being angry at it but not knowing why."

Involuntary Membership. As only one participant became a member of their social group involuntarily, it is impossible to make generalized statements about membership experiences attributable to this category. That said, José's descriptions of membership were by far the most negative. He used words like "isolated", "angry," "frustrated" and "depressed" to describe his early membership experiences. Unlike the other participants who could all identify some benefits of membership, such as having a sense of belonging and comfort at least in the earliest years of membership, José's experiences were just the opposite. For him, feelings of isolation began almost immediately while he was in the hospital recovering from the meningitis that would ultimately leave him deafened. He recalled not having the ability to communicate with

other patients and family members and immediately feeling the loss of comfort, support and relational benefits he had previously derived from chit-chat.

One factor contributing to José's negative membership experiences was his lack of choice in joining the group. Unlike the four individuals who chose to become members of their social group, José had no allusions of being part of a group that was a good "fit" for him. Whereas other participants were either confident that the group was a good fit (for the first few years at least), or confused about whether the group was a fit, José initially flat out resisted an understanding of himself as deafened. For him, his self-understandings of being musically and academically gifted were irreconcilable with being deafened. He maintained an understanding of himself as hearing long after others concluded he was, in fact, deaf. His denial increased his feelings of isolation and loneliness because he deprived himself of the friendship and support of the deaf community. Eight years after losing his hearing, José began to affiliate with other deaf people and he joined a deaf social club and self-help group. It was through these memberships that he grew to accept that the group of late deafened adults was a good fit for him.

Another factor contributing to José's negativity was his perceived drop in status as a deafened adult. If we look at the individuals who voluntarily joined their social groups, we can see evidence of their perceived jump in status. For example, Laura felt the Jehovah's Witnesses were the "truth" and God's elect, and Brian understood the priesthood as an occupation that garnered a lot of respect. Comparatively, José felt he lost respect and opportunity. He acknowledged that many deaf individuals view their deafness as a unique characteristic, something that positively defines them, shapes their identity,

and their social worlds. But, for José, being deafened was a physical and social disability, a deficit, and a loss that left him feeling stigmatized and less than others in society.

Not unlike the others, José's story indicates that personal agency, in this case the ability to control one's social group memberships, is a key factor determining one's overall contentment and sense of belonging in one's social group. Not only did José not have control over becoming deafened but this disability meant that others would have to speak for him and help him with the daily living tasks that required hearing.

> I never felt like a self-sustaining adult. I always felt like a little kid. I would have to stand there while [others] were talking on the phone [for me]. I felt like one of those eager puppies that look at you when you put the food out. I always felt awkward. I felt I was not in control. I felt that others were controlling my destiny.

José's lack of choice determined that he had to work through negative emotions, such as anger, bitterness, and depression, before he could feel a measure of belonging and fit.

Meaning

A moral is the "lesson or principle contained in or taught by a fable, a story, or an event" (The American Heritage Dictionary, 2000). In narrative analysis it is understood that when people tell stories they ascribe an order and meaning to their experiences "to make a point" (Reissman, 1993, p. 5). It is understood that every story has a moral. In doing a narrative analysis then, I determined one of the tasks was to probe the content of each story to discover its moral, which I then compared to the morals of the other stories to see if any overarching moral, or *metamoral*, existed. I discovered two such metamorals in the membership stories.

First, as I noted earlier, the pre-disengagement phase refers to membership experiences prior to any misgivings about membership and intentions to leave. Yet, in their membership stories participants provided clues and dropped hints as to why social

group disengagement was the inevitable conclusion of the larger story. Participants went to great pains in their membership accounts to provide a rational and logical sequence to their stories. Essentially, the moral of the story was that disengagement made sense. Participants were saying, "Look! I was different than the others. I may have felt like I belonged. I may have assumed I belonged, but I was wrong. I didn't know it then, but I never ever belonged to that group."

This message was largely communicated through intragroup comparisons. Hannah, for example, compared herself to her brothers. She said, "I tended to often look for something different . . . I was frustrated. Now I have brothers who have never been frustrated so in the same family you would have different reactions to things." Faith noted, "I often, unlike the other children, I recognized myself as being an enormously deep thinker. I found myself to be separate and different from the others from about age five on". Sean remarked, "So by comparison to my other siblings, who left at a young age, I refused to leave. I didn't drop out of school. I didn't quit." This is an important point given that education proved to be Sean's ticket out the group. Brian noted, he "never wanted to be like everyone else" in the priesthood and hence chose to go to a different theological school than his peers did and he exercised more independence than is typical of priests by doing his own laundry, cleaning his own room, and scheduling his own appointments. There are many more examples I could use, but the point is clear. These individuals looked back and were able to identify aspects of their former selves that set them apart and marked them for disengagement long before they consciously choose to disengage from the group. In conclusion, participants had a sense they were

different from others in the group long before this sense of difference was desired or cultivated.

The second moral of the stories was that group membership, however difficult and painful it proved to be, was central to their understanding of self both then and now and hence needed to be honoured. At times I was surprised by the extent to which some participants went to protect and defend their former social groups and the circumstances surrounding their memberships. Faith indicated,

> I don't think there is anything inherently wrong with the group. It just didn't fit me, in the same way that a lot of things don't fit me. Maybe part of my sense of self is, if something doesn't fit me I leave it. I am the only one in my family who left a marriage. That marriage didn't fit me. I chose it for very good reasons. But I also chose to leave it. . . I don't think the Christian Reformed Church is in any way inherently [wrong]. If people like it, go. That is great. Be part of it. I have no evangelical zeal to get people out.

Heather's defence of her parents who raised her as a male even though she was born intersexed and her gender identity ambiguous serves as another example.

> I was born intersexed and in 1966 my parents were undereducated let's say. Neither of them finished high school. They were both just 20 years old when I was born. So the doctor came to them in his white lab coat and his posh accent and said, "This is what we think we should do." And so they did. So all of a sudden, baby who-knows-what is baby boy. . . So a little bit of stitchery here and there. And they didn't tell me. (pause) Doctor said, "Look, just don't say anything and hopefully it won't come up" . . . We were in Britain so the class divide came into it to some extent too. . . We were dirt poor, working of the working class . . . So they [my parents] do what the doctor said, of course. Friends of mine have asked me, "Do you blame them?" Of course, I don't. I mean they did the best they could at the time. They were a couple of 20 year olds.

I came to realize that if participants were to dismiss their former social groups or denigrate their past memberships they would be denying an aspect of themselves. These membership stories suggest to me that the structure of identity is much like a physical structure. You can't like a finished building without also appreciating the foundation,

girders, and posts that keep the building upright. If you were to remove the foundational blocks and the weight bearing beams, the building would fall. Likewise with identity, to excise the past understandings of self and past social group affiliations from one's current understandings of self would lead to a caving in of one's self.

CHAPTER 8

The Process of Social Group Disengagement – Phase Two

I have bitten off the pieces that I did not want
I have torn them into tiny bits of rain
Oh the sun has dried those memories
like I knew it would.

-- JANN ARDEN, Saved

Phase two, the disengagement phase can be broken down into five distinct stages, each with definable features and ascribed meaning. The five stages are 1) outside in, 2) initial questions and doubts, 3) multiple leavings, 4) being the best, and 5) choosing life. Each of these stages will be discussed in turn with regard to common characteristics, common experiences, and meaning.

Stage One: Outside In

The phrase "outside in" refers to participants receiving some exposure to the world outside of their social group and/or receiving outside knowledge. This access to the outside world allowed participants to make intergroup comparisons and to consider their contentment and sense of fit in the group within a broader social context. The common characteristics, common experiences, and meaning of stage one are summarized in Table Seven and discussed separately below.

Common Characteristics. For many participants, education was the window to the outside world. As Hannah explained, "When you are in it as a child you don't know anything different." However, once she started public school, she was able to compare herself to others and it was then that she began to appreciate how restricted and isolated her life was as an old order Mennonite. Hannah added,

Table 7: Disengagement Phase, Stage 1 - Outside In

Common Characteristics	Common Experiences	Meaning
• Access to the outside world (e.g. through education and relationships with "outsiders") • Intergroup comparisons	Negative feelings: • Nascent feelings of "not fitting". • Shame and embarrassment about membership. Positive feelings: • Validation and support from the outside. • Empowered by the discovery that membership was a choice	• Self-awareness is dependent on choice of identity options • Self-awareness requires relationships with individuals similar to and different from one's self • Reflection and reflexivity are essential processes in self-discovery • The ability to utilize outside information is dependent on when it is received and self-awareness

> I went to a public school, which meant there were non-Mennonites at the public school so my peers, my schoolmates, would not necessarily be Mennonite. So when they could wear pants and we always had to wear dresses, when they could go out in the evenings and I couldn't, and then once we got to high school, when they could go to out and do things, it always felt very, very, restrictive.

Sean's world broadened in a similar fashion when he entered a high school outside of his geographic community. He remarked, "My understanding of the community changed with opportunity."

Faith went to a parochial church-affiliated elementary school and her world broadened when she went to a public high school. Within the home and church, higher education was not valued as it was associated with a loss of faith. Faith's high grades, academic abilities and propensity to challenge the status quo were considered character flaws, signs that she was not being as submissive or as humble as she ought. When Faith entered high school, her academic abilities were validated and honoured. As Faith explains,

> My English teacher thought I was the cat's meow. In fact, I have a book upstairs [in my house] that says that she never had a student like me, or something like that. I often received from my teachers that which I didn't receive from my family. I had very high marks. My teachers loved me and I loved my teachers. I was the teacher's pet. They loved me. It was very easy to be loved by teachers. So much of sense of self came from school and feeling smart.

For Faith, having access to the outside world through public education allowed her to evaluate herself using a new set of criteria. In so doing she discovered that what her social group considered a character flaw, other groups considered an asset. It is not surprising that Faith grew to love these teachers who allowed her to see a positive image of herself.

Hillary and Chris became aware of the social groups that would ultimately prove to be a better "fit" for them when they were in university. They each spoke about how they had needed to become cognitively aware of identity options and consider them in an abstract way before they could begin to contemplate how or if any of these options applied to them. Hillary was recently separated from her husband, and a student in a social work program, when a professor assigned readings pertaining to homosexuality. Hillary found the readings fascinating but assumed her intrigue was "for professional reasons." She added,

> It wasn't until I met someone that I found interesting that it all came together – the stuff that I was reading...because while I was reading there were some "Ah-Ha's" happening. I didn't really understand what was happening but I was starting to process and come to an awareness of myself as someone with a different orientation.

Chris came to a "theoretical" awareness that she was transgendered when she was writing her Master's thesis. She recalled,

> I was doing research on [the movie] *The Crying Game* for my thesis. I was looking at gender and nationhood and orientation. It is a good film for those three things. . .I think part of my understanding of gender - I think I came at it from a far more theoretical mode than most people who come at it through a much more experiential mode. . . I was using theories of Butler, Foucault, Bhabha . . . and I was looking at signs and signifiers and functions in terms of interpretation and how they work with individuals and how they work in terms of plot. It was all very theoretical in terms of the performance of gender. Then, I think it was after that, I had some friends who I knew who had transitioned and I started to think of it less theoretically and more in terms of this seems that would be right.

University education was also significant for Laura, Mary, and Victor in that it broadened their world and allowed them the freedom and opportunity to consider alternative self-understandings.

Besides education, other means of broadening one's world were evident in the data. Brian, for example, gained greater access through his friendships with "normal" people. He intentionally went against the wishes and expectations of his bishop and priestly colleagues to make friends outside of the priesthood. Brian explained that when you are a priest it is assumed that your closest friends will be priests and that you will spend your free time, including your holidays, in the company of priests. Brian felt hemmed in by that expectation and he intentionally chose an outside interest, scuba diving, as a way of making friends with people from the outside world. Brian noted,

> Another thing that . . . was a source of conflict was I didn't really have a lot of priest friends. I had more friends who were normal people. That was discouraged. I remember this old priest that I lived with, he said to me, "You need to have your best friends be priests because when things are really tough they are the ones who can really support you. They know what it is like to be a priest." I always thought, "That is a bunch of bullshit." My friends, my best friends were always not priests . . . Once I went on holidays with a priest. . and I vowed I would never go on holidays again with another priest. After that for eleven years or ten years I went on holidays with lay people. One family in particular I became good friends with and we used to go camping and I began scuba diving. I got into scuba diving and got into being an instructor. So I used to work my schedule as a priest around making sure I was available on Monday nights to teach scuba diving. That became a source of conflict. It was, "Well, your priestly duties come first".

It was through his friendships with lay people that Brian was exposed to alternative ways of living that appealed to him. He started meeting people who were living full and rich lives. His own life as a priest seemed restricted and joyless by comparison. This led him to question the choice he made to be a priest and to consider the appropriateness of "fit" between the profession and himself.

> I got invited to a party. . . I met two guys there who were a couple . . . and they basically invited me to come over to their place one day. So I did. And they became [my] friends. . . I just marvelled at that fact that, "Oh, my God, look, they've got their own home and they're doing all these renovations themselves and wow, that's amazing and they're really nice" . . . So I very slowly got introduced to this other side of myself that started coming out. But it was all very quiet, hush, hush. I wasn't "out" to anyone but I was just struggling with it myself . . . So gradually, over time I just started having all of these other feelings. Why can't I have a relationship? Why couldn't I have my own home? Why couldn't I have kids and that kind of stuff? So it was very slow kind of thing that was happening.

For José, his deafness kept him isolated. His access to both the outside world and the deaf community was compromised by his inability to communicate. As he learned to mouth read and use sign language he became more connected to the deaf community and, ironically, his world broadened. Like Brian, his friendships allowed him to witness alternative ways of living. He realized that his deafness need not prevent him from marrying, getting a university education, and being socially and politically active.

Brian and José's stories reveal the role friendships can play in broadening one's world. However, several participants did not have the opportunity to develop such friendships due to the group either preventing them from mingling with "outsiders" or the group keeping them so busy that they didn't have time to forge these friendships. In several instances these barriers were creatively surmounted through the internet and the formation of "cyber friendships." As Beth explains, when she was living with her abusive husband she made two friendships using the internet and these friends proved to be a vital support to her, beginning when she was still living with him and continuing to the present day.

> He [ex-husband] had a real burn on for this computer. . . Really hated it. And I think some of that was largely again this abusive side. I had these two friends . . . that weren't his and he didn't have control over it. . . [After I left my ex-husband] I kept the[se] two friends . . . and I was quite shocked with the amount of caring and concern that they had through this whole situation because they were so far

away. We'd never met in person, nothing like that.

Many participants used the internet as a source of outside knowledge. They accessed information from the internet to confirm or challenge the beliefs and values of their social group. It was a useful tool for finding a community of others who shared their experiences of "not fitting" and had successfully found alternatives. Laura and Claire, for example, accessed web sites that are geared toward individuals who have questions about the Jehovah's Witnesses. These sites offer significant challenge to the official positions taken by the organization.

A key advantage of the internet is that it can be accessed anonymously in the privacy of one's home or work place, away from the prying eyes of other in-group members. The user determines the timing and extent of usage, which also offers a measure of safety and control. In addition, the internet can be used by individuals with disabilities (such as the deaf) and those who are geographically or socially isolated (such as Sean and Beth). Given the ability of the internet to decrease isolation and provide alternative views, it is perhaps not surprising that 25% of the sample belonged to social groups that forbade its use.

Common Experiences. The experiences of social group membership changed with participants' ability to make intergroup comparisons. In some cases, a group that had once felt comfortable or benign began to feel restrictive and controlling. In others, a group that once seemed to be a good fit began to feel less so. In still others, vague feelings of not fitting began to take shape. In this stage, nascent feelings of "not fitting" were accompanied by low grade feelings of disquiet. Although these feelings were primarily experienced as negative and niggling, participants were not inclined at this

point to consider disengagement. As Hannah explained,

> Now the thing is when you are in it as a child you don't know anything different so you just assume that everybody stays home every night until you start meeting people who go out and then it's sort of like, oh, why can't I? But there is an extremely strong sense of belonging that part of me wouldn't even consider leaving because there is too much at stake.

This sentiment of a positive sense of belonging offsetting any consideration of disengagement was voiced by many of the participants. Hillary articulated this feeling in the following way:

> I did have a sense of belonging but I also felt like I didn't fit in. These were very separate [feelings] . . . Yes I did have a sense of very much being a heterosexual woman but the fit was not right. I could not put my finger on why that was. I never let myself go there.

For some participants, greater access to the outside world was associated with feelings of shame and embarrassment. Shame resulted when participants placed themselves in the position of the outsider and evaluated themselves according to how they assumed the outsider would be evaluating them. For example, Faith saw her social group quite differently when she began dating a man who was unfamiliar with the Christian Reformed Church. She explained:

> Part of me started to look out and see that I and the things that I had considered to be just normal because I had grown up with them, were in fact quite strange because now I was looking through his eyes. That was part of me seeing things that I did not like at all.

Trevor had a similar experience. Trevor assumed that his money, his ability to intimidate others, and his connections to organized crime would impress people on the "outside." However, after being spotted with his niece and nephew in a shopping mall, Trevor was confronted by a former acquaintance who suggested child welfare authorities would be concerned if they knew children were in his company. Although angered by the remark, Trevor acknowledged that it forced him to consider that the outside world may

not be as impressed by him as he had originally thought and in fact may even be disgusted. Trevor concluded, "Here was this normal working man in society and that [i.e., a disgusting person whose presence put a child's safety at risk] is what he saw. So that perception of what does everybody see and what does everybody think came in."

Not all feelings associated with this stage of the disengagement process were negative. As indicated earlier with respect to Faith, during this stage some participants were able to receive validation from the outside world in ways they had not from their social group. In addition, some participants felt empowered because they discovered they were not destined to belong to their particular social group forever. Even though they may not have desired to leave at this time, they were now aware that if they wanted, they could leave. As Sean explained:

> A lot happened around that whole time. I lost my mother, got more confidence, got more academic support, just kind of began seeing things beyond the community. And that was a push to get out of the community. By then I understood that I could get out of the community. That this was not carved in stone that I needed to be there. I can get beyond this.

Meaning. This stage of the disengagement process provides useful insights into the epismology of the self. The moral of the "outside in" stories is that individuals need access to the outside (i.e., knowledge of other social groups and identity options) to know who they are. Self-awareness is dependent on choice and to have choice one must have knowledge of a range of options from which to choose. Chris summed up this point the best.

> I think that a construction of the self is in part based on the social construction of yourself in relation to others. And given that there is a social context for the categories through which we understand ourselves and other people, I think that means to a certain extent that your knowledge is in part going to be utilised or accessed through community, through other people. And whether or not that's like this is a group of people or this is something I identify with or whether or it's something that I don't identify with and in the process of disidentification you

identify with something else.

The "outside in" stories support Cooley's (1902) notion of the "looking glass self." Contact with individuals outside of their social group provided participants with additional "mirrors" and hence new reflections (i.e., understandings) of themselves. As Brian's story suggests, the outside mirrors allowed him to "slowly [get] introduced to this other side of myself that started coming out." Mary offered the following:

> I think probably what happened with some of these people that I talked [with] . . . is that they validated some parts of who I was that I couldn't see. Because there was a lot of self-doubt and self- judgment and self- recrimination because I wasn't fitting the mold I was supposed to fit because I wasn't who I was. Or I wasn't who everybody thought I should be . . . So, for somebody else to say, "You're very bright." It was like, I am?

However, the "outside in" stories further elucidate Cooley's (1902) contention that relationships are essential to self-knowledge and development by suggesting that these relationships need to be made with individuals who are similar to oneself <u>and</u> with individuals who are different from oneself.

These stories also draw our attention to the role of reflexivity in self-knowledge. As discussed above, participants' knowledge of themselves expanded when access to the outside allowed them to project themselves into the position of "the outsider" and consider how he/or she might view them. This finding is consistent with Cooley's (1902) sentiment that "we perceive in another's mind some thought of our appearance, manners, aims, deeds, character, friends, and so on, and are variously affected by it" (p. 184). As Siegel (2005) explains, "reflexivity is an essential element of selfhood" (p. 17). He suggests knowledge of the self is not only derived through reflection but also through reflexivity. These "outside in" stories lend support to these views.

A final moral of the "outside in" stories is that the timing of the outside access

determines its usefulness. These stories suggest that self-knowledge is cumulative and certain bits need to be in place before new bits can be received from the outside and incorporated into the self. In other words, access to outside knowledge needs to dovetail with participants' psychological and social stages of development to be of value. As participants grew, their social worlds naturally broadened to include the influences of peers, the educational system, and the socio-political and cultural climate in which they lived. Hence questions related to how well one fit in their respective social group did not surface until the individual was cognitively able to conceive of alternatives.

Chris, for example, described himself as a "tomboy" prior to going to school and he indicated he never identified as a girl. However, it wasn't until he was eight or nine that he began "wishing, really, really wishing I was a guy." His statements make sense. Fraiberg (1959), a recognized expert on early childhood development, suggests that children do not have a fixed understanding of their gender until age seven or eight. Prior to this, children fantastically assume they can choose their own gender and their play (as Chris' story also reveals) reflects this gender fluidity. The realization that gender is "fixed" is precipitated by the entry into school whereby cultural views of gender are reinforced. So Chris, by the age of eight or nine, was cognitively able to grasp that he was biologically "fixed" as a girl and also able to appreciate that he didn't identify as such. He was at a developmental stage where he could make sense of the outside information.

Stage Two: Initial Questions and Doubts

During this stage participants began to question the fit between themselves and their social groups and doubt their suitability as members. The common characteristics, common experiences, and meaning of stage two are summarized in Table Eight and

discussed separately below.

Table 8: Disengagement Phase, Stage 2 - Initial Questions and Doubts

Common Characteristics	Common Experiences	Meaning
• Questions arise about the poor fit between individual and group.	• Dissonance between individual and social understandings • Censored and silenced by the group results in: negative feelings about the self, feeling denied of avenues of self-exploration, feeling disconnected to oneself, and feeling lonely	• The manner in which a social group responds to initial questions and doubts sets the future course of the disengagement process • Family members can support or subvert group norms

Common Characteristics. Several studies (Altemeyer & Hunsburger, 1997; Ebaugh, 1988; and Levine, 1984) consider initial questions and doubts about membership to be the first definable stage of the disengagement process. However, this study suggests that a period of questioning is necessarily predicated by the individual's exposure to the outside, as it is through the process of intergroup comparison that participants began to evaluate and question the suitability of their own group memberships. As Ebaugh (1988) admits, the process of doubting includes an admission of alternatives. This association between intergroup comparisons and the burgeoning of questions and doubts about membership is aptly illustrated in Brian's story. Brian took up scuba diving as a way to make friends outside of the priesthood. He remarked,

> I enjoyed it [scuba diving] and all those other people that I met. I became good friends with people. There was a lot of young people involved in it. . .I became really good friends with this one young guy, who, it turned out in the end to have been gay himself. He came out to me and I came out to him. And what had happened was, I said to myself, "Oh my God. Here's this guy, he's 21 years old. He's taking his own life into his hands and just doing what he wants to do. What the hell am I doing? Why can't I be something? What's wrong with me?

The questions related to membership were of various types. Some of the participants' questions, such as the ones Brian raises in the above quotation, pertain to themselves. "What's wrong with me?" These participants were able to acknowledge the

poor fit between themselves and the group but they internalized the problem. In some cases, such as Brian's, the questions were attempts to discern what it was about them that made it difficult to embrace life outside of the group. They questioned why they were remaining in a group that was making them unhappy and why they seemed unable to leave. Chris, for example, was beginning to identify as transgendered when, for a period of three years, he continued to "interrogate" himself and question what social group he would belong to. He noted,

> I think part of it, simply put, is the difficulty of the decision . . . I think that is [true] any time you are making big decisions in terms of orientation or a move or a lifestyle change or a transitioning. And sometimes with groups where there is more social stigma attached [to membership] or social oppression there can be a lot of hesitation [to join] and a lot of questions about it. OK, it may be right but is it necessary? I don't think that there was a lot of question about my feeling trans. I think that the question of engaging in the process, the cost of the process, the stigma associated with the process in terms of how other people respond to it, makes a lot of people hesitate.

In other instances, participants' questions were attempts to discern why they were unable to be as content with membership as their fellow group members appeared to be. They wondered what inherent flaws or deficits they possessed that made membership so tenuous for them. Participants, such as Hannah, Faith, Claire, and Laura, who belonged to religious groups, considered their questions about membership to be a sign of weak faith, a lack of humility before God, or arrogance. That they would question the group's authority, teachings or beliefs was in itself deemed a character flaw. As Faith explained,

> When I would talk to others . . . they would say, "Why do you ask those questions? Don't ask those questions. Just don't be like that!" There was a sense of being different in that way.

She concluded, "I considered my doubts and my questioning and my anger . . . to be wrong and bad. . . I very much considered it arrogance. Who was I to even have those

thoughts?" Laura offers a similar sentiment. She noted that by asking questions,

> . . . you can be, I think, marked as a person. You are looked upon as not a very spiritually strong person if you question things. Because if you question things then you are beginning to doubt that it [the group] isn't THE truth.

Some participants, in contrast to those described above, responded to their feelings of not fitting in their social group by interrogating the group rather than themselves. As Claire's story reveals, this type of interrogation is the product of a slow and incremental process. When Claire's outside friendships and her reading led her to question the values and beliefs of the Jehovah's Witnesses, she did so with the hope that she would find answers that would support the organization and actually strengthen her commitment.

> I started reading a little more but then I'd think, "What if [the teachings are not true?]. . . It was, well I'm going to go and read . . . the encyclopedia. I remember [the celebration of] Christmas and birthdays were two such issues. People didn't believe it when I told them that birthdays were wrong to celebrate and Christmas was wrong to celebrate, and that's what we were taught. So I went to the encyclopedias at the library and I spent many, many hours and days just going back and forth. And I did that for years, just going back and forth every time something kind of sparked that I thought wasn't quite right. I would try to see it from more of a secular viewpoint then a religious viewpoint. So I'd go back and I'd read and I'd go, "OK, well there, I've read enough that I've verified that they [the Jehovah's Witnesses] are saying is the right thing". There were other books that I could have read but I took the ones that would verify things.

If Claire still had lingering doubts she would tell her mother who would then ask the elders to come over to discuss the issues with her. Eventually, Claire found the answers she received from the books "that would verify things" and the elders to be unsatisfactory. She then decided to seek answers from a wider range of sources. Seeking answers that were satisfying and rang true to her became more important than "proving" the organization was right. She remarked that it was at this point that she stopped confiding in her mother about her questions and her reading forays.

Common Experiences. Participants' questions and doubts about group membership were predicated by a generalized sense that they were not fitting into their social groups. They experienced dissonance between their individual and social self understandings. Participants asked questions as a way to explore and ultimately ease the dissonance. As indicated above, when most participants started to ask questions they felt censored or silenced by their social groups. The extent to which participants felt they could openly share their questions and doubts was in direct measure to the extent to which they felt they could discover and share aspects of themselves with the group.

When an individual's questions were censored several phenomenon occurred. First, the participant determined the questions, and hence aspects of him or herself, to be wrong and inappropriate. For example, Faith admitted to feeling "negative" about herself. Hannah felt "unusual," Hillary "different," and Laura "marked." When Hannah concludes, "I didn't like the questions I was starting to ask," one gets the impression that she didn't like her emerging self-understanding that she was a "questioner" because of the stigma associated with being a questioner in her social group and because the questions left her feeling unsettled.

Second, when participants were deprived of opportunities to seek satisfying answers to their questions, they were likewise deprived of opportunities to discover and develop aspects of the self. As Chris explained, we need opportunities to "play" with aspects of the self to see what fits and what doesn't. In an ideal world we are allowed to test out various personas with a receptive audience. Asking questions is one way of exploring and testing one's self. For example, Chris suggested that coming to terms with first being gay, and second being transgendered sparked numerous identity related

questions.

> I think that for me the self accepting part, the process of accepting myself as queer, that happened before examining the trans issue. And I'm not sure why. That could have been just a function of the age, [a function] of my being in my early 20's, 19's and early 20's, and starting to have to deal with dating pressures and figuring well, if I'm dating, then who am I dating? And what am I interested in? Who am I interested in? Where is that connection? And I think that, and I don't mean to be facetious but I think that the whole sort of sexual intimacy and sex part, that whole exploration can be quite distracting for a number of years (laughter). And that ends up, you end up, for me, that was also important. Not just in terms of who it felt right to be with, but also, what was I like in the context of these relationships? What did I need in these relationships? What could I give? What kind of structure for these relationships did I want? Did I want an open structure? Did I want a closed structure?

Third, as a result of being denied opportunities to ask questions and voice doubts, participants were often left feeling disconnected from their group and in some respects also disconnected from aspects of themselves. An emotion commonly associated with feelings of disconnection is loneliness. Participants revealed that although they were not alone, and in fact many were still actively involved in their social groups, chronically busy, and in constant contact with people, they were lonely. As Hannah indicated, when she started to ask questions she felt lonely:

> Incredibly lonely because I wasn't sure who I could process those questions with. I tried some with my best friends, but I always had to feel my way very carefully. Because if ever they started to say, "Hey, what are you doing?" you knew that you could be cut off as fast as you are accepted. So the need to conform is so strong that as a very young child, you learn how, if you have something that is a little on the edge, you test it like children do with their parents. Can I get away with this? And I did that with my questioning as I tried with a few people but the really deep questions, most of them believed what the church did so they didn't understand my questions.

In addition to feeling "silenced" and "lonely" other emotions used to describe this stage were "confused," "unsettled," "schizophrenic," "angry," and "unhappy."

Meaning. The moral of these stories is that the manner in which a social group responds to initial questions and doubts sets the course of the disengagement process. As Altemeyer and Hunsburger (1997) suggest, initial questions and doubts are "the tip of the wedge" (p.28) but it is the group's responses to these questions that force the gap to widen. Similarly, Ebaugh (1988) understood early questions and doubts to be a form of "cuing behaviour" whereby individuals admit and express both to themselves and to others their unhappiness in the group "long before ma[king] a conscious choice to leave" (p. 70). These cues are picked up by others and their reactions can either stay or advance the disengagement process.

These stories of "initial questions and doubts" illustrate the role of the group in the early stages of the disengagement process. If the group responded to participants' questions in an open and encouraging manner, as was the case for Claire and Mark, they felt heard and validated and had no immediate desire to leave. They did not feel the need to compromise themselves in order to fit into the group nor did they feel they had to choose between themselves and the group. If, on the other hand, the group responded by trying to silence the questions, as was the case with Hannah, Faith, Chris, Brian, Dorothy, and Laura, the individuals' unhappiness in the group increased as did nascent thoughts of leaving. The options available to them became polarized. Either there was something wrong with them or the group. They could either stay and feel at odds with the group or consider leaving. It seemed less likely that they could remain in the group and be themselves.

Given that all the participants in the sample eventually disengaged from their social groups, it is not surprising that most participants indicated they were discouraged

from asking questions. Hannah indicated that within the Old Order Mennonites,

> There was a very, very strong social demand that is put on. The less questions the better. Children shouldn't ask questions and if they ask questions they should be told to stop.

Chris recalled,

> I think one of clearest memories was that I shouldn't talk about this [being transgendered]. This was something I know about and this is something I shouldn't talk about. Children have a sense of what is safe to talk about in terms of the environment.

In their response to the questions, family members played a key role in either supporting or subverting group norms. Faith's mom responded to her questions by telling Faith "This is stupid. . .Stop that!" Faith adds, "I would ask questions and be told sharply that you do not question". Hannah recalled feeling comfortable confiding in her sister about her questions related to the traditions of the church but needing to censor herself on matters pertaining to faith and belief. Hillary observed that she felt as silenced at home as she did at school and at church. However, not all the stories were bleak. For many years Claire felt comfortable raising her questions with her mother. Mark felt his family shared his questions and encouraged him to be open and true to himself. Likewise, Sean was able to share a few of his questions with his mother and feel supported by her before she died.

Stage Three: Multiple Leavings

A multiple leaving occurred when the a participant either disengaged from at least one central aspect of their social group or disengaged from at least one other social group, which had once been central to their self-understandings, *prior to* leaving the social group in question. The common characteristics, common experiences, and meaning of stage three are summarized in Table Nine and discussed separately below.

Table 9: Disengagement Phase, Stage 3 - Multiple Leavings

Common Characteristics	Common Experiences	Meaning
• Focus is on individual identity development Two Types: 1. Pruning – disengaging from aspects of the group that are problematic 2. Removing Barriers – disengaging from related social groups that are hindering individual development	• Growing self awareness and acceptance • Experiences of stage varied according to type of multiple leaving: 1. Pruning – largely positive and hopeful 2. Removing Barriers – running on instinct, bewildered, constrained, compromised, lonely	• "Trial runs" are necessary for disengagement success. • "Process imaging" can be a helpful strategy. • Multiple leavings build a sense of individual agency, minimize the risk of becoming overwhelmed, and allow for increment coping.

Common Characteristics. The discovery and extent of multiple leaving attempts in the disengagement process was a unique finding of this research. All sixteen participants experienced at least one type of a multiple leaving experience. Participants' stories evidenced two types of multiple leavings. After an initial reading of the stories many of the leavings seemed independent from each other but upon closer examination it was apparent that participants understood their multiple leavings to be connected. In all instances, the multiple leavings were attempts to ease the dissonance between their individual and social selves by choosing to develop and strengthen the individual self and reduce commitment to the social understandings of the self. This strategy stands in sharp contrast to the one utilized in Stage Four of the disengagement process ("Being the Best") discussed below, wherein dissonance is eased by re-committing to their social understandings of the self. The two types of multiple leavings and the connections between them will now be discussed.

Type One – "Pruning"

Some participants, after questioning or doubting the suitability of membership in their social group, attempted to locate the aspects of group membership that were

particularly problematic for them. This led to a pruning process. Rather than view group membership as a singular affiliation and the group as something that must be accepted in its totality, they began to consider membership as comprised of multiple affiliations. In an effort, then, to ease the dissonance between themselves and the social group at large, they consciously pruned away some of the less desirable memberships. It was a parsimonious effort; an attempt to create harmony between their personal and social identities with the least amount of disruption possible. It was an effort to stave off complete and total disengagement and, like the pruning of a tree, the earlier disengagements allowed new growth to occur.

Faith's story offers one of the richest examples of this type of multiple leaving. Faith described her social group, the CRC, as being "a strongly religious, ethnically homogeneous, rural, church affiliated life style/social group". Her understanding of membership in the CRC included growing up as a first generation Canadian of Dutch heritage and living in an isolated rural community. Expectations that she not pursue post secondary education and instead stay in the rural community and marry "a good Dutch boy" were perceived by Faith to be part and parcel of group membership.

When Faith was sixteen years old she had an opportunity to participate in a volunteer/training program at a psychiatric hospital in Michigan, a facility affiliated with the CRC. She noted, "There I met people who were Christian Reformed, who were not rural, who understood psychology, who understood feelings, and accepted feelings". She discovered that many aspects of the CRC she had railed against, such as the censorship of questions and theological inquiry, the devaluing of secular postsecondary education, and the emphasis placed on duty at the expense of feelings, were in fact not intrinsic to group

membership. That summer she began to appreciate that the CRC, like most social groups, was not homogeneous and experiences of membership were social constructions. She became hopeful that her membership in the CRC could be less tenuous if she could leave "parts of it," such as the aspects of the group that were interwoven with her experiences of living in an isolated, rural community. She described this discovery as "one of the most incredible experiences" of her life. She recalled, "I became almost ecstatic . . . I felt freed." In an urban center in Michigan, she had found a CRC community that valued aspects of herself that had previously been devalued in her rural Ontario CRC community, specifically her questions, her feelings, her mysticism, and her interests in psychology.

Unfortunately, when Faith returned home, her father vehemently opposed her new understanding of the CRC. He told her,

> "You will forget that [your experiences in Michigan]. This is what is real, here." He said that over and over again, "This is what is real. The way we have it here. The way we know it here is real. That was not real what you learned there and it will go away."

Faith continued,

> Despite him saying that, that was the beginning break from (pause) because it is just not just the Christian Reformed Church that I am talking about, I am talking about the way the family saw it, the world and life view of my family, Dutch, rural, whatever, not just Christian Reformed. What I saw was that Christian Reformed could also be like that and I could leave parts of it with out having to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

Faith did leave "parts" of the group. She left the rural community to go to university in the city. She likewise disengaged from "the world and life view" of her family. She was estranged from her family for several years. She chose to marry "late" (by her family's standards) and when she did marry, she chose someone from outside her social group.

Leaving "parts" of the group allowed Faith to remain a member of the CRC for eleven more years before finally leaving the group all together at the age of twenty-seven.

There are other examples, but I will provide just three more. After the death of his mother, Sean pruned away the least desirable aspects of his territorial socio-economic group by leaving his father and the village to live with his older sister in a neighbouring village. Chris pruned away a few of the behavioral and dress "requirements" associated with being female. He dressed in boys' clothes, played on boys' athletic teams, and would use boys' washrooms if possible. Brian pruned away some of the conservative aspects of the priesthood. He disengaged from the diocese that had initially sponsored him to work in a less orthodox diocese. He later understood this leaving, moreover, as a way of distancing himself from the diocese where his sexual abuse had occurred. Brian also pruned away a few of the clerical aspects of the priesthood. He recalled,

> I would be out in the church on Sunday morning and I would not have a [clerical] collar on. I would just have a shirt on. I wouldn't wear the [required] black pants. I think a lot of people liked it that I was unconventional. . . I remember him [fellow priest] speaking to me once about the fact that I wouldn't wear my collar when I went to the schools. I said, "Why [should I wear it]? They know who I am. What difference does it make?" But it was all in the "It is important if you are out in the public to be seen as a priest. What are you ashamed of?" I said, "I am not ashamed of anything." I said, "I will identify myself as a priest if it is needed."

Like the others, for Brian, pruning helped him to distance himself from aspects of his social group he considered the least desirable (the abuse, the conservatism, and the clericalism) in order to claim as much individual space within the group as possible.

Type Two – Removing Barriers

A second type of multiple leaving involved a much less conscious process. In these instances participants removed the barriers, that is, the associated social group memberships that were preventing individual identity development. Disengaging from

these other social groups was an incremental process. As these individuals left these other social groups they become closer and closer to an understanding of their true self living with individual and social identity congruence. They became more self-aware and confident, which in turn gave them the strength and resolve to make the biggest and final leap – disengagement from the social group that was the focus of this research. In most of these cases the participant indicated that at the time of these earlier disengagements they were not consciously aware of where their actions would eventually take them. At the time they seemed almost driven to make these momentous changes. Clarity about the necessity of the choices was achieved only in hindsight.

This type of multiple leaving is aptly illustrated in Hillary's story. Hillary's first disengagement was when she moved from Ireland to Canada at the age of twenty-nine. She said she felt her life was over. She indicated, "I didn't see any future for myself." She thought she was immigrating so her children would have more opportunities. In hindsight she explains she never could have entertained an understanding of herself as a lesbian in Ireland. She remarked, "I needed to leave Ireland to come out." Although she had a sexual relationship with woman in Ireland, she had "blotted that out." She added,

> I had never even heard the word lesbian until I was late into my teens. I heard about homosexuality but that was men (laughter). So it wasn't even a concept. So I just thought I did dirty things with my best friend and that I must be abnormal in some way. I had nothing, no framework to hang it on. No language. No symbols. No nothing. They [the Irish] didn't even consider women as homosexuals because we were so invisible in Irish society. So powerless we didn't even exist. We were not a challenge. The men were a challenge to other men. In Ireland, it was illegal to practice homosexuality until about ten years ago. It was against the law. . . One who engaged in homosexual activities was sick, perverted, and mentally deranged. I think when I started to come to an awareness [that I enjoyed being with women] I didn't allow that [an understanding of myself as lesbian]. I saw myself as a heterosexual woman who was frigid, who didn't really enjoy sex. I didn't understand why I wasn't having that orgasmic experience that I had [with women] with men. I couldn't name it. That was what it was but I didn't know.

The second disengagement for Hillary was from her husband. For Hillary, the dissolution of her marriage was closely connected to her immigration to Canada. She described her marriage as being "in shreds" by the time they were ready to immigrate. However, they were both committed to trying to make things work until they were settled in Canada. At the time of her separation and divorce, Hillary did not make the connection between her sexual orientation and her marital problems. She still understood herself to be heterosexual and considered the marital problems to be related to poor compatibility and the fact that neither of them "had found the right person." Again it was only in hindsight that Hillary could understand the dissolution of her marriage with her coming out as lesbian.

> To sum it all . . .had I had the stable and healthy marriage would I have stayed? I would have stayed but still been denying myself. I believe that. He [ex-husband] actually helped me come out without realizing it. So he did me a favour by not being a warm, loving, caring, and respectful husband. Because I really do feel that I am lesbian at my essence.

Hillary's third disengagement was from the Catholic Church. Hillary indicated that as a Catholic she felt a lot of guilt about the sexual relationship she had with a woman when she was a teenager. After her separation from her husband Hillary became attracted to another woman and but she had difficulty acting on her feelings because of "my Catholic piece feeling guilty." She was unable to honestly consider herself a lesbian because as a Catholic she still understood homosexuality to be deviant and wrong. She could not entertain an understanding of self that was irreconcilable with her understanding of self as a devout Catholic. Hillary concludes that it was with her disengagement from the Catholic Church that the final barrier to her self-awareness and acceptance as a lesbian was removed and then all the pieces fell into place.

There were other examples of participants who left social groups of significance prior to the one in question and who, like Hillary, left these earlier groups because they were inhibiting individual identity development. Victor, for example, left his home community where it was assumed he would start up a business like all of his older siblings had done, to study arts at university. He also left his marriage prior to understanding himself to be gay. Chris left his sexual orientation group and identified as lesbian, prior to understanding himself to be transgendered. Mary left her relatively conservative Mennonite church to join an evangelical Mennonite community that she considered to be less sexist and homophobic. She made this change prior to understanding herself to be lesbian. Trevor left the world of alcohol and drugs before he left the world of organized crime.

Common Experiences. The participants' experiences of the multiple leaving stage of the disengagement process seemed to be loosely connected to the type of multiple leaving each had experienced. Those who pruned away the less desirable memberships before leaving the main social group had the most positive reactions. Faith used the words "ecstatic," and "freed." Chris indicated that his earlier leavings helped him to become "self-accepting" and "honest with others." (Note – Chris experienced both types of multiple leavings and I am referring here to his experiences of "pruning"). Likewise, some participants indicated that the earlier leavings allowed them to "be" in the group with a greater measure of authenticity. There was a feeling of peace associated with not having "to lie" or live a "dual life". These participants seemed buoyed by their abilities to control their membership experiences by disengaging from aspects of the group that were less agreeable to them. During this stage many of these participants were

hopeful that their earlier leavings would enable them to stay in the group, a hope that ultimately proved unattainable.

These participants whose multiple leavings were attempts to remove the barriers that prevented them from becoming themselves, experienced this stage of the disengagement process as one dominated by instinct. They were driven to make the earlier leavings but recalled at the time feeling almost bewildered as to why they felt so compelled. The bewilderment resulted from an inability to provide any concrete rationale or logical explanation for these earlier disengagements because their actions had been largely driven by feelings rather than conscious decision. These feelings included ones of being constrained, compromised, and even smothered. Several made a reference to feeling like they were dying. Their stories revealed a primal understanding that continued membership in these groups would somehow compromise both their being and their becoming.

During this stage many of these participants felt ostracized and lonely, not only because they were disconnected from earlier social ties, but also because they were, in some key respects, disconnected from themselves. Yet this group also experienced hope – a seemingly inexplicable confidence that they were on the right path; that they were adequately preparing themselves for a future unforeseen and developing a self, that to them, was as yet, unknown. In listening to these stories I was reminded of Erickson's (1959/1980) confidence that given the right circumstances an individual "can be trusted to obey the inner laws of development" (p. 54).

Meaning. The central moral of the multiple leaving stories is that practice is necessary for disengagement success. The previous experiences of disengagement served

as trial runs to help the participant train and prepare for the upcoming "main event". The multiple leavings enabled participants to identify the personal and social pieces that were as yet not in place but needed to be if success was to be ultimately achieved. The specific learning components required were unique to each participant but included such things as: learning they needed to work through past trauma, discovering they needed to develop stronger social ties with people outside of their social group, and learning they needed to develop elements of themselves before they could successfully leave.

The multiple leaving stories also highlight the importance of "process imaging" in the overall disengagement process. "Process imaging" is an extension of a phenomenon known in the field of cognitive neuroscience as "motor imaging." Motor imaging refers to the mental representation of a motor activity; for example, running or raising your hand, without the execution of the action. Studies (Jeannerod & Frak, 1999; Porro, Francescato, Cettlol, Diamond, Baraldi, Zuiani, Bazzocchi, & di Prampero, 1996) suggest that identical muscle pathways are activated during the motor imaging process as during the actual physical motor performance, albeit with lesser intensity. This finding has led to the use of motor imaging as a means to enhance performance in sport and encourage motor recovery in post-stroke rehabilitation (Sharma, Pomeroy, & Baron, 2006). Admittedly, social group disengagement is not a motor activity and there are limits to which an analogy can be stretched. However, the multiple leaving stories suggest that process imaging, like motor imaging, can enhance performance during the actual event. The earlier disengagement experiences serve as the raw data from which the process image is constructed. The earlier disengagement experiences allow participants to visualize the process and the factors needed to successfully accomplish the feat and also

to imagine a life post-group. This type of preparation requires an initial leaving experience accompanied by ample opportunity to mentally simulate the action in preparation for subsequent leavings.

Trevor's story is a good example of how process imaging was used effectively. Trevor's first momentous leaving was from the world of drugs and alcohol. He told me,

> That was when I made my first change in my life. People, places and things, everything had to go. Where I did drugs, who I did drugs with, and the things I did drugs with, the things I had to do, whatever, everything had to go . . . But I left all of my friends at the time, like this guy that I grew up with for seven or eight years in the crime and drug world, I just stopped talking to him one day. Everybody, like I just never talked to anybody from that world again. I started going to [A.A.] meetings and never looked back.

When Trevor was preparing to leave the world of the bikers and organized crime, he did process imaging of the earlier leaving experience. He concludes,

> For the second time in my life I needed to make a complete overhaul. From the first time I had done that I knew that you have to drop everything and everybody and just go. It was something that had to be done.

The final moral of the multiple leaving stories is that there are definite merits to regulating social group disengagement (i.e., experiencing multiple leavings over an extended period of time) rather than experiencing disengagement in one fell swoop. These stories highlighted three merits. First, the earlier leavings enabled participants to gain a sense of control over their own identity development. They became active agents in the disengagement drama; central characters in their own stories. Participants understood the multiple leavings as active choices designed to limit and control the group-based aspects of their self-understandings.

Second, regulation allowed participants to control their identity development such that incremental growth was assured with potential feelings of being overwhelmed held in check. This point, related to emergent self–understanding, is reminiscent of a Sufi

proverb pertaining to spiritual enlightenment, "Enlightenment must come little by little or else it will overwhelm" (Gibb, 2005, p. 49). Participants were able to establish a measure of identity equilibrium before moving to the next stage of the disengagement process. For example, after Trevor left the world of drugs and alcohol he was able to achieve some comfort with his identity as "clean," "sober," and "in recovery" and achieve equilibrium (in his case, eight years of sobriety) before making the next transition, which included leaving the world of the outlaw bikers and organized crime and addressing his addictions to adrenaline, sex, and money.

Third, being able to regulate the process allowed participants to cope with the losses incurred by protracting them across multiple leavings. For example, Claire slowly disengaged from aspects of membership in the Jehovah's Witness organization taking the time to grieve each loss and "fill the void" before disengaging from another aspect of the group. By breaking the disengagement process down into multiple leavings, Claire was able to slowly decrease her reliance on social supports within the group while simultaneously increasing her supports with individuals outside of the group. She surmised that had she left in one fell swoop she would have felt so isolated and alone she would have returned to the group almost immediately.

Stage Four: Being the Best

This stage marks a notable shift in the disengagement process. In the earlier stages, inconsistencies between individual and social understandings were addressed by privileging the emergent self-understandings. For example, in the multiple leaving stage, participants "pruned" away aspects of their social group memberships or disengaged from interconnected social groups as a way of encouraging the development of their

individual identity. At this stage, participants were less attached to their social group than they were in the pre-disengagement phase. Some had even become peripheral or marginal members in a seeming attempt to slowly ease their way out.

Disengagement has now become a serious consideration. However, before making the ultimate decision to leave, the majority of the participants (13/16) chose instead to make a last ditched effort to make membership work by delving completely into the group and trying to "be the best" member possible. In an about shift, participants renew their commitments to their social groups. They begin to focus almost exclusively on the group- based aspects of their identity and attempt to suppress their new (and contradictory) understandings of self. The shift was remarkable; the pendulum so far swung that participants were not content to be merely acceptable or "good enough" group members but strived instead to be outstanding members, to be the best. The common characteristics, common experiences, and meaning of stage four are summarized in Table Ten and discussed separately below.

Table 10: Disengagement Phase, Stage 4 - Being the Best

Common Characteristics	Common Experiences	Meaning
• Focus is on developing the group- based aspects of the self • Commitment to being an outstanding group member. • Need to achieve recognition by in-group	• Early on - feelings of inadequacy, insecurity, and self-blame. • Appreciated the validation received from the in-group. • By the end of the stage – feeling like a "fake," exhausted, restless	• The individual is not to blame for the poor fit. • "I did all that I could"

<u>Common Characteristics</u>. There are two characteristics of the "being the best" narratives. The first is the participants' inner resolve to commit themselves to group membership. The second is the participants' desire to be validated by the in-group; to be

recognized by others as being outstanding group members. Some examples will be used to illustrate these points.

The four participants who were members of religious groups (Hannah, Claire, Laura, and Faith) strived for a religious devotion that was recognized by their group to be the ultimate commitment (e.g., becoming a nun or a missionary, giving up paid employment to evangelize, becoming a church leader or religious instructor, or spending hours per day in prayer). Hannah, for example, could recall having doubts about being an old order Mennonite as early as the age of five. These doubts intensified until, as Hannah explains, "somewhere between the ages of fifteen and nineteen . . . I remember realizing that I don't believe the same as these other people." Instead of disengaging from the group like her parents and younger siblings had recently done, a decision Hannah was seriously considering, she instead made a renewed effort to make membership work. She said, "I tried really hard." "Part of me wanted a real devotion to Jesus". She thought of becoming a nun but knew that wasn't a possibility "because Mennonites don't have nuns". Instead she committed herself to becoming the best old order Mennonite she could be. She said, "I decided to become a very, very devote, plain, conservative [old order Mennonite] and do all the right things." She made a commitment to "do her darnedest to follow all the rules" and "live a pious life." She even made plans to become baptized and officially join the church.

The three participants, Mary, Victor, and Hillary, who by this point had inklings that they were gay or lesbian, now donned the culturally accepted markers of heterosexuality – marriage, children, and domestic bliss. Hillary admitted, "I very much wanted to be the good wife, the perfect mom . . . I wanted to do that to the best of my

ability." She concluded, "I was almost beyond reproach." Mary thrust herself completely into her roles of wife and mother. She recalled, "I was trying to be a good wife and not complain and not be depressed . . . So I was there doing everything right." Victor had several sexual liaisons with a man when he discovered his girlfriend was pregnant. His comments reflect his radical recommitment to the social group typical of this stage and likewise the desire to be better than other group members, in this case to be better than "most [heterosexual] guys". Victor recalled,

> I went full swing. "OK. This is my duty. I'm going to stick by this person." I did it for two years. I felt it was the right thing to do with a child coming into this world. The pressures I put on myself! I didn't want to run like most guys at that time. At least those were the stories I was being told. I had "good family values." . . . . I'm glad that I did what I did, although my life became very complicated. I tried to make it work. We tried to live together.

Before Heather and Chris disengaged from their gender groups they too made last ditch efforts to fit and "be the best". Heather tried to create a more masculine body by taking steroids. She said,

> I grew. I got bigger. I got a lot bigger (Sigh) . . . By the time I was 17 or 18 I was 5'10 and I had gained 50-60 pounds in mass. The steroids were working fairly nicely in synergy with my particularly screwed up body . . . It was weird [to have this different body] but because it was what I was trying to do, it worked for me.

Heather also became involved in hyper masculine activities. She joined the army and became "a super solider." She was a small arms instructor, solider of the month, and a member of the regimental rifle team. All-in-all, Heather concludes, "I was a great soldier."

Chris argued that coming out as a lesbian could be viewed as an effort to "be the best" female. As Chris explained,

> A number of women in the queer community really interrogate what the best woman actually is. I think they are critical in good ways. A sort of feminine

> analysis of the social construction of women would really interrogate what a best woman is. The best woman in a feminine analysis is for you to define as a woman. There is circularity in that as you go through the process. It's interesting because the people I have known who have done it have also crossed a couple of communities and crossed in gender. They have gone from being regarded as heterosexual to being regarded as part of the queer community and maybe in their own way they have become the best woman.

Other participants also tried to be the best. Mark tried to fit into his culture by pursuing the things he felt the culture valued, like having a respectable career, power and influence, opportunities for advancement and occasions to associate with affluent and influential people. He admitted that he had "a sense that this is how you play the game." Trevor tried to be the best drug trafficker by "totally treating it like a business". He concluded, "These guys [the bikers] were just amazed by me . . . by the fact that I didn't do drugs or get high on my own supply, or anything else. They were just amazed by me. . . I was treated like a king because I made them a lot of money."

Beth was convinced the break-up of her first marriage and the abuse in her second marriage were her fault. She concluded, "So, during the second marriage, I just worked harder because, you know, I became really convinced that it had to be me."

> So, maybe it's the dishes, so you become the world's best dish washer and dryer and putter a way. Well, damn, now it's the floors. So on top of the dishes, well here comes the floors. Oh well, shit, it's the laundry. By the time I left him I was working (pause) I took the kids at school at 8:30 in the morning. So I'd be up at 7:00, get them dressed, get their lunches done, all that stuff. Get them to school by 8:30. Straight from there I would go to his store, do the banking and the books and everything before it opened. We opened at 11:00 a.m. I worked there until 8:00 p.m. I would then come home, tuck my kids into bed. You know, I'd be home by twenty after eight or 8:30. Tuck the kids into bed. 9:00 I'd go paint for a couple of hours, do some housework, go to bed at about 2:00 a.m. It didn't matter what you did, you had to do more. So on top of working the full time store and the paint job and doing all the housework and then looking after three kids and it still wasn't enough. And afterwards you see it didn't matter what you did, it just wasn't going to be enough.

Common Experiences. Participants entered the "being the best" stage feeling profoundly inadequate. Having identified the incongruence between themselves and the group, they firmly identified themselves as the sole cause of the problem. As Faith explained, "I often thought quite negatively about myself, that I wasn't a good enough member of the group." Her solution was "to do something deeper or better to be accepted." Likewise, Heather described herself at this stage as feeling very "insecure."

> You have doubts. You think, "This is the path that I'm on but it doesn't feel right so I must be doing it wrong. I'll try harder. Everybody else seems to be succeeding and enjoying life as a man. I must be getting it wrong. I'll try harder. Maybe I need to do more manly things. Maybe that'll do it. So I'll join the army".

Similarly, Mary felt she did not belong to her social group and her effort to "be the best" was an attempt to prove to herself and the in-group that she did belong. She explained, "It was very much, I do belong here and I will prove to you that I belong here."

Many participants acknowledged that they enjoyed the praise and recognition they received from their in-group members when they were "being the best." Being a good group member had its rewards. Initially, participants were hopeful that their outward behaviour and compliance with group expectations and norms would produce an inward compliance and commitment to the group. These feelings of hope began to wane as the stage proceeded and the anticipated inner change wasn't forthcoming. At this point, living within the strict dictates of the group became as Hillary articulated, "constricting." Brian intimated that he felt like "a fake" and "a fraud." Hannah felt "restless". Faith used the metaphor of a "war going on within herself." She explains,

> There was an inner rejection of so much of what I was seeing but wanting so much to feel a part of the group that I tried to do anything that I could. So there was this huge war going on with myself.

In summary, participants' efforts to "fit" through the use of sheer will power and persistent effort did not produce the desired end – to feel like they belonged to their social groups. Hillary's summation is an accurate reflection of many participants' feelings during the later part of this stage: "I wasn't nurtured by it but I found a way of living within it." But in the absence of this nurturing, participants felt hollow and exhausted. As Brian explained, "all the demands of being a priest and performing this and doing that and being this for people and being asked to do this and told to do that. It just was overwhelming." Beth recalled, "It didn't matter what you did, you had to do more . . . and it still wasn't enough." As this stage draws to a close one is left with the impression that participants are on an identity treadmill. They are extremely active but going nowhere. Their efforts to fit have become monotonous, wearisome, and ineffective.

Meaning. The moral of the "being the best" narratives is the individual is not to blame for the poor fit between the individual and the group. This revelation was crucial as self-blame was one of the last remaining barriers between themselves and social group disengagement. As Chris explained, participants could now "move on."

> I think in some ways, it [devoting one's self to the group] is a testing of what doesn't fit. And it is as much of an exploration as the actual leaving would be the product of that exploration. I think at different times everybody sort of tries something else on and at some point something fits so they stay. And maybe it is through the process of nothing fitting that you move on.

The "being the best" narratives reveal that undergoing a period of intense commitment and dedication to the group can ease post- disengagement adjustment. Participants discovered that it ultimately didn't matter whose fault it was that they could not fit into the group. As Beth concluded,

> I don't know if the point you reach is a realization that you have short fallings or they do. I don't know what it is. But you do reach a point where you can't do it

> anymore, even if it is your own short falling. But I can sit here comfortably today and say I did all that I possibly could have done to [make it work] and it still wasn't enough. . . But that makes it a lot more comforting now, you know? Frustrating, because well damn it, if that wasn't enough [what would have been?] . . . But again there is a lot of comfort in the realization because I can sit here today and say . . . "I put every ounce I could into that . . . I went above and beyond what anybody would be required to do." And I can sit here today and accept that.

Stage Five: Choosing Life

Laura Brown, one of three central characters in the movie, *The Hours*, wakes up one morning, walks to the corner, boards a bus, and in so doing permanently exits the lives of her husband and two small children. As impulsive and heartless as the action may have seemed to her family and friends, for Laura it was the culmination of years of unhappiness and feelings that she did not, could not, and would never fit into the life she was living. Decades later, when her son dies, Laura is called to defend the decision she made to abandon her children. She reasoned, "It would be wonderful to say you regretted it. It would be easy. But what does it mean? What does it mean to regret when you have no choice? It's what you can bare. There it is. No one is going to forgive me. It was death. I chose life".

This quotation summarizes the experiences of the participants in this study during this final stage of disengagement phase. Participants did not impulsively leave their social groups. They tried for years to make membership work. But when staying became a matter of life or death, either physically or psychologically, they were finally mobilized to leave. The common characteristics, common experiences, and meaning of stage five are summarized in Table Eleven and discussed separately below.

Table 11: Disengagement Phase, Stage 5 - Choosing Life

Common Characteristics	Common Experiences	Meaning
• Physical threats on participants' lives. • Experiencing threats to the self.	• Fear for their physical safety. • Feeling betrayed by the group. • An association is made between unhappiness and the poor fit between themselves and the group.	• The "me" eclipses the 'we".

Common Characteristics . Three participants, Trevor, Beth, and Claire, determined disengagement was the only way to ensure their physical safety. In these three instances, an in-group member tried to kill them and/or had made serious physical and verbal threats to their life. Their physical safety was further compromised by their groups' explicit refusal to protect them from these threats, making it immediately and abundantly clear that if they wanted to stay alive they would have to leave the group.

Claire and Beth were physically abused by their spouses and their lives threatened. Beth echoes the sentiments of Laura Brown regarding the subject of choice when she muses, "He [my ex-husband] threatened to kill me so it was one of those (pause) I guess it was my initiative. I did it when he wasn't looking, but really it wasn't a choice. It was one of those necessary things."

Claire's comments illustrate how the social group, in her case the Jehovah Witness organization, failed to protect her when her life was being threatened by her abusive husband. In fact, the elders' flippant and insensitive remarks essentially sanctioned his behaviour. Claire recalls,

> He had threatened to kill me and he was getting very abusive, throwing hot cups of coffee at me and doing things in front of the kids, throwing things around... he actually, literally picked me up, I was in my bare feet, and threw me out on the driveway and then locked the door... So I brought all that up to the elders and they said, "You have wifely duties and you must stay with him, regardless." And I said, "But he's threatened to kill me!"... The elders said "What kind of flowers

> do you want? We'll bring you flowers for your casket." So that was actually the last straw at that point. So I stopped going then.

The severity of Claire's situation was underscored by the fact that at the time of this incident, she was a member of good standing within the Jehovah's Witness organization but her husband was no longer a member, having been disassociated by the group several years earlier. When the elders gave him, in essence an "outsider" preferential treatment because of his gender and likewise refused to protect her, Claire knew she and her children were in grave danger.

Trevor left his social group because of threats made to his life. He recalled,

> When it caught up to me, there was a guy from the other "team" [i.e., a rival biker gang] who, this was near the end, he wanted to kill me. . .He had just gotten out of the penitentiary for killing somebody else. It was dropped to a manslaughter charge so he only did eight out of ten years. His resume showed that he could kill people. He was not the kind of person you wanted to be enemies with. . .When he came out of jail and moved back to "his" city, he really took it literally that it was "his" city.

Trevor discovered that a plan was in place for his murder. But before it could be carried out, the man who had wanted to kill him was arrested on two new murder charges. The man ended up committing suicide in prison. Trevor concluded,

> The shock and scare of having someone wanting to kill me for real started to set in. Even though he [the man who had tried to murder him] was gone, I knew there would be others coming along. That was how that world was. They play for keeps, in that sense. I don't like living in fear . . . I just had enough.

Like Claire, Trevor realized that the social group he belonged to would not protect him in the end. He observed,

> With the guys I was running with – everyone used that [the group] as intimidation and back up, you know, "I'll call them." That was a joke. If you called them and told them "I need some help," they would just tell you to look after it the way they would. You know "Do as we do. If you want what we have, do as we do." So it would have been left up to me to handle this on my own.

Three participants indicated that if had they stayed in their social groups they probably would have committed suicide. Sean overdosed on pills and almost died. He actually used the language of choice and life and death alternatives when he described this period of his life.

> That's the in between phase of my life which was a make or break point. I think that it was the point in my life where I literally had to choose who do I want to be? Do I want to take advantage of the positives and the nurturing that my mother gave me and the potential I had as a person? Or do I just want to give up and be an alcoholic, or take my life? And it was really – You choose! So I chose this. I chose to capitalize on what I had as a person. I chose to deal with the issues of my past and push myself to this point.

Laura had intrusive and recurrent thoughts about killing herself and her children. Heather ended up in a psychiatric ward for a few weeks after her landlady found her "literally catatonic," sitting on her bed in her own filth, and "basically starving to death". In these three instances, the severity of the depression and the nearness of death provided the final impetus to leave.

Although their physical lives were not at risk, at least ten participants felt if they were to remain in their social groups their "self" would die. As Hillary explained, "Somewhere alone the way I had lost myself . . . I was only twenty-nine going on thirty . . . yet I felt that my life was over." After suffering through two severe episodes of depression, Mark concluded membership in his social group "was killing him." Similarly Mary indicated,

> There was a certain point where I recognized that my survival was dependent on my leaving and that if I stayed, I wouldn't survive. Whether that meant physically I wouldn't survive or whether that meant mentally or emotionally, whatever. It didn't matter.

Like the participants whose physical lives were at risk, a key factor for those who felt their individual selves were at risk was the seeming indifference of the group to their

well-being. Some, such as Laura and Brian, went so far as to contend that their social groups were active agents in the destruction of their "self". Their groups were abusive. For example, Laura had some training as a sign language interpreter and was asked by the group to interpret at meetings for a member who was deaf. She was a single parent of two teenagers at the time. As Laura explained,

> I was interpreting every meeting, which as you know is five meetings a week. Not just every speaker at every meeting [but also] every comment at every meeting, every prayer at every meeting. And I was working full time [during the day] and, at that point I had a second job that I was going to - cleaning at night to make ends meet. So I was exhausted. I was really exhausted. . .I asked for help . . .I desperately needed to have assistance with this.

Laura tried numerous times to get relief from her responsibilities of interpreting at meetings and having to attend them all. She was denied this assistance. She noted, "That was the beginning of the end . . . something switched and I had not taken in anything for myself for so long because I had given it all out. I was not being replenished spiritually or in any other way."

Brian entered the priesthood with no conscious memory of being sexually abused by a priest during his high school years. He said, "I think it was all clinically repressed." Brian recounted the day it all came back to him.

> One day my life went snap. . . I had my collar on and I remember just ripping it off and throwing it at the wall. I knocked all the books off the shelf. I just lost it. This had never happened to me before . . . I just thought I need to get some fresh air. I need to go for a walk to get this out of my system. I started walking and I then found myself running . . . and all this stuff was racing through my head . . . it was overwhelming me. And I started to think, and this was the first time it had ever come into my head [this] idea that the church was abusing me. And those thoughts just kept on racing and churning and then all of a sudden I just saw the abuser's face. Then the lights came on and I thought, "Oh my God! It is him!" All these years it was him who was controlling me and abusing me through the church. So I was identifying the abuse. The abuser was part of the church. The abuser was part of the church. I am feeling abused by the church. The church is abusing me. It is all abusive. I have got to get out of here!

After this realization, Brian began his slow disengagement from the priesthood. In describing his motives for leaving the priesthood Brian used many phrases that called attention to how he experienced the group as destroying his "self" and his life. For example, "I think for me it was just necessary that I leave because I could see myself just dying inside. Little by little I was dying. It was not going to do me any good. I had to leave it completely." He concludes, "So I just decided. That is it! I am leaving. I am leaving. I am going back to school. I am getting a job. I am going to live my own life and I am going to be happy."

Several participants indicated that they were "choosing life" not just for themselves but also for their children. Some indicated that their self-worth was so eroded they did not have the strength or confidence to leave the group for their own sakes but could rally for the benefit of their children. As indicated earlier, Laura knew that when she had thoughts of killing her children it was time to do something. Beth, Hillary, and Claire were sufficiently concerned about the impact of domestic violence on their children and their groups' failure to protect them that they were empowered to leave. Mary explains the desire to survive and its tight connection to the survival of her children when she remarked,

> At a certain point, in order for me to survive, and because I had three daughters, I was determined they were going to survive. [I was determined] that they were going to know that there were choices for their lives. And that if I had lived within the constraints that I felt I was being asked to live with them [in the social group] that I would be modeling for them something that was not life giving.

Common Experiences. For several participants, the primary experience during this phase was fear. Having their lives threatened was a critical wake up call. Those who experienced their social group's blatant failure to protect them felt betrayed. Some, like

Claire, felt "duped" because a group, to which she had devoted her life, failed to defend her in the end. This feeling was augmented by the fact that her family's loyalty to the group extended back three generations. In sum, participants no longer felt obligated to remain in a group that did not seem to value them or their membership. Associated with this realization were feelings of sadness, resignation, and cumulative exhaustion.

Another common experience associated with this stage was unhappiness. This feeling was coupled with a realization that happiness was important. A key finding of this study, and particularly relevant to this phase, was the association participants made between their personal unhappiness and the poor fit between themselves and their social groups. For example, Brian associated his "unhappiness" with his "struggle being a priest." Likewise Mark associated his "bout of severe depression" with "playing a role" and not being true to himself and once he stopped he experienced "enjoyment." At least nine participants associated the depression they suffered while they were group members with their failed attempts to fit into their social group. What is noteworthy about the "choose life" stories is that the participants were no longer invested in trying to fit. They had resigned themselves to the fact that they never would. They made a decisive choice to leave. The primary motive was their individual happiness and in some cases also the happiness of their children. They stopped accepting unhappiness as a way of being. As Brian concludes, "There was something inside of me at that time that was thinking about my own happiness."

Meaning. The "choose life" stage marked the turning point in the disengagement drama, the point at which the participant made the internal and irrevocable decision to leave the group. From a narrative perspective, the decision to "choose life" was the

climax of each participant's story. To echo the findings of Ebaugh (1988), "there comes a point in the . . .process at which the individual makes a firm and definitive decision to leave" (p. 123). As I will indicate in the next chapter, the internal decision to leave is a separate event from the "public announcement" to leave or the actual disengagement event. However, this stage is very significant in that the participants are now mobilized to act. Although they may need to wait until the opportune moment comes along before they publicly disengage, they are now active and central characters in their disengagement dramas.

During this stage, the participants underwent a fundamental shift in self understanding. Thus far throughout the disengagement process there was evidence of a constant weighing of the "me" and "we" in participants' overall self-understanding. For example, as discussed above, in the "being the best" phase the participants suppressed their individual identity, the "me', so to direct all of their efforts to developing their social identity, the "we." In the "choose life" stage, participants took stock of these previous efforts and concluded that the singular focus on social identity came at a cost to the self. They then determined that a group that could not or would not value and nurture their "selfs" was not worth belonging to. In choosing life, participants literally chose to value their lives over a life lived within the group. "Choosing life" was ultimately the decision to privilege the "me" over the "we."

CHAPTER 9

The Process of Social Group Disengagement – Phase Three

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

- - T.S. Elliot

Consistent with previous disengagement research (Ebaugh, 1988; Jacobs, 1989; Wright, 1987) the results of this study suggest that the disengagement process extends beyond the actual disengagement event to include a period of adjustment and adaptation. Participants indicated that their stories didn't end with their inner resolve to leave. They had to undergo several more stages in the process before they felt they had truly left. Ebaugh (1988) refers to this final period as "creating the ex-role" (p. 149). Jacobs (1989) uses the phrase "total deconversion," to describe this period wherein the individual achieves "complete separation" from the group and a "redefinition of social reality" (p. 130). Jacobs (1989) identifies the "adoption of a new self-concept" as a central task associated with this stage (p. 130-131). Comparatively, Wright (1987) identifies the final stage as a period of "re-entry and re-integration" (p. 75). He likewise differentiates between the tasks of "defection" or "detachment" from the group and "the selection of an alternative identity and worldviews" (p. 75). The recognition that the final leg of the disengagement journey involves the dual processes of disengagement from the group and the development of new self understandings is also a significant finding of this study.

The post-disengagement phase can be broken down into three stages: 1) period of waiting, 2) establishing distance, and 3) "new" identity formation. Each stage will be

discussed in turn with regard to common characteristics, common experiences, and meaning.

Stage One: Period of Waiting

This stage begins with the participant's internal and irrevocable decision to leave the group and ends with the participant making their disengagement public either through announcement or action. The common characteristics, common experiences, and meaning of stage one are summarized in Table Twelve and discussed separately, below.

Table 12: Post-disengagement, Stage 1 - Period of Waiting

Common Characteristics	Common Experiences	Meaning
• Period of time between the internal decision to disengage (self-acceptance) and a public disengagement event (self-disclosure) Purpose: o Reduction of social, financial, and status-related "side bets" o Preparation financially for life post-disengagement o Tying up loose ends to ensure a safe and successful disengagement o Self-acceptance • Length varied according to personal agency	• Struggling with self-concealment • Excitement and fear associated with facing the unknown • Feeling all alone • Lack of regret	• Self-concealment can help individuals gain control over the timing and pace of the disengagement process • One doesn't need to have new shoes before throwing away the old; it may be best to go without shoes for awhile. • Self-discovery is slow and ongoing; uncertainty is a necessary part of the process

Common Characteristics. Mohr and Fassinger (2003), psychologists who have researched "coming out" processes in lesbian, gay, and bi-sexual adults, make the distinction between "self-acceptance" and "self-disclosure." Self-acceptance involves the "life long process of embracing oneself," whereas self-disclosure involves publicly revealing one's self to others (p. 482). These are useful distinctions for elucidating disengagement processes from a wide range of social groups, not just sexual orientation groups. The period of waiting was the stage wherein the participant moved from self-acceptance to self-disclosure.

Faith offers a good description of the internal and public events that bracket this stage. Faith was at a retreat when she had an "enlightenment experience" allowing her to see "everything for what it was." She indicated,

> I saw the [CRC] church for what it was. I saw guilting for what it was. I just let go. I just let go of it all. I said, "I am not doing this anymore." [That was] the moment I left. I continued on after that, still going and whatever. But that [retreat] was when I let go of the guilt. Then I still continued [to attend] because there were people there that I liked and it had become a bit of a habit but it became very sporadic after that.

Faith's absence at religious services was her public disengagement event, her self-disclosure.

The length of the waiting stage ranged from a twelve hour period in Beth's case to over nine years for Claire. Five participants had waiting periods that lasted for only a few days or weeks. However the mean length was 2.36 years. Two questions related to this period of waiting require answers. First, why did participants wait to follow through on their intentions to leave? And second, what factors explain the variance in the length of this period of waiting? I will attempt to answer each question in turn.

The primary reason a participant waited before leaving his or her social group concerned "side bets". As Becker (1960) suggested, a side bet is an attribution of value to an aspect of membership, such as friendship, financial security, and status that is not intrinsic to membership. Side bets are rewards for membership and they can make disengagement difficult. As Faith intonated in the quotation cited above, after her internal decision to leave the CRC, she continued to attend sporadically because "there were people there that I liked." These friendships were a notable side bet.

Having one's entire social world connected to the group was a defining reality and significant side bet for the six participants who belonged to totalist groups. In the

case of the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Old Order Mennonites, disengaged members are immediately shunned by the group and all contact with former group members, including close family members, is prohibited. Hannah, for example, extended her stay in the Old Order Mennonite group for two and half years because all of her friends, her boyfriend, and most of her family belonged to the group. She knew if she were to leave she might never be able to communicate with them again.

Brian had similar relational side bets. He knew from observing how the "fraternity of priests" closed ranks after a priest left, he might lose all of his friendships with fellow priests if he were to leave. He explained,

> The minute somebody leaves the group, there isn't a hole in the group anymore. You know the circle of friends? [A candle holder that is made of clay figures with their arms wound around each other's shoulders forming a tight circle facing the light]. So there is your fraternity of priests. So this person leaves. There isn't a hole. They close ranks and the circle becomes smaller and you are on the outside. When I think back to hearing them talk all the time about different priests who left . . . it was like they just disappeared into nothingness, into that ether. They were gone.

For Sean and Claire, the relationships they had with their mothers were significant side bets. They remained in their respective social groups longer than they personally desired out of a need to protect their mothers. Claire knew her mother would be heart-broken if she were to discover Claire no longer believed in the teachings of the Jehovah's Witnesses or attended meetings. Sean stayed in his geographic community in an attempt to protect his mother from his father's violence and torture. Several participants stayed in their groups to protect their children. Mary and Hillary, for example, delayed coming out as lesbians because of their concern that their children might be stigmatized as a result.

In the above mentioned instances participants eventually left their social groups when the value of these side bets was reduced and/or sufficient attachments were made

with individuals outside of the group. In Hannah's case, for example, her friends started to withdraw from her and the strength of those relationships lessened to the extent that they were no longer sufficient to keep her in the group. Hannah recalled,

> [When] they started to withdraw and not invite me to things then I knew that my days were numbered and I was no longer welcome there. And I knew the pressure that they were getting was from their parents and their peers. My friends didn't want to ostracize me, but the pressure that they were getting was immense.

For Claire, Laura, and Brian the development of meaningful friendships outside of their group reduced their dependency on friendships from within. Likewise, connecting to a new social group, such as the LGBT community for the gay, lesbian, and transgendered participants in the study, provided sufficient impetus to end their period of waiting.

Financial stability and having status and respect within the group were significant side bets for Dorothy, Mary and Beth. Dorothy was unhappy at her job but she liked the perks that went with it, such as having the respect of her co-workers, financial stability, and the image of being a hard working self-sufficient single woman. Dorothy went from having financial stability to living well below the poverty line when she transitioned from one career to another. Mary had status as a married woman with children and a home. She feared she would lose the respect of her rural and church communities if she were to come out as a lesbian. Beth was prepared to endure her marriage and further abuse so as to remain with her children in her remodeled century home, maintain the job she enjoyed and continue to hold the respect of her community. She suspected she would be left penniless if she disengaged.

> I could have had more abuse. [It was] a big fear to leave him. I knew I would lose my house. I knew I would probably lose my possessions. He had always said, "If you do leave I'm keeping the kids." Risking losing my kids was way too much. I don't have a high level of education. I worked in his store so I didn't have an occupation on paper. I wasn't paid for running his store for 8 or 9 years.

> It was just my job. So I put up with him so as not to hurt the children in a big split up and also because I had no inkling of what I could possibly do with myself afterwards. It was 10 years of living with an asshole and knowing there was going to be nothing if I left him. The house was in his name. He had access to all the bank accounts which he did clean out before I left him. So, yeah. A big nothing if I left.

A second reason participants delayed their public disengagement was to prepare financially for a life post-disengagement. While Jehovah's Witnesses, Claire and Laura had each been stay-at-home mothers per group expectation and they had each committed much of their time to evangelizing door-to-door, and attending the five weekly meetings. In anticipation of disengagement they each found well paying jobs. In addition to providing welcome social opportunities and a boost to their self esteem, these jobs enabled them to support their children, buy homes and vehicles, and decrease their financial dependence on the group.

Sean, due to his impoverished childhood, and Brian, due to his priestly vows of poverty were financially strapped when they decided to leave their social groups. They each used education as a spring board out of their respective groups but they needed time to gather the money they needed to pay for their tuition and living expenses. As Sean explained,

> How would I go about it? [A guidance counselor] helped me apply for assistance. Because, talk about negative family values! My father was completely against me going to university even though he had this much [holds his fingers a ½ inch apart] of a role in my life he was still considered my legal guardian because I was under age and he was my biological parent. He was completely against it. He wouldn't support me in any way . . . I had to apply for student financial assistance, student loans, and when you are under the age of 21 and not out of school for four years your biological parent has to sign, and he wouldn't do it. So I had to actually go through the process and the paperwork for my sister to be my legal guardian so she could sign the documents for me to even go to university. So even that negative pressure still at that level to pull me back to that lifestyle.

Brian used the period of waiting to save money and collect the material possessions he needed to live outside the group.

> What I had been doing during that last year, when I had made up my mind to leave, I had this closet in my suite of rooms and I used to go out every week and I would buy something. With my own money I would buy blankets and sheets for a bed, towels, iron, ironing board, and dishes, whatever. This closet started to get fuller and fuller. I used to go back sometimes when it was tough slugging I would open up the closet and say, "Ok, almost ready to leave." Then I would close it again.

José had several financial hurdles he needed to surmount during his period of waiting before he could transition from being a deafened adult to a cochlear implantee.

> I decided at this time, "Okay. Something has to change." Well by chance of joining this organization [of deafened adults] I received information about cochlear implantation and I attended one of the information sessions. I thought, "Wow! This is something I would like to explore. So I started. I applied to start going through the [physical] exam. The issue was not so much whether I could benefit from it, although there was no guarantee at that time because it was still very new. It was the question of who pays for it. It was very expensive, $38,000 US back then . . . The process was finding funding. I went from one insurance to another to secure funding. It was a long and frustrating challenge. Then there were stalls and delays in actually scheduling the surgery. I almost pulled out a couple of times . . .but I kept on track and finally got the surgery.

Taking the time to tie up loose ends that kept them bound to the group was the third reason participants waited before disengaging. For example, for Trevor to safely leave the world of organized crime, he had to ensure that his drug trafficking "business" was successfully transferred to an up-and-comer in the biker world. As Trevor explained, he needed to carefully time his exit or his safety would have been compromised. If he had witnessed or been part of gang related murders, the group would never have allowed him to leave. Also if he had tried to take his "business" and "clients" with him, his safety outside of the group would have been compromised.

> I hadn't been involved enough to really know of any murders. I hadn't been around any. I hadn't seen any. I hadn't been part of any. That was a big plus when

> I wanted to leave because if you know something that could make somebody [within the group] go away for life, they don't want you to leave. They want you to stay close. When it came time to leave I picked one of the guys who worked for me. . .One of them [an outlaw biker] came up every week to collect [money] and bring the stuff [drugs] down. As they did that I introduced them [the bikers] to this guy [my selected replacement] .

A final reason why participants waited before publicly disengaging from their social group was to allow themselves time to become comfortable with and accepting of their new self understandings before having to share and/or defend these understandings to others. Chris described his period of waiting as a time when he learned to accept himself as transgendered.

> Chris: I talked with friends. I did reading. I tried to get a sense of who would be supportive, what kind of support I would need and identify what I thought would be important for support and what I thought wouldn't necessarily be as helpful, and what I had to do for accepting it myself.
> Catherine: Yeah. What kinds of things did you do? What kinds of things were helpful in those three years?
> Chris: For accepting it myself?
> Catherine: Yeah.
> Chris: Talking with other people who were trans was helpful. Doing some reading about people who were trans-gendered, but also people who identified as sort of in the between spaces, people who interrogated a rigid definition around gender, I found that was helpful.

This need for self-acceptance was particularly poignant for participants who needed to prepare for membership in a social group that involved a loss of power, privilege and status. Heather, for example, talked at length about the diligence and mindfulness required for her to successfully relinquish her male and heterosexual privilege to live as a lesbian woman. Mary, Victor, and Hillary spoke about the challenges of moving from membership in a dominant social group, (i.e., the married, heterosexual, parent group) to membership in a group that can be stigmatized in our society. The impact and weight of such a transition gave these participants pause but

notably did not prevent them from ultimately making the decision to disengage. This point is significant.

As I noted earlier, Tajfel and Turner (1979) understood an individual's striving for positive self-esteem to be translated into a striving for positive group identity. Farsides (1998) added that disengagement can be understood in terms of this striving for positive social identity. An individual would use "individual mobility" (p. 9), that is, disengagement from a lower status group to a higher status group, as the means to achieve positive group identity and hence positive individual identity. The results of this study suggest that the desire to join a higher status group is not the sole or perhaps even primary motive for social group disengagement. A surprisingly high number, seven participants in a sample of sixteen (44%), disengaged from a higher status group to join a lower status one. This finding suggests that the need to have individual and social congruence can override the need to belong to a group with higher social status.

I will now attempt to explain the range in the length of the waiting stage. The phrases "coming out" and "being outed," typically associated with the public disclosure of one's homosexual orientation, are useful terms to describe the measure of control participants had in planning the disengagement event, which ended their period of waiting. While both terms are associated with self-acceptance and self-disclosure, "coming out" suggests individual action and choice whereas "being outed" suggests others are forcing the disclosure. Generally speaking the participants who had the longer waiting periods "came out." They exercised more control over the process and could tie up more loose ends before they publicly disengaged. They tended to be more prepared for life outside of the group and coped better emotionally post-disengagement. Participants

who had the shorter waiting periods were often "outed" by others. They had a harder time coping with the emotional aftermath and had to tie up their loose ends after the fact. Although this particular stage may have been shorter, the disengagement process was not necessarily shorter overall, as more tasks had to be done reactively (after their public disengagement) rather than proactively (during the period of waiting).

By way of illustration, in the following paragraphs the experiences of being "outed" are juxtaposed with experiences of "coming out." Hillary was "outed" by a co-worker. She said, "Disclosure was an issue for me. I felt the whole world was going to know and I wasn't ready to tell or share. It was so, so difficult." She added,

> It started to become very confusing. I didn't want to discuss it. I didn't want to go there. I wanted to settle down. I wanted to have a sense of how I should approach it, how I should share it with people. At the time, I wanted it to go away. . . I didn't feel like I was in the driver's seat.

Hillary's sense of not being in the "driver's seat" parallels Beth's experience of not being able to choose the timing and circumstances of her leaving. Beth explains,

> Beth: It was an abusive relationship and a rather abrupt end to it. It involved taking my children and essentially walking away from everything we had, the house, my friends, my possessions and just leaving with the kids. . . no plans. . . It was a miracle I had my shoes on at the time. Very unplanned.
> Catherine: Was it on your initiative? You just saw an opportunity to go and you left?
> Beth: He threatened to kill me so it was one of those. I guess it was my initiative. I did it when he wasn't looking, but, really it wasn't a choice. It was one of those necessary things. There had been quite a violent episode the night before and he had left. The police were there and they sent him away again, but it was basically, I got to get out of that house. I'm not safe here. So I packed a couple of things up while my kids were at school the next day. I took the children out of school and took them to the women's emergency [shelter].

Beth's experiences of leaving with little more than the clothes on her back stands in sharp contrast to Brian's careful purchasing of the material possessions he needed to live relatively comfortably after he left the priesthood. Claire, who had the longest period

of waiting, had a very deliberate and controlled disengagement. She described her social group as one that "you can't get out of it nicely." In an attempt to maintain control over the disengagement process such that she wouldn't be shunned from her family and friends that remained in the group, Claire slowly and incrementally disengaged over a period of nine years. She moved out of the geographic area so that her absence at the weekly meetings at her former Kingdom Hall would be attributed to her move and not to deliberate intention. The members of her former Kingdom Hall assumed she was attending another Kingdom Hall, when in fact, she wasn't attending at all. This attempt at deception worked for years. Claire was able to achieve financial stability, establish her career, and develop strong relationships with the outside world before she publicly left. She was also able to maintain the close relationship she had with her aging mother who was a Jehovah's Witness and be with her when she died. In hindsight she wonders if her disengagement was "sneaky" and "sly." However, she concludes, "I just did not want to hurt her [my mother] . . . I didn't want to risk that."

For all participants, the period of waiting ended with public disclosure, some behaviour or announcement that would indicate to others, both in-group and out-group members, that the participant was no longer a member of the group. For Hannah, Faith, Claire, and Laura, who left religious groups, their disengagement was noted by their absence at religious services and meetings. Claire and Laura explained that a failure to attend the yearly "Memorial Service," also called "The Lord's Evening Meal," was the definitive sign that one had left the Jehovah's Witness Organization. Claire noted,

> The Memorial Service which is the Lord's Evening Meal. . . Everyone who has ever been one of Jehovah's Witnesses, who has studied, maybe not been baptised, or who has been baptized and fallen away, anyone would always go to that one meeting a year. And once you stop doing that, people know.

For Sean and Beth, their disengagement was observable when they physically moved out of their geographic area. José's ability to "hear" and modulate his voice were external markers of his disengagement. Although Heather had sexual reassignment surgery recently, her public disengagement occurred sixteen years prior to her surgery when she started to openly live as a woman. For Chris, things "started" when he initiated the procedures necessary for sex reassignment surgery and began hormone therapy. For Mary, Victor, and Hillary their disengagement event occurred when they began to tell people they were gay and when they began to openly date and live with their same sex partners. Dorothy and Brian left their occupational groups when they stopped doing the duties associated with their jobs and stopped receiving their pay.

Common Experiences. Many participants felt hidden during this stage and struggled with this. This feeling was particularly intense for those who had the longer waiting periods. Claire, for example, described herself as living "under pretense." Especially near the end she felt she was "playing games" not only with others but regrettably also with herself. She noted, "I kept under the pretense with my mother that maybe I would come back. I just didn't want to hurt her and it took me a long time to realize that I was hurting myself more."

Hillary, Laura, and Faith spoke about the internal turmoil they experienced in keeping their disengagement plans a secret from friends and family who remained in the group. Faith recalled feeling "pretty schizophrenic because . . . I could not allow my inner thoughts to be expressed." Hillary said, "I remember feeling panic-stricken . . . about being discovered because I didn't know what the ramifications would be . . . but I felt conflicted because I was deceiving other people." Similarly Laura valued honesty and

truthfulness and thus being secretive and self-concealing was difficult. She felt guilty about "deceiving" her friends and "keeping up a charade." However these negative feelings were mitigated by the sheer euphoria she felt when she made the internal commitment to leave. She noted,

> When I made that conscious decision, I am not going back anymore . . . it was like a huge weight had been lifted off my shoulders. I couldn't believe the freedom that I felt at having made that decision. And I knew it was going to be life changing experience for me but I didn't know in what regard. I was willing to face whatever was going to come my way.

Laura's feeling of facing an unknown future was also a common experience. Like Laura, most participants welcomed the uncertainty with both fear and enthusiasm. Dorothy, for example, used the terms "excited" and "scared" to describe her feelings. She observed that for her "the symptoms of fear and excitement are often the same". She recalled this period of time as being one where her "life opened up" and she felt free to consider different options. She admitted there was fear attached to not knowing what the future would hold, and also some stress attached to living so close to the edge financially. However, Dorothy was predominately confident. She felt leaving "was a step forwards." Mary also described fluctuating between "terror" and "huge relief."

Another notable experience was that of feeling alone. It stands to reason that in excising oneself from a group the individual felt the absence of belonging, missed the comforts of membership, and the feeling of oneness produced when identifying with others. Disengagement is a solitary and isolating experience, especially when in-group relations are severed and out-group relationships not yet established. Hannah explains this feeling well,

> So when I called them [close friends in the group] and told them that I would be leaving [the old order Mennonites], we had a long conversation and then it was

> sort of like "It was nice knowing you." Then came the feeling of I am all alone in the world . . . I felt all alone.

Likewise, Laura recalled,

> I was very much alone because when I left I had no friends on the outside because I had been brainwashed into believing that everyone on the outside was bad . . . They were going to die in Armageddon because they didn't believe what we [the Jehovah's Witnesses] believed and they were not doing the work that we were doing. So I had no friends on the outside, even here at my work it took quite awhile before I actually felt free to develop friendships. So I was alone. I was very much alone. . . I had no friends on the inside and no friends on the outside.

What is notably absent in this stage are feelings of regret. This is a particularly remarkable, especially for the participants who suffered substantial losses, such as the loss of their homes, livelihoods, social status, and a faith in God, but also for those who felt they had little control over the process. Participants' stories revealed that the absence of regret is attributable to several things. First, most participants had no regrets because they had an intuitive sense or confidence that this stage was an essential part of a process that would ultimately lead them to something better. Dorothy expressed this view when she recalled, "It still felt like I was doing something and maybe not quite in limbo. I didn't quite know what I was going to do but I was doing things towards something." She concluded, had she remained in her occupational group it "would have felt like a step backwards or at the very least not a step forwards".

Second, several participants felt no regret because they determined they had little choice. As the character Laura Brown in the movie *The Hours* surmised, "What does it mean to regret when you have no choice?" Third, participants indicated that the advantages of leaving outweighed the advantages of staying and hence they had no regrets. Hannah speculated,

> If I had any doubts, they would have been about three weeks after I left and all of a sudden realizing the enormity of what I had just done. On the other hand, life was attractive enough on that side that I wasn't quite sure I wanted to go back. It was the realization that what I had done was irreversible, but that feeling was short lived.

Meaning. The first moral of "the period of waiting" stories is that self-concealment can be used to one's advantage during the disengagement process. Admittedly, self-concealment is seldom a desired way-of-being. Participants craved visibility and acceptance. However, self-concealment did come with some rewards, the measure of which was determined by agency (who was doing the concealing) and motive (why the self was being concealed). These stories reveal that there are two types of self-concealment. The first type is the result of the actions of others when someone's true identity is denied or unacknowledged by others. This type of concealment is disempowering and can undermine an individual's self-worth and compromise identity development. The second type of self-concealment is the result of an individual choosing not to reveal their true identity to others. In this instance the individual holds the power and can make use of it for disengagement and identity development purposes. The first type of self-concealment was evident during membership. The second type was evident during the period of waiting.

Through self-concealment participants gained control over the timing and pace of the disengagement process. At this stage of the process participants had knowledge of the inner workings of their groups but the groups were, in most instances, oblivious of their intentions to leave. This lack of awareness prevented the group from having the knowledge it needed to force an exit before the participant was ready. Gaining this power was particularly important for the participants who needed to plan their exits to ensure

their physical safety (for example, Beth, Trevor) and for those who belonged to groups that had punitive disengagement procedures, such as shunning.

A second moral of these stories was that knowing your social group is not a good fit is sufficient cause for disengagement. The adage that "one must have new shoes before throwing away the old" does not apply to social group disengagement. In fact, if one were to extend the analogy, the moral of these stories is really that one should be shoeless for awhile. It is okay to be in identity limbo for a period of time. The self-awareness required to decide to leave one's social group is rudimentary for the ongoing development of the self but is by no means the end product.

During this stage several participants spoke about not knowing "what would be right" for them to do and not knowing what new social group to join. These feelings did not however, preclude their confidence that their current group membership was not right. Dorothy, for example, spoke about "testing herself" during the waiting stage trying to see what she could do and what she wanted to do. Chris spoke about this stage as providing opportunities to "try on" various identities to see which one would "fit." Hannah told a remarkable story that illustrated her experience of "everything being up for grabs."

The week Hannah made her disengagement public she had lunch at a restaurant. She was wearing the covering and prayer cap that identified her as an old order Mennonite. Her food arrived with cutlery and a cloth napkin.

> I remember going into a restaurant and thinking, "I live in the same house, my life isn't a whole lot different than it used to be but everything's different." And the reason that I thought about that is because I was sitting in the restaurant and there was a serviette put on the table; it was like all my life I've never been able to figure out what to do with a serviette. In our homes we had never owned such things. We never, ever used them. We never put them out for guests. That was

> just not part of our culture and I remember thinking that I don't use my knife properly and then afterwards I realized everybody uses it differently. There was a sense in which I had moved an entire culture without leaving home and it all looked like it was the same as the week before and yet everything within me was up for grabs and I didn't have a clue how to sort that out.

The third moral of the period of waiting stories is that uncertainty is okay. It is important to welcome uncertainty as a necessary part of the disengagement process and not try to avoid the feeling by returning to the social group or by joining another group pell-mell. Social identity, like a transport truck, take a long time to stop and change direction.

As Claire's story reveals, there are clear advantages to having a long period of waiting, especially for those who had belonged to a social group that heavily influenced their values, beliefs and world view, and powerfully shaped their self-understandings (as was the case for most participants). It can take years for individuals to disentangle their own beliefs from those of the group. A long waiting period allowed participants to begin to judge their behaviours against a set of criteria and standards other than those espoused by the group. By way of self-concealment they could develop values and beliefs which were not under the control or "sanction" of the group. As Claire explained, during her waiting period, her "conscience got a little bit harder," meaning she began to feel less guilt about having thoughts and behaviours that were contrary to group expectation. She noted,

> With my slow leaving it was kind of like my conscience got a little bit harder as I went along so that things didn't bother me as much and I could kind of think things through a little clearer than if I'm panicking, thinking I've done something wrong and I should go back. Or I shouldn't have left, or that type of thing. But I think I've developed some close friends, some girlfriends that I could speak to . . . friends that were on the outside.

Stage Two: Establishing Distance

During this stage participants attempted to sever emotional and relational ties with their former social groups by exiling themselves from the group. One of the distinguishing features of this stage was that the gap between the group and the participant was initiated by the participant and not the group. The common characteristics, common experiences, and meaning of stage two are summarized in Table 13 and discussed separately below.

Table 13: Post-disengagement, Stage 2 - Establishing Distance

Common Characteristics	Common Experiences	Meaning
• Self-imposed exile from the group through relocation, the severing of relational ties, and/or espousing different values, beliefs, worldviews	• Excitement and energy accompanied by initial shyness and lack of focus • Emotional pain associated with grief, loss, and redefining the self • Shame around former memberships • Anger at former group	• Helpful strategy in managing pain associated with: ○ Grief and loss ○ Redefining the self • Cleansing the palate

Common Characteristics. Distance was created using a variety of methods. Some participants created physical distance by moving out of the area. Relocation decreased the likelihood that they would run into former group members and also gave participants the opportunity to have a fresh start. Others created distance by severing relational ties with former group members. They began to form relationships that affirmed their new understandings of self and could replace, or at least decrease their reliance on, relationships with former group members. Still others created distance by espousing values, beliefs, and world views that stood in sharp contrast to the ones held by the group. In some instances the distance was reinforced by an advance in education, but this was not necessarily the case. I will now provide evidence of the manner in which

distance was created, the types of distance established, and the function distance served in the post-disengagement phase.

One of the ways distance was established was by way of an abrupt disengagement event. This method was used by participants with both short and long periods of waiting. Hannah, for example, had 2 ½ years lapse between her decision to leave her social group and her public disengagement event. Yet when she finally decided to leave, she did so abruptly. She reflected,

> The way I handled it [leaving], because the pain was so great to carry, was that whole sense of walking out. Slamming the door and not looking back. Then five, ten, fifteen, twenty years later, I could look back at what happened. But that is the way I process things.

Six months later Hannah created geographic distance by moving to Washington D.C. and later, Africa. In hindsight, Hannah understands her moves "as a coping mechanism." She said "it was a way to get away and do something different."

Hannah's reflections provide useful insights into the reasons why participants were motivated to establish distance. Distance was a means of managing the pain of leaving. Hannah was able to break the pain down into pieces and over the years revisit and process aspects of the leaving as she felt strong enough to cope. This approach kept Hannah from being overwhelmed by the enormity of what she had done and the losses she had incurred.

Likewise, Sean recalled, "I literally turned my back on the community and that life . . . and just walked away from it." Like Hannah, Sean used distance as a means of managing pain. However, his reflections also reveal an additional motive – distance helped him "negotiate who he was with who he wanted to be." Sean's story suggests that establishing distance in the early stages of post-group identity formation can help the

individual demarcate the old self from the new. Berger and Luckman (1966) were among the first to identify the creation of psychological and physical distance as an effective strategy easing the discomfort associated with redefining the self. They understood distance as allowing the individual the opportunity to leave their old group and prepare for the legitimization of a new group. As Sean recounted,

> Once I got away from that community it took me a long time to really process. And for the first couple of years I would only return maybe 3 - 5 minutes, literally. I would drive into the community and just, literally, drive to the end, turn around and drive back out again. Lots of time I didn't even stop because I just didn't know how to negotiate who I was with who I wanted to be. And this is a part of my evolution . . . because people in that community knew how I had lived and the life I had come from. So how could I go back and face those people? I had so many hang-ups and issues to deal with . . . So who I had to become and who I wanted to be, I was still in the process of negotiating those things with my past and where I had come from.

Sean's story suggests that revisiting the former social group before one feels strong enough, can jeopardize the development of the self. Participants had a fear that their former groups could pull them back into being who they were and prevent them from becoming who they needed or wanted to be. Sean explains this point,

> I established a life there [names an urban center]. And from there I began to re-introduce myself to [names his former community]. That was the quick drive through and then I would turn around and leave. . . It took a long time for that to change but now the community is just the community. I go back now and spend time there. I can go into the community and go into the corner store and I kind of like going back there at some level because I guess I can negotiate it a whole lot better. . . I think I have processed who I am as a person and I think I'm really proud of who I am as a person and I'm really comfortable with who I am. That is my past. It has shaped me to be who I am and I think I have looked at it and processed it at that level.

Like Sean, Trevor, Hillary, Mary, and Chris, understood establishing distance from their old selves was a necessary step toward developing the new. They also spoke about needing time to adjust to the changes within themselves. Contacts with people who

knew their background and knew about their past selves hindered their adjustment. Trevor, for example, created distance by moving half way across the province. He determined that if he wanted to become a law abiding citizen, an every day working man, he needed to be in a location where no one knew about his former connections to organized crime. He wanted to learn how to relate to people in a mutual and caring way and not resort to intimidation to get what he wanted.

> I moved away. I wanted to leave the city. There were too many stimuli for me from the old world that made it hard for me to continue my changing and my road to recovery from that world. I was afraid of running into people . . .I don't like looking over my shoulder. I don't like people to look at me when I go places and say, "Yeah, he used to do this. He used to do that." I come here [the city where he currently lives] and I am nobody. I am just a guy who drives a bus for the city. . . People are not afraid of me. I am just a guy and I get along with everybody, which is nice as opposed to the way it used to be. I started to work on myself when I got here.

As a single mother of five school aged children, Hillary was not able to relocate. Instead she established distance by not going to places she had formerly frequented as a heterosexual. In the quotation below she describes the reasons she temporarily stopped going to university after she came out as a lesbian.

> I didn't want to go up [to the university]. I found it more and more difficult to go there. I felt more and more people would be talking. I felt it was nobody's darn business. I felt naked. I felt I was being treated as a bit of a curiosity. I felt really awkward going to the university because I had been there through my married days. I was known as a married heterosexual woman and I didn't want to be known as the heterosexual woman anymore . . .I needed time to adjust. I just wanted people to know me as me and not with all the baggage that went along with it. I was excited to meet people for the first time who did not know my history.

Likewise Mary was unable to relocate because she and her ex-husband had joint custody of their children. So she worked with a therapist who helped her do "a lot of emotional distancing," which in turn helped her prepare for the rejection she anticipated

once she began to openly live as a lesbian. She indicated, "I had really, really distanced myself from my family because I didn't expect them to be accepting or understanding." Mary's comments reveal that "emotional distancing" can be a strategy to manage real as well as anticipated pain. Her comments also suggest that establishing distance is extremely important initially but the need for it decreases as one gains new supports and becomes more comfortable with his or her new identity. This was a sentiment shared by many participants. Mary recalled,

> I did lots of emotional distancing. The reason I didn't leave the community was because I wasn't prepared to leave my kids. I was also not willing to take them away from their father. That wasn't an option. . . I was present in the church and (children's high school). There were so many parts of the old community that I saw on a regular bases. One thing that a therapist did that was very helpful was that we did a lot of sky hook imagery. "You are going to walk in there and you are going to hold your head up high and you are just going to be there. You are not going to make an apology." There was some of that living the new narrative. How are you going to live that new narrative so that you are not apologizing and you are not running away? In order to do that there was real distancing that had to take place, real emotional distancing. I don't think I had any idea about how much of that I did until within the past few years when I have no longer been doing it. I started to let down those walls and I started to say, "You know what? It doesn't matter that much anymore."

Several participants needed to establish distance out of necessity. Beth had to leave everything behind; her home, her friends, and her business connections to ensure her safety. She and her children moved into a women's shelter and later second stage housing connected to the shelter. With respect to her social distancing she noted,

> That's very difficult because I'm not comfortable talking to any of them [close friends] anymore. I don't feel safe talking to them. A lot of them have chosen not to get involved. It's very hard to speak to those people. They knew what was going on but don't want to choose sides because it's uncomfortable for them. So I just cannot feel safe talking to them. Some of them are hurt by it. Some of them that just makes them side with my former spouse more.

She remained legitimately worried that if her former friends were to discover where she lived or if she were to socialize with them publicly, her safety would be compromised.

She couldn't risk that they would pass on information to her ex-husband who was still threatening to harm her. Hence, she distanced herself from her friends.

Mark, Brian, and Faith serve as examples of individuals who distanced themselves ideologically and theologically from their former groups. When Brian left his priestly vocation, for example, he created distance by also leaving the Catholic Church and his Christian faith. The theme of managing pain is also evident in Brian's reflections.

> The faith. I've walked away from it. I've walked away from the institution and I've walked away from religion. I've walked away from faith. I don't profess to believe any of the stuff that I was supposed to have believed. I don't know that I didn't believe at some point, some of the stuff. But I think part of my having experienced the rejection of the church, the non-caring, way they handled everything just turned me completely off from any kind of faith experience whatsoever. I haven't been inside the door of a church in nine years.

Faith indicated her changing political views and her anger towards those she deemed "small minded " created distance , "a wedge" between herself and her former community.

> I was starting to outgrow the kind of conversations people were having. I particularly found a small mindedness with respect to world affairs. I was becoming more left wing during my university years. I was much more concerned with social justice kinds of issues and I didn't find there was any room for conversation about that. If there was, it was most often from a conservative perspective. So my politics started to create a bit of a wedge too. I found myself getting angry a lot of the time when I was having conversations.

Common Experiences. There were feelings of excitement associated with meeting new people and discovering new things about one's self. Having distance between one's self and the former group allowed participants to freely explore aspects of themselves without feeling they were under the watchful eye of their former social groups. Although there were some feelings of shyness and anxiety as participants moved away from the known to the unknown, feeling energized was a common experience.

Participants who had come from restrictive social groups were bombarded by the positive opportunities that awaited them and many found it hard to focus for the first while. Sean's excitement when he left his community to go to university in an urban center reflects these positive experiences.

> I partied a lot. I won some awards for my parties but I didn't win any awards for my academics. So it was a monstrous struggle for me to balance academia with having all these friends and being in an environment where that social side of me was really nurtured and I just went boom. . . it began to give me a sense of confidence or a different view. . . I was definitely nurtured in [names city] . . . Lots of opportunities . . . My social side just went crazy which was awesome. It was good. Academically I suffered but personally I just really, really was nurtured.

The flip side was that many participants also experienced incredible pain during this period. Grief and loss were prominent themes. Hannah, Faith, Laura, and Claire indicated that the loss of relationships with former in-group members led to feelings of loneliness. As Laura concluded, "I was very much alone. . . I had no friends inside and no friends outside." Heather was disowned by her family and lost a close friendship because of her transition. Chris and Faith were estranged from their families during this stage. Beth lost contact with her close friends and her in-laws because they sided with her ex-husband and it was no longer safe to be in communication with them.

Although establishing distance was an effective pain management strategy, it was evident from these stories that the pain would have overwhelmed participants had they not taken steps to manage it in a constructive manner. Beth offers a good description of the depth of these feelings:

> Very big shell shock and terrified. I had no idea what I was going to do. It was like being pushed off a cliff. So there I was, sort of standing in front of a train waving. It's really hard to put that into words, what that felt like and it was really hard not just to curl up in a ball and die.

Another common experience was shame. Over half of the participants were ashamed about their past group memberships. Sean, for example, felt ashamed by the poverty and lifestyle he had growing up. He reflected, "Poverty did such horrible things to my brain and self-image and I just didn't know how to deal with and how to negotiate that." He added,

> From a life perspective and a lifestyle perspective, I hated growing up and being the poor kid. Everybody in the community knew we were the poor kids. We were the kids had the grungiest clothes, horrible haircuts and all kinds of other issues. There are certain things about my life that still almost make me cringe, like my toys came from the dump, and things like that.

Some participants who left religious groups (e.g., Faith, Claire, Laura, and Hannah) were ashamed of the values and beliefs their former group espoused. During the distancing phase participants began to see the group from a different perspective (from a distance rather than from within; as an outsider rather than as an insider) and this change in perspective led them to consider their former group's teachings to be elitist, sexist, and in a few instances also racist. They were ashamed of their former groups but more significantly ashamed of themselves because they had internalized these values and beliefs and had understood them to be the truth. As Claire recalled,

> I felt so duped. And I think that's probably the most correct wording. When I looked back at what I had been taught and what I grew up with as a child, as a teenager and also what I had started to teach my children - I looked back and I thought, "How could I have been so stupid? Did I not have any sense of intelligence?"

Fortunately these feelings lacked permanence. They were soon replaced with feelings of relief. As Claire explained,

> After you're away from it and after you realize they're wrong, it's like, "Wow!" But I went through that and I was so embarrassed, stupid, duped. I fell for it. It was like someone played a practical joke on me for so many years. Then all of a

> sudden you find out who did it. But what a relief! The relief outweighs the duping.

Many participants also reported feeling anger and bitterness towards their former social groups. Jacobs (1989) observed that anger can be used to create emotional distance between individuals and their former groups and can help them rationalize their decisions to leave and lay "the necessary groundwork for redefining one's self" (p. 120) apart from the group. After Mark spent time in Central America, for example, he returned to Canada and reported feeling very angry with people here who did not share his new cultural understandings. He noted, "My early experiences of coming back wasn't guilt but it was, I think, anger – anger at the people here just not caring about what was happening in the rest of the world, or at least that is how I perceived it." He wisely decided not to return to his former job as he surmised, "I would have been damaging . . . because of my trying to reconcile and integrate those experiences."

As the period of distance came to a close, participants seemed restless and ready to continue with their progress. As Hannah explained, "I was delaying the inevitable that I would come face-to-face with myself."

Meaning. I have already indicated that the main functions of establishing distance were the management of pain associated with a) grief and loss and, b) the redefining of the self. The moral of the "establishing distance" stories, which can only be understood in light of these functions, is that a change in social identity requires a metaphoric cleansing of the palate. Cleaning the palate is a phrase associated with wine tasting. In order to clear their mouths of the previous taste of wine, wine tasters will rinse their mouths with water or eat a small piece of bread before judging the next wine. Cleansing the palate is important because it allows the wine tester to evaluate the new

wine completely on its own merits without contamination by the lingering taste of the previous wine.

Establishing distance allowed participants to "cleanse" themselves of their former social groups and former social identities before "tasting" or identifying with something new. The palate was cleansed by the creation of distance from the old social group and a disinclination to immediately join a new one. Beth, who was still in the establishing distance stage at the time of our interviews, understood the value of the stage as giving her time to decide what she wanted to do and who she wanted to be. She observed,

> I do think I need time to sort out and decide what I want to do and who I want to be . . . Having time where there is no pressure on me is key. . .I really need the time to just sit here and be dysfunctional for awhile, let the shell shock pass and let that complete Oh-my-god-I-am-lost feeling pass. Some days I don't want to get out of bed. Other days I am like the Energizer bunny. It is nice to have that time to let these ups and downs settle a bit.

Likewise Laura indicated that she needed a period of time between disengaging from one group and joining another one to develop her self. She indicated,

> I didn't want another group, no way . . . I was finding out who I was. I was taking courses. I was a student. I was finding out that part of my life that I had never experienced as a young person. I was learning new things. Learning I could do it – that I could succeed at these things after being taught that they were "worldly" things. So I knew that I could succeed and it was not having a detrimental effect on me . . . I was finding that out. I was finding out that I didn't need to be someone's wife or someone's mother . . . finding out about all these avenues [for self discovery]. . . I didn't want that identity to be taken away from me by another group or by other people.

As the above two quotations suggest, the moral of the establishing distance stories is that the individual self needs time to develop and strengthen between the exiting of one group and membership in a new one. As Laura explained, she needed to "learn new things" free from the lingering judgments of her former group. She didn't want the process of self discovery to be compromised or "taken away" by another social group. Establishing distance allowed her new understandings of self to solidify. For most

participants their understandings of self eventually strengthened to the point where they felt able to 1) pick up aspects of their former social understandings and incorporate them into their new self-understandings, and 2) join a new social group without feeling their individual self was "being taken away."

The importance of taking time to cleanse the palate is underscored in previous disengagement studies (Jacobs, 1989; Levine, 1984). Levine (1984) discovered that individuals who did not take the time to resolve their identity issues as related to their former group memberships were likely to join a new group without having any resolution. As a result their individual identity could remain stunted and the degree of incongruence between the individual and the former group could be replicated with the new group. Jacobs (1989) indicated that feelings of dislocation post-disengagement were rooted in the "reassessment of one's personal identity" (p. 111) outside the context of the former social group. Establishing distance from the group led to a "restructuring of the self" and when sufficient ego strength was achieved, there was an eventual and "affirmative" (p. 121) integration of the past experiences into the new life.

Stage Three: "New" Understandings of Self

As I have previously argued, disengagement is comprised of two distinct processes: 1) the individual leaving the group and 2) the group leaving the individual. The public disengagement event that concluded the period of waiting can be viewed as the conclusion of the first disengagement process, the individual leaving the group. But given that the group can continue to linger within the psyche of individuals and inform their self-evaluations long after formal membership has ceased, how is one to know when the second disengagement process, the group leaving the individual, is completed? Are

there definable features that clearly mark the end of this second disengagement process? Did participants in the study achieve a new understanding of self that could be distinguished from previous self-understanding held while a member of the group?

After an interrogation of the data I discovered that there were indications that for most participants the disengagement process was complete. I also discovered that participants did understand themselves as having a new identity. But before I provide elaboration, I will offer two introductory comments. First, not everyone in the sample considered their disengagement process to be complete. Beth and Trevor, the youngest participants in the sample and also the closest temporally to the disengagement event (14 months and 5 ½ years respectively), were in the establishing distance stage at the time of their interviews. They had each experienced a public disengagement event, but both felt their identity was still in flux and neither had found a new social group that was a fit for them. However, they were both optimistic that the disengagement process would end and they were reasonably content to enjoy their current stage and not rush into anything before they were ready. As Trevor explained,

> I want to enjoy the journey too . . . the means to something. It is the means I am living in right now. It is about not wanting what I don't have but wanting what I do have. At the same time trying to like this part of the journey because it is part of the journey and I have to surrender to it because I am in it. I am here. If I don't surrender I will be really miserable. I haven't done this much talking about what I am doing because I made a decision in the last year to… whatever comes up, whatever crosses my path, whatever changes I need to make, I am going to make them and I am going to be OK no matter what.

At the time of my interviews with Beth she had just received a court settlement sufficient to cover living expenses and educational costs for the next few years. She felt extremely fortunate not to have to rush into a job or career and instead be able to take time "to sort it out and decide what I want to do and who I want to be."

Beth: Come back and see me in five years.
Catherine: I'd love to see how this story progresses.
Beth: That's just it. There's still so much. Like it's been 15 months and there's still so much that's still out there. I'm happy and I'm very optimistic. Things have gone way better than I ever anticipated. . . I felt so bewildered and lost all through it that I figure it's got to be shear luck that got us here. All I can think is what this conversation will be in five years. . .Court went way better than I ever anticipated and that's opened up lots of opportunities just in the fact that I don't have to worry about finances and . . . and how many people get that opportunity? I don't have to take a job because I need to put the food on the table. I can actually sit there and decide what it is I want to do. And I'm not in a hurry to do that and it's just so neat. And I'm lucky.

Second, participants placed their disengagement narratives within a larger text that included all of their living and being. Their experiences were not presented as isolated short stories that could be read or understood independent of the larger text of their lives. In some ways their disengagement stories never end because they become part of the fabric of their being. Past group membership shaped the participant's identity in such an exacting and permanent way that they were unable to now claim a completely "new" identity, if by "new" one was to infer an identity completely devoid of any self-understandings derived from former group memberships. There certainly was evidence that participants continued to carry their former group memberships within them, at least in a residual way. However, the presence of "hang over identity" should not be considered a sign that the disengagement process was incomplete. In fact, it can be viewed as evidence of completion and a "well-integrated and whole person" (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 4). As Sean explained,

> I don't think leaving is just two seconds and you're out the door. Leaving is a life-long process. And leaving for me is me leaving [home community]. Obviously it's still something I'm processing. I process all the time. You don't separate who you were with who you are.

I will now describe the final leg of the disengagement journey and outline its

identifying characteristics as it concerns the remaining fourteen participants. I will also provide evidence that these participants achieved a "new" understanding of self. The common characteristics, common experiences, and meaning of stage three are summarized in Table Fourteen and discussed separately below.

Table 14: Post-Disengagement, Stage 3 - "New" Understandings of Self

Common Characteristics	Common Experiences	Meaning

• Taking personal responsibility for identity development
• Making peace with one's former self and perhaps also one's former group
• Claiming a new identity by:
  • Joining a new social group
  • Creating a new social category
• Changing external behaviour, dress, and/or name to mark internal changes
• Validation from others that they no longer belong to the former social group
	• Happiness
	• Absence of anger, guilt, or fear
	• Pain associated with close friends and family not being happy for them and/or not accepting their new self-understandings
		• "All's well that ends well"
		• I am a survivor
		• Arriving where one started
		• Achieving congruence between one's old and new self
		• The individual self should not be denied

Common Characteristics. Several participants could recall the specific moment when they knew they had moved on to the next phase of their lives. For Brian, this moment occurred when he received a phone call telling him that the priest who had abused him as a teen had died of a massive heart attack. Brian said,

> It was the day he died that I had made up my mind that that it's time now for me to just do what I want to do; to live my life for myself. It was kind of the idea that what I had set out to do, I'd done. It's finished and now I just walk away.

Hannah offers another example. She had created geographic, relational, and emotional distance from her former social group by moving to Africa. She recalled,

> In Africa I had an experience where I was threatened with guns and being at the wrong place at the wrong time in the middle of a coup and I realized suddenly that life could end here. I suddenly realized that I had always wanted to die and now

> suddenly I wanted to live. That turned it around for me when I suddenly decided to look at life the opposite way around instead of all the things I missed, I can now look at all the things I have.

This event ended Hannah's period of establishing distance. She returned to Canada and enrolled in university and slowly began to carve a new identity and life for herself outside of her former social group.

Having a memorable event, such as Hannah's or Brian's, to mark the end of the disengagement process was atypical. Most participants, as Hannah also did after her move back to Canada, slowly eased into their new lives and self-understandings. For these participants it was only with the passage of time that they were able to distinguish their "new" selves from the old. That said, however, participants were able to identify specific changes that enabled them to demarcate the old self from the new.

One change was in the taking of responsibility. Several participants determined the end of their disengagement process to be when they understood that they alone were responsible for becoming who they needed to be. For some participants, prolonged anger and resentment with their former social groups inhibited their development and ability to move forward. Ironically this same anger had once served an essential function in creating distance from the former social groups and allowing for an understanding of self independent from the group. However, left too long, the anger kept the participants bound to their former groups and prevented their personal growth. Hannah explains,

> In and around the same time, when I started realizing that life could be joyful was around the time when I stopped being the victim. I felt tired of being the victim in life; the old church wouldn't let me do this and wouldn't let me do that, and then I couldn't go to school, it was just like it was always their fault. When I stopped believing it was all their fault and I had some responsibility too for some of these decisions then I was able to move into all that different space.

Brian spoke about his decision to take responsibility when he noted, "[I decided I was] not going to put my life on hold . . . That was my commitment to my self." For Heather, taking responsibility involved not trying to live for other people but live for herself. She indicated,

> I realized I had been letting other people drive my life. I had been trying to live to the standard that I thought my father would want, which was ridiculous, instead of trying to live the way I should have lived. And it's when I decided I was no longer going to live my life for other people, but for myself that I was able to [make the transition from male to female].

Another sign that the disengagement process was complete was participants' ability to make peace with their former selves. Claire, for example, indicated that she knew she had truly left the Jehovah's Witnesses when she could accept and forgive her former self for having once been a member. She commented,

> I'm not that harsh on myself, because I really feel that we were only given this much rope. You couldn't really go and do anything other then believe what they said because that's the way I grew up.

I asked Faith, "When did you know the disengagement process was complete?" After some reflection, Faith offered the following:

> Three things come to mind. One, you can forgive them [the former group] . . . that allows for reconnection. Two, you begin to see them as wounded instead of yourself as wounded . . . that allows for compassion. Three, you let go of the judgment of them, which is just the reverse of them judging you. When you leave you make the leaving right by judging them as awful or bad or dysfunctional. If the judgment can be turned into compassion, that is an extremely important thing.

Another notable change was a shift in social identity. For half of the participants (7/14), the shift in social identity was marked by membership in a new social group. These participants used their new memberships in their self descriptions. For example, Heather now identifies as female and lesbian, Mary and Hillary each as lesbian, Victor as queer, Hannah as a modern Mennonite, Laura as a Christian and Brian as a social worker.

For the other half (7/14), a change in social identity was marked by their decision not to join an existing social group, but in some ways to create their own social categories. For José, Chris, Mark and Dorothy this has meant "living in the spaces between," a phrase Chris so aptly coined. José, for example, now identifies as a cochlear implantee, an individual who is neither hearing nor deaf. Chris identifies as neither male nor female. Dorothy identifies as being neither in the fashion industry nor in electrical engineering. She identifies as the executive director of a women's employment centre which incongruously runs two main employment programs; one in clothing design and production, the other in trades. Sean, Mark, Faith, and Claire found it impossible to narrow their understandings to a specific social group or category. Mark indicated his cultural identity comes from being part of the "culture of the world." Sean no longer feels he belongs to a specific territorial group but feels "international." Both Faith and Claire indicated they no longer have a religious group affiliation. They each described themselves as "spiritual" but added that they felt their religious understandings were broader than a particular faith or denomination.

Participants indicated that their internal shifts in understanding were outwardly evident and observable to others. Many of the changes in the external presentation of the self were intentional strivings to have consistency between the inward self and the outward self. These changes also helped others to place their new identity and relate to them accordingly. Heather and Chris made the most radical physical transformations by living, dressing, and behaving in accordance with their new gender understandings. This meant adopting new mannerisms and gestures, and learning to modulate their voices. For Heather, these changes were accompanied by hormone treatments, electrolysis, and sex

reassignment surgery. Chris is taking hormones and plans on having some surgery in the future.

At least half of the participants indicated that changing the way they groomed and dressed was an outward sign of their new self-understandings. This stands to reason as our clothing, jewelry, hair style and accessories can reveal a lot about who we are. Mark lost his "golden boy look" by growing out his hair. Sean lost a significant amount of weight and began dressing in fashionable clothes. Hillary stopped wearing "femmy clothes." Brian, who had always raged against having to wear a clerical collar and priestly robes, was now free to wear what he wanted.

Hannah, in leaving the old order Mennonites, had the hardest time determining what her new appearance should be and what she was comfortable wearing. In her old order Mennonite community individuality was discouraged and conformity of dress was a requirement. The community placed a high value on "plainness" and members were prohibited from expressing their individuality through their clothing, jewelry, or hair style. Hannah had internalized many of her former community's beliefs with respect to dress, such as women had to keep their heads covered to show submission to men and respect for God. Hannah told me a lengthy story, an abbreviation of which appears below, of how she slowly began to change her dress in accordance with her changing beliefs and new self-understandings. Although it is quite lengthy I am including it because it offers a wonderful example of how the presentation of the new self takes time and is commensurate with growing self-awareness. Hannah's story also reveals that external changes need to occur when a person feels ready and comfortable and not

before. Finally the story reveals that feelings of comfort are a sign that the external changes are timely and represent a good fit.

> Now, when my parents left the [old order Mennonite] church, my mother continued to wear her covering. Not so much because she believed in the submission to men, which is what it symbolized, but she knew she would have better connections to extended family [who remained old order Mennonite] if she didn't physically change . . . So that influenced me some, because when I left the church, it was sort of like, do I wear the covering, don't I wear the covering? I don't know . . . So I decided to keep wearing the covering because I hadn't figured out yet when I should stop and if I should stop. . . . . I went [to Washington D.C.] in January [six months after I left the church] and 9 months later, in September, I decided . . . you know, this covering doesn't belong with me anymore. So I went back and looked at 1 Corinthians 11 and all the scriptures I had ever been taught about why I must wear the covering and I read them and re-read them because I didn't want to bring hell on myself or anything. So I finally decided . . . OK, I'm not going to wear my covering anymore . . . I realized that as long as I wore the covering I always felt safe. We had heard many a sermon on how the covering would keep a woman safe and I realized it was something within me that said, "Nobody is going to attack a weird looking woman like me" . . . and the minute I didn't have it [prayer cap] on my head I suddenly realized, "I don't look any different from the average Joe on the street. Now I am up for grabs. People can attack me. People can steal my purse and they will think nothing of it". I suddenly realized I had to come to grips with my fear. . . When I came back [from Washington D.C.], I didn't wear my covering but I still had long hair. I had never cut it. . . About a year later I decided I am going to cut my hair. And to me that was the most traumatic day of my life. . . I was really, really restless so finally I went and I said I have no idea what I want I just want my hair cut. . . About three or four years after I left the church I remember starting to wear jeans and being incredibly self conscious. And I remember someone once said to me. You know, you don't have to wear them. You can wear your dresses. Oh, I guess I can. I don't have to fit in like that. So I went back to wearing dresses for a while until I could actually feel comfortable in jeans . . . it was sort of like needing to go as far as I was comfortable and I think within six months I went in to the optometrist and got contact lenses so I was no longer wearing glasses and I had my hair cut short and I was starting to wear fairly mini-type skirts too by this point. All of a sudden I got brave and sometimes it would take me six months to take the next step.

By way of comparison, Trevor, who has not completed his disengagement process, spoke to me about not knowing how to dress because he remains unsure of who he is. He told me some days he will dress like a skate boarder or a tough guy, other days,

like a preppy academic, and still others, like an athlete. Trevor is trying on various identities much like he tries on various clothes. He described his past self as "liquid." He felt he could be poured into any identity container and act accordingly but none of these identities had internal stability. He commented,

> That whole self...I have been searching for that my whole life. I still am searching. That is what I am doing now. I now have a better idea what [I am] . . . liquid was what I was - that kind of liquid that would be like in those cartoons that you see as a kid, where you see something crawl up and turn into whatever, liquid metal.

Trevor still does not know who he is but he is getting more clarity. Continuing with his metaphor, Trevor humorously explained, "I am no longer liquid. Hey - I am gelling!" Trevor's struggle in knowing who he is and likewise knowing how to dress is complicated by his desire not to take on external trappings without making the necessary internal changes – a mistake he made several times in his past. Trevor believes he never had a strong sense of self and hence was attracted to groups, like the bikers who could tell him who he was, what to do, what to believe, and how to dress. Membership in this group came with external trappings, such as a chopped Harley bike, money, expensive vehicles, a rough and violent persona, and having the right woman (i.e., beautiful and sexually available) on one's arm. Although initially attracted to the image, it ultimately left him feeling hollow and selfless.

Four participants externalized their inward changes by giving themselves a new name. Heather chose a feminine sounding name that was a prominent name in her extended family. Chris no longer uses his feminine name. At the time of the interview he was still experimenting with a few names but had not yet found one that matched his self-understanding. He was trying to find a name that reflected his understanding of being

transgendered and also sounded similar to the name he was given at birth. After coming out Hillary legally changed her name to the name she was called as a child. José chose a Spanish version of his given name as a way of reconnecting with his Spanish heritage. It is interesting that all of these "new" names were not only attempts to externalize inward change but also attempts to reconnect to one's early history and family of origin. These name changes suggest that having continuity between one's old and new self is also important. This theme will be expanded on below when the meaning of this stage will be discussed.

Another sign for participants that the disengagement process was complete was when others no longer associated them with their former social groups and/or associated them with their new social groups. As Laura explained, ten years after leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses "people, now, on the outside don't view me as a Witness anymore." Several months after Mary came out as a lesbian, her best friend, who was also her first cousin, said, "Now I know who you really are. It's wonderful to see." This was incredibly validating for Mary because her cousin had known her throughout her life, had witnessed her life as a heterosexual woman and was now witnessing her life as a lesbian and she was able to confirm for Mary that being a lesbian was who she really was. Mary concluded, "Because she had seen me all through those other years it was a really helpful sort of mirror that she provided for me."

Perhaps the most moving example of this type of external validation came from Sean. In the village where Sean grew up, he was associated with his unemployed and abusive father, a man the community reviled. His father's name was Albert, and much to Sean's constant shame and embarrassment, he was often referred to as "Albert's son."

After he left the community Sean got a university degree and had landed a good job. The nature of his work resulted in him being interviewed by a television network and appearing in a news program, which many people from his former village viewed. Shortly after the program aired Sean returned to the community to attend a family funeral. His internal changes were reflected in the new reactions he received from his former community who no longer viewed him as "Albert's son" but as "Ann's boy," a tribute to his deceased mother.

> So when I go used to go back there [to the community] I was the kid who got toys from out of the dump and I was the poor kid in the community who worked in the two room school and I was Albert's son. But I go back there now and I'm not Albert's son. I'm Sean. I'm recognized as being my own independent person. Want to hear a really cool story? My cousin died and I went back to the community for the funeral. I remember being at the community centre and a lady came up to me and said, "You're Ann's boy, aren't you?" I said, "Yes, Yes, I am." So someone identified me in association with my mother versus an association with my father, which was the plague.

Common Experiences. In the "choose life" stage, participants considered their unhappiness to be an indication that there was dissonance between their individual and social identities. By the end of the post-disengagement phase we return to this theme. By far the most common emotions associated with this phase were happiness and contentment. Participants viewed their happiness as an indication that they had now achieved congruency between their individual and social understandings. Brian explained,

> When I look at my life, I think I'm happy. I feel I'm happy. I'm tired a lot. But I don't know if that necessarily means I'm not happy. It's just that I'm tired. I guess I rate my happiness on the basis of, when I get in my car in the mornings to drive to work and I'm driving up the expressway, I've never yet thought to myself, I hate my job. Or I don't want to go and face this today. I've never thought that way. I've a home that I own and the mortgage is dwindling so that's good. I have very good friends. I have some really solid friends that I have really good friendships with. I'm . . . exploring a relationship . . . I'm not quite sure where all

> that's going but it's there. I have two kids that are a huge part of my life. I make good money. I have nice things. When I think back to nine years ago, ten years ago, twelve years ago, when I decided I was leaving and had nothing, I've come a very long way from nothing.

Mark made the connection between "enjoyment" and his decision to "be who I am." Sean noted, "I am content in my skin, happy with everything." Curiously, Victor also used the metaphor of skin to describe his feelings of freedom and contentment.

> I like the skin metaphor. I could shed the layers of expectations that were on me and then I had sort of that intuitive "Ah-ha." Spirituality doesn't control me. My parents don't control me. Society doesn't control me. All those thoughts from high school about "fag this" and "fag that" are bad, don't control me any more. So for me it was, I am going to use the word skin because I have this metaphor in my head of a snake or something scaly . . . the scales were the things that were preventing me from being who I am. And once I freed myself from those scales, there was a smooth surface. And that surface feels right. So that is why I am wearing the skin that I am wearing now.

Several participants made reference to feeling the absence of negative emotions, such as anger, guilt or fear, which had plagued them as members. Heather spoke about her life prior to her sex reassignment surgery as being filled with fear. She was afraid of being discriminated against and physically assaulted because she was living as a woman when "officially," according to her birth certificate, driver's license, and passport, she was a man. Heather's fears were not unfounded. When she was in the army and it was discovered that on her weekend leaves she was behaving and dressing as a woman, she was brutally assaulted by army officials and discharged. According to Statistics Canada (2004), "sexual orientation" (including transgenderism) is the third leading motivator of hate crimes in Canada. For Heather, the biggest difference between her life before and her life after her transition has been the absence of fear. Heather explained,

> I have spoken to some extent about the emotions – the fear that I had been living with for so many years. That, I think, has been the overriding thing. The most enormous difference between before and after is the fear is gone. Absolutely,

> totally different. It is impossible to explain to anybody who hasn't lived with it. I would bet that I could explain it to some Afghan refugee. Somebody who has lived with that kind of fear for years and then suddenly doesn't. It is stunning. It is truly stunning . . . I am not afraid anymore . . . and that is a huge difference. I haven't begun to plunge the depths of what difference that is making in my life.

Laura and Faith considered the absence of guilt to be a sign that their disengagement processes was over. Laura recalled, "The guilt was gone and it wasn't until then that I actually felt free."

Although participants were predominately happy with themselves nine (56%) spoke about the pain they experienced when close friends and family could not or would not accept their new understandings of self. Victor became emotional when he described how his mom "tolerates" but does not "accept" his homosexuality.

> It's sort of like the difference between acceptance and tolerance. I think there are still people in my family that tolerate me . . . My Mom's Catholic faith allows her to love me because she knows it's the right thing to do. And essentially she does love me but "Don't you dare go against the Pope! Don't you dare marry Ted! Don't you dare announce that! Don't you dare challenge me on my beliefs and my God and what I read in the Bible as being fact." She's never said any of that but it's implied in a lot of what she says [crying] And you can probably tell with the emotion that's in my eyes, how it impacts me. . . I just wish that my Mom could understand me the way I understand myself. And I know that's exactly what my mother is thinking. That she wishes that I could understand her the way she understands herself. So we're in two different boxes and agree that that's just the way it is. We maintain our relationship and when I talk about my relationship with Ted and maybe utter the word, "marriage", she becomes very quiet. And that saddens me because I wish we could talk about it.

Mary spoke about the sadness she experienced when her close friends stopped talking to her because they considered her lesbianism to be a sin. She recalled "There were some people who said, 'I just can't see you anymore. I can't. It is just too hard. I won't have anything to do with that." That was very difficult." Heather's ongoing efforts to connect with her mother are quite painful. She indicated,

> I've written her [mother] long letters and long e-mails and said, "Look, here's my

> life now," you know? "I'm well liked. I give to charities. I volunteer. I have been voted president of three different charitable organizations that I've been part of. People like me." I don't understand why my mother doesn't like me. . . I [tell her things] to let her know who I am and she just doesn't respond. . . She never acknowledges that I talk about my life or my kids or Susan [partner]. The only way she acknowledges it is the next letter will say, "Hi. How are you? How's Susan? How are the kids?" But she never actually responds to any of the things I say about what's going on in their life or mine or the exciting things that have happened or "Wow! You are president of the league!" No response. . . I think she's ashamed of me. And I think that is the root. I think her problem is her embarrassment . . . She's ashamed. She has an old fashioned view of transition and finds it shameful. [She] finds it weak and perverted and shameful, I think.

What made these tenuous relationships with family and friends particularly painful was the fact that these participants felt they had made a positive change and their loved ones did not share in this understanding or in their happiness. Furthermore, these participants felt they were being rejected or "tolerated," not because of something they did but because of who they were. These facts made it difficult for these participants to strengthen these relationships without severely compromising their new selves.

Meaning. Happiness was a prominent theme and, as indicated above, was associated with individual and social identity congruence. Participants viewed their happiness as "proof" that the decision to go through the disengagement process had been a good one. One of the morals of the "new" identity stories was, to use the title of a Shakespearian play, "All's Well That Ends Well." This moral takes into account that disengagement processes were neither easy nor pain free. Yet, the end result, happiness, proved that participating in the process had been worthwhile.

King et al. (2000), a group of researchers who studied the parental stories of life transitions associated with the birth of a Down syndrome child, argue that the ability to "construct stories with happy endings tends to be associated with psychological well-being (p. 513)." Interestingly they also conclude:

> Telling a story that conveys one's struggle with a life problem – in which the person portrays him or herself as seriously challenged by life and struggling to make sense of it all – is associated with the subjective sense that one has grown as well as with enhanced ED [ego development]" (p. 530).

This finding is consistent with the results of other studies using narrative analysis, such as Pals & McAdams (2004) who studied the stories of adults' recounting their most difficult life events and Pals (2006) who examined midlife stories. These two studies suggest that working through a negative life experience and being able to convey redemptive meaning related to these experiences via the life story is a sign of psychological health and maturity. Likewise the results of this study suggest that despite, or perhaps because of, the hardships associated with the disengagement process participants demonstrated considerable ego (i.e., identity) development and improved psychological well-being, leading one to conclude that "all's well that ends well."

Another factor contributing to the sentiment that "all is well" concerns the impact the disengagement process itself had on the emerging identity. Given participants' happiness and contentment with their current self, perhaps it is not surprising that participants were likewise at peace with the process that allowed these new self-understandings to emerge. Loevinger (1976) argued that it is only when environments fail to meet expectations that there is the potential for development (as cited in King et al., 2000). Throughout the disengagement process, participants suffered because in real and substantive ways, their social groups failed to meet their expectations. Ultimately it was this failure that pushed the individual to develop in ways they might not have otherwise. As Kubler-Ross (1997) wrote, "Should you shield the canyons from the windstorms, you would never see the beauty of their carvings" (p. 18). As Sean explained,

> It's so interwoven. Every facet of my life, every component of my life, from

> picking up toys at the dump to being abused to witnessing the abuse of my mother to everything else from that, it shaped me into who I am and you can't [separate me from the process].

This is not to say that participants did not have resentment, anger, or bitterness related to their painful disengagement experiences. They did. However, they tried to reconcile their painful disengagement processes with the product of these processes, their new self-understandings. One of the ways this reconciliation occurred was by making a distinction between a "good leaving" and a "good outcome." Many admitted that a "good leaving" was an oxymoron; an impossibility. The disengagement process was like a painful initiation rite. It was an essential process for identity development but the necessity of it did not make it "good." As Sean explained, "I don't think there is such a thing as a good leaving. I don't know how you would describe that." Hannah suggested,

> So I'm thinking about what would be a good outcome and I think there isn't a way of leaving that church that I know of that isn't painful. Unless one simply didn't care, and there are very few people that wouldn't care when they leave. So when I just look at my siblings and my parents and everyone who has left, it is traumatic when one leaves and I think what I would consider a good outcome is if one can learn to individuate; to become one's self, independent of the group.

Despite the sentiment that "all is well that ends well," participants never suggested that they were now at a point in their lives where they could walk happily into the sunset amidst applause as the curtain closed. Not one participant claimed that "living happily ever after" was the moral of their story. Participants fully anticipated future struggles. What allowed them to be optimistic, however, was their acquired self-understanding as survivors. Participating in the disengagement process was difficult but they had survived. They had ultimately disengaged successfully. This leads to a discussion of the second moral of these stories: "I am a survivor."

After leaving her career in women's fashion, Dorothy went through some

financially difficult years. Dorothy recalled that one of the main lessons she learned was "If I ever become poor or desperate again, I know I will survive." At the time of my interviews with Claire, she was remarried and due to her husband's business failing they were facing possible bankruptcy. Yet she contended, "I have started with nothing and if I start with nothing again, I am not concerned." Sean recalled the point in his disengagement process when he decided to embrace this understanding of self as a survivor,

> The more I realized how much shit I went through as a kid . . . [I] just thought, "You know what, you can be a survivor or you can be the victim." I chose the survivor route. I thought, "Let's suck it up. Let's push this down and go. You can do something more with your life. You can get beyond this."

Trevor recalled, "Something else that I learned . . . is that I have an incredible gift to survive crazy situations." He described his life post-disengagement as a "real battle." He has had to learn to face many of his fears, which he had previously masked by addictions. He has had several break downs resulting from "not knowing what to do, how to act, how to be, who to be." He added, "It was like fighting through. Some butterflies don't make it out of the cocoon. It is just too much to get out." But Trevor sees himself as a survivor, as a butterfly that has made it out. Five years after leaving the world of organized crime, Trevor still struggles with holding down a regular job and avoiding "the soft and easier way". However, he concluded, "I know no matter what happens I can survive and not just survive but I can come out on top - from situations of life and death to situations of needing to be diplomatic in the employment world."

I began this chapter with a quotation from the poet T. S. Elliot, "And the end of our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time." Many participants did not claim a new identity as much as reclaim or transform earlier

bits of self-understandings that had been lost along the way. Throughout the disengagement process there were hints and clues about who they were and whether they would or would not fit in their social groups but participants seemed unable to make sense of these or act on them before they were ready. This is the third moral of the "new' identity stories: "I have arrived where I started."

Hannah left an old order Mennonite religious group, in part because the group could not provide satisfying answers to her spiritual and religious questions. Today Hannah devotes her life to religious and spiritual inquiry. After a few years of travel, followed by a career in business, Hannah returned to university to study religion. Currently, Hannah is pursuing a doctorate degree in ministry. Faith also left a religious cultural group and after studying science and working in the healthcare system for 15 years she now has a career as a spiritual counselor. Similarly Laura understood herself as a spiritual person before she became a Jehovah's Witness. As a Witness she identified as "religious" but not "spiritual." She felt the organization had not nurtured or helped her to develop her spirituality. After she left the Witnesses she reclaimed this self-understanding. She now identifies as "Christian" and "spiritual." Part of her reluctance to join a church is rooted in her fear that she could lose her spirituality once again.

Brian is another case in point. Before he decided to become a priest Brian was enrolled in a social work program at university. He completed his first year in social work and then switched to religion and philosophy before attending a Catholic seminary. After the priesthood he returned to social work. Likewise Hillary and Victor had same sex relationships prior to living as married and heterosexual individuals. After coming out as

gay and lesbian they were reminded of these previous self-understandings, which they had repressed for years.

José was a talented musician who could not hear or play music when he became deafened. One of the motivators for him getting a cochlear implant was to hear music again. He said, "It was really emotional when I started listening to music." He has been able to reclaim his understanding as someone who knows and loves music. However, he is reluctant to completely return to his past understanding as a musician, not because it wouldn't be a fit for him but because he doesn't think he could handle the pain of having this aspect of his identity snatched away once more if his CI processor were to permanently fail. He surmised,

> Life is on a thread. That is why I went through a period for the last couple of years of really thinking of buying a guitar and taking up music again but there was always the question of "what if the device ceases to work?" I don't think I would be able to take, given my love for music, I don't think I would be able to take that being removed again. If I lose it as a spectator, a listener, that's one thing. But, if I started playing again and playing well and then to lose it again I don't think I would want to deal with that. . . It's kind of like going back to your ex-wife and then getting another divorce.

Sean grew up with incredible chaos and turmoil. His early life was filled with crisis and threats to his life. Sean currently works for an organization that goes to parts of the world that are coping with political and environmental upheavals. He loves the fast pace, the adrenaline rush, the curious blend of fear with the desire and ability to help. He quite literally feels at home with these emotional states.

Some participants could not clearly recall their early self-understandings. Yet once they discovered who they were, they considered these understandings to be correct because they helped them make sense of things that would otherwise be left unexplained. When Chris, for example, determined he was transgendered he could make sense of his

preschool desire to change his gender, his confusion about which washroom to use once he started grade school and his traumatic experiences during puberty. Mary offers a good example of how her self-understanding as a lesbian helped her to make sense of many unexplained elements in her past.

> I just knew [I was a lesbian]. How did I know? I think it was from the moment I met this woman. Whatever experience I had there was like, you know those marble beams where you drop a marble and each one goes down and they fall into place? It was like, everything fell into place. Or like all the dominoes fell over. It was like, it was there and it made sense. All the stories that hadn't made sense now made sense. Why did I care if my friends were dating? You know? Why did I care that my friend went out with this guy who I didn't like and who asked me out and I said no and then she went out with him? Why did I care? Why did I care about that? You know? All those pieces of the story that never fit now did fit. . . It was like this was the puzzle piece that let the whole puzzle come together. And finally, the puzzle was together and so you couldn't argue with it anymore because there it was. It was clear. So there wasn't any argument about whether it was clear or not. There was an argument about what the hell am I going to do with this. But, did I know it was clear? Yeah.

It is hard to determine how many of these clues "truly" existed earlier and whether they can be relied on as "proof" that the new identity is, in fact, the true identity. I say this not to discredit the participants' accounts but to be transparent about the limits of narrative analysis. Stories are the way we make sense of our lives. Like any good story, participants' accounts of their disengagement were woven together by themes that were outlined and developed. Part of what makes a good story are the connections the teller makes between one event and another and the efforts made to ensure that all the loose ends are tied up. The hints and clues that participants' reported certainly support their contention that their current understanding of self is authentic. But as Margaret Atwood (1996) wrote in her novel *Alias Grace*, "We are what we remember . . . perhaps we are also preponderantly – what we forget." Perhaps if participants had arrived at an alternative understanding of self, they would likewise be able to find hints and clues that

would support the alternative understanding. We need to consider that the reasons why so many participants "arrived where they started" may be as much related to how we tell stories as it is to identity formation.

But does this matter? One of the benefits of narrative analysis is its ability to illuminate experiences and discover the meaning these experiences held for participants. What does it mean that participants viewed themselves as "arriving where they started?" According to the participants in this study, it means that congruence has been established between their old and new selves. This is the fourth moral of the "new" identity stories.

According to Ebaugh (1988), one of the central challenges for a person who has disengaged from a social group is resolving the "tension between one's past, present and future" (p. 149). Hence, being an ex-member of a social group is different than never having been a member at all because the ex-member must incorporate their former social identity into their current understandings of self. Raggatt (2006) argues that the "primary function of narrative" is "integration" (p. 16). In this study, the story was both process and product. By telling their disengagement stories, participants were able to integrate their former selves into their current self and likewise demonstrate that such integration had occurred.

McAdams (1985) suggests that individuals construct a life story in an attempt to "reduce the multitude of motley information about the self to manageable personified categories" and to "provide our lives with a sense of inner sameness and continuity" (p. 127). Having continuity is considered essential to overall functioning and well-being. As Raggatt (2006) observed, "Individuals clearly derive happiness and a sense of purpose from the experience of integrating past, present, and future into synergistic wholes" (p.

16). This theme of happiness connects the fourth moral to the first. One of the reasons "all's well that ends well" is because happiness was not only derived from having individual and social identity congruence but also from having congruency between one's past and present selves.

Identity theorists speak about the continuous and discontinuous (or the stable and dynamic) nature of the self. These concepts were discussed in Chapter 2. I argued then that it was possible to consider identity to be consolidated, yet subject to social and circumstantial influences. This moral of "arriving where you started" embraces both the continuous and the discontinuous natures of identity. To quote T. S. Elliot once more, the continuous nature is manifest in "arrive[ing] where you started" and the discontinuous element in "know[ing] the place for the first time."

One way of reconciling the continuous and discontinuous aspects of one's self is to consider identity formation to be like a spiral rather than a linear or circular process. When climbing a spiral staircase, for example, it can appear as it you are going around and around in circles but in actuality you are steadily climbing higher. Likewise with identity development, it can appear as if individuals have returned or circled back to an earlier understanding of self, but in fact they are at a different point and steadily progressing. The spiral is a primordial metaphor for the development of the self (Kharitidi, 1996) and is frequently cited in identity research (Niemi, 1997; Stevens, Jr., 2004; Tapper, 2000; Tatum, 1992, 1994). I also found references to the spiral metaphor in the non-fictional accounts of disengagement that I used as non-reactive measures (see Appendix K). The best example, as its title reveals, is Armstrong's (2004) *The Spiral Staircase: My Climb out of Darkness.*

Although this upward spiral metaphor was never specifically mentioned by participants, their stories did evidence this circling back with the simultaneous climb upward. I have already offered numerous examples of the connections participants made between their current and former selves but I will offer one more as evidence of the spiral nature of identity development. As I indicated earlier, many participants changed their external appearance to reflect their new understandings of self. In the quotation below, Hannah recalls an experience she had walking through a labyrinth at a spiritual retreat. She begins her story by noting that she was "feeling myself," meaning she was feeling like her current self. Yet in walking the labyrinth, she quite literally and also figuratively circled back to an earlier understanding of self to the extent that she reverted back to wearing her covering (at least symbolically). Her sense of wearing the covering is suggestive of the circling back, whereas her sense of "feeling myself" is suggestive of the upward climb.

> Last Saturday I was at a Labyrinth workshop in Toronto feeling very, very much myself. A Labyrinth is like a maze, only it has one path in and one path out. They were first found in some of the cathedrals in Europe and now they are being used as prayer . . . I was going to this workshop and I feel like myself because I love this type of thing. While I was walking the labyrinth . . . and lots of interesting things can happen while you are praying . . . someone had scattered scarves along the side just in case somebody wanted to use scarves for, I don't know, dancing, or whatever. I'm walking along the labyrinth and I come across a black, see-through scarf lying beside the labyrinth and I walk by. On my way back I saw it again so I stooped over, picked it up and threw it on my head without realizing what I was doing and it suddenly felt so familiar. And I thought, "Darn, I got rid of my coverings a long time ago but it still feels familiar." That whole experience showed me that while I may not physically wear the covering there is still a piece of me that has a really hard time not being submissive to men. And I notice that when I am studying and they say, "You need a group, a committee, to review your oral exam," or whatever it is, and I'm petrified of men and I give them all kinds of power. And then this day when I was walking this labyrinth then I realize while I may not wear the covering, I live as if I still wear the covering.

The fifth and final moral of the new identity stories is that the individual self should not be denied. As I have already demonstrated, throughout the disengagement process the "me" and the "we" were in constant interplay. At times the "me" would be privileged (e.g., during the multiple leaving stage) and at other times the "we" would be privileged (e.g., during the being the best stage). Like a blade of grass pushing through the sidewalk, the individual self could not be denied. If it had been, participants surmised they would have paid a high price, sacrificing their happiness, their psychological well-being, and perhaps even their lives (see, for example, the choosing life stage). Mary articulates this sentiment well when she observed,

> I think that being in the closet is one of the most horrible things in the world [for] people. Now, I work with lots of people who chose to stay in the closet and that's entirely up to them. But I think that we need to recognize the cost. And it's a high cost. I think it's a really high cost for us to deny the truth of who we are. Whether it's sexual orientation, whether it's gender, whether it's job, career, anything. I think when we attempt to conform for the sake of belonging the cost is much higher than most of us recognize.

In looking back on her former social group membership, Faith surmised,

> There is just no way that I can still see myself there. There is just no way. I would say that I would have become so depressed that I would have not been able to make it, except that I would never have allowed that. Just who I was, my sense of self was such a determined fighter against it...I would have just become ill, I think. I think I would have become ill. But I actually can't imagine it. I think I would have continued to tamper with things for the rest of my life, I think. I look at my sister . . . She said [to me], "You know I get migraine headaches every two weeks." She said, "Those migraine headaches are the questions. But I would prefer to have migraine headaches than find out answers that I couldn't live with.

Faith concludes, "I didn't want to have migraine headaches. I would rather leave and not become ill."

Participants' stories revealed an interesting irony. Leaving a social group could be interpreted as a selfish act – an act that solely benefits the "me." Yet, once the growth

and development of the individual self was attended to, then ironically participants could become more focused on their social identities and pay more attention to the needs and desires of others. For Mark and Sean this has led to an almost selfless commitment to attend to large global issues, such as world poverty, hunger, and disaster relief. Heather's mother considered Heather's gender transition to be a selfish and irresponsible act; an act that did not take into consideration the feelings of close friends and family. Heather's mother viewed the transition as an act that would bring shame and disgrace to the family. In some ways, Heather agrees. Prior to her transition, "by not living the life I needed to lead to make me a happy camper," she was thinking about others before herself. Not living as a female "was the ultimate selfishness that I was not indulging in." She adds, "When I did [live as female] it balanced it and I am now one of the least selfish people that anybody knows." She concludes that generosity is a "guiding principle for my life. It is a really big piece of who I am today."

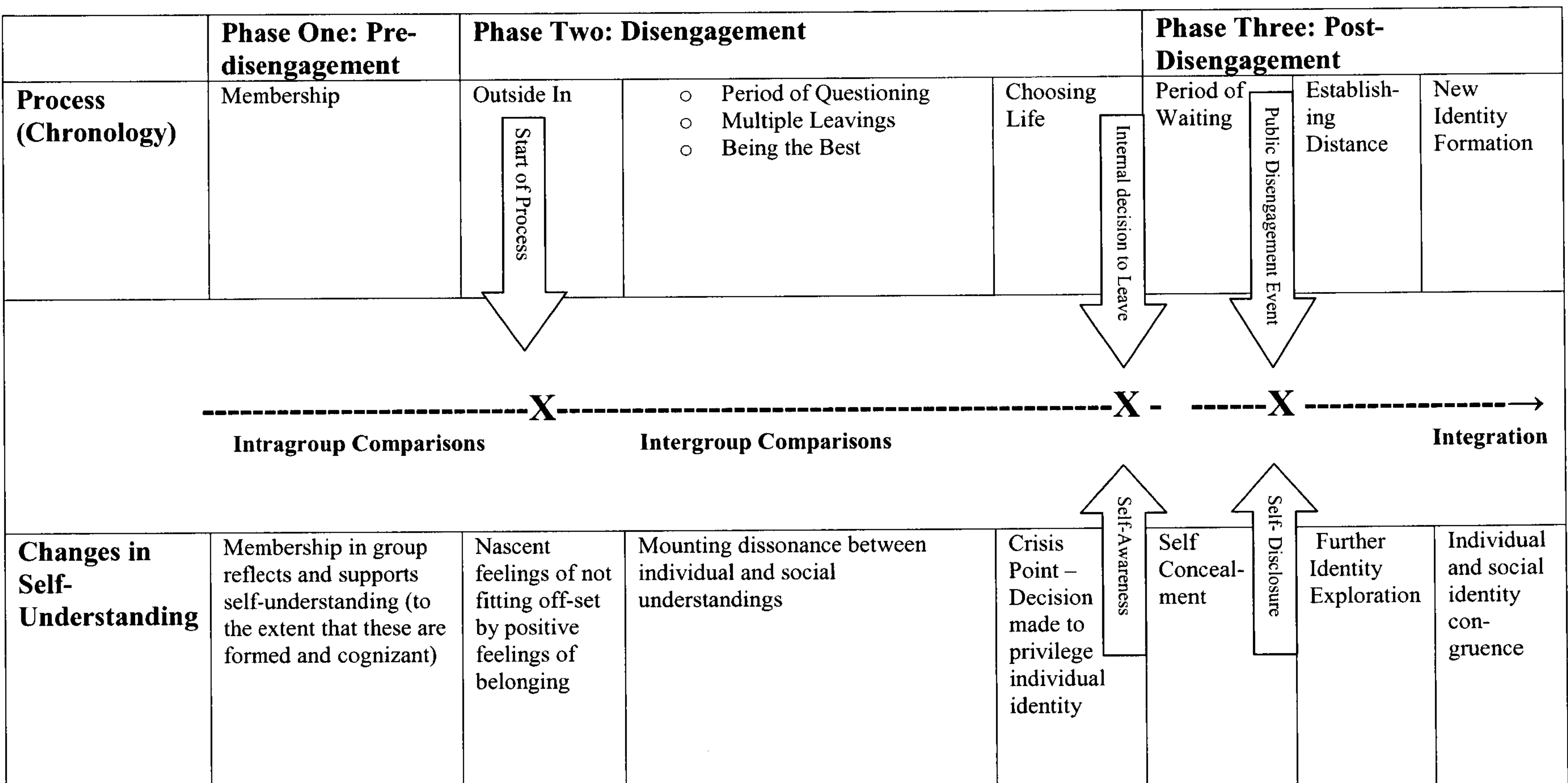
In conclusion, W. B. Yeats said it best when he wrote, "We are happy when for everything inside of us there is a corresponding something outside of us." In leaving their social groups participants were able to achieve individual and social identity congruence. Once this was established the "me" and the "we" could be held in check, without the one diminishing or overshadowing the other. For these participants, the results of achieving such balance and congruence in their lives made the process worthwhile.

Summary

Figure 1 serves as a summary of the phases and stages of the disengagement process and the associated identity implications. The chronology of the process is intended to be illustrative. As I have indicated elsewhere not all participants experienced

the exact same stages in the exact same order. The most variance occurred within the disengagement phase following the "outside in" stage. Hence these stages are listed together. The arrows mark significant events in the disengagement process. As indicated by the first arrow in Phase Two, the disengagement process itself begins with the "outside in" and is accompanied by intragroup comparisons as an additional means of self-awareness and knowledge. The second arrow refers to the individual's internal resolve to leave the social group, which is accompanied by self-awareness. The third arrow refers to the public disengagement event, which is accompanied by self-disclosure. This figure illustrates how the stages in the disengagement process dovetail with an individual's mounting sense of individual and social identity incongruence which culminates in the disengagement event. The process concludes with individual and social identity congruence or "integration."

Figure 1: The Process of Voluntary Social Group Disengagement and Associated Identity Transitions



CHAPTER 10

Practice Implications

This above all:
To thine own self be true,
For it must follow as dost the night the day,
that canst not then be false to any[one].
-- WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, Hamlet

In the previous three chapters (Chapter 7, 8, and 9) I produced evidence in support of the argument that social group disengagement is a definable process with identifiable stages, each complete with distinguishing characteristics, experiences, and meaning. The purpose of these earlier chapters was to explicate the disengagement process and its associated identity implications and to contribute to theoretical understandings of this phenomenon. I will now discuss the implications of these theoretical understandings for direct social work practice. In this chapter I will present findings related to the type of professionals with whom participants engaged, the nature of these involvements, and what participants found helpful. Then I will suggest ways in which knowledge of the disengagement process and of what participants found to be helpful in professional involvements can be useful for social workers. Finally, I will outline some of the unique struggles an individual going through a disengagement process might face as related to each of the stages and offer practice guidelines.

Nature and Type of Formal and Informal Supports

Fourteen study participants (88%) indicated they had received professional help during the course of their disengagement process. For the purposes of this paper, the term "helping professional" refers to an individual who has the education, training, and authority to provide counselling and other forms of psychological, mental, or emotional

treatment and is paid to do so. The helping professionals in this sample included: six "counsellors," five social workers, two Jungian analysts, two psychiatrists, and one psychologist (some saw multiple professionals, thus the numbers reported with regard to professional helping add up to more than 14).

The nature of the help provided by the helping professionals included: in-patient treatment in a hospital (3 participants), in-patient alcohol and drug treatment (1 participant), out-patient crisis counselling (3 participants), group treatment (3 participants), individual counselling (9 participants), marriage counselling (1 participant), and testing and assessment (3 participants). Ten of the fourteen participants received prolonged, in-depth help (i.e., longer than a few sessions) on more than one occasion throughout the disengagement process. Ten participants received multiple types of help, such as in-patient treatment followed by counselling, or testing followed by counselling. The length of professional involvement ranged from several sessions over a number of weeks to ongoing counselling over several years. At least two participants indicated they were in counselling for over ten years.

Of the fourteen participants who received help from professionals, ten also received informal support. The two participants who did not receive professional help did receive informal support, meaning that all sixteen participants received help of one kind or another. I will be using the term informal support to refer to structured help that was received from paraprofessionals. The main types of informal support were support groups and self-help groups. Support groups are comprised of individuals who have all gone through a similar experience. The purpose of these groups is to share with each other, support one another and learn how to cope by learning from each other. Support groups

are often facilitated by understanding and skilled volunteers who are members of the group and have risen to leadership positions. Self-help groups, on the other hand have more of treatment focus. The purpose of self-help groups is to bring about personal change. Leaders are often considered experts due to their own successful management of the problem or issue that is the focus of the group. Two participants attended self help groups for their addictions and eight participants were active in support groups related to their current social identity and/or their identity transition (e.g., LGBT individuals, late deafened adults, women going through a career change, and individuals leaving religious groups). Other forms of informal supports included: internet support groups (IGS), spiritual retreats, educational workshops, healing circles and personal growth seminars.

Participants' Experiences of Professional Help

In the previous three chapters I discussed the phenomenology of the disengagement process and associated shifts in self-understanding. The attention will now shift to the phenomenology of the help participants received along the way. A description and analysis of participants' experiences of formal supports (i.e., from helping professionals) will be followed by a description and analysis of their experiences of the informal supports they received (i.e. self-help and support groups). The headings refer to the specific things participants experienced as helpful. Whenever possible the helping professional will be described using the term the participant used (e.g. "counsellor," "therapist," "analyst," "psychologist" or "social worker"). In all other instances I will use the generic term "helping professional."

Working Through Past Trauma and "Lingering Issues"

For the fourteen participants who received professional help, thirteen indicated that factors related to their social group disengagement were either the main (5/12) or one of the main (8/12) reasons they sought help. For those eight participants who had multiple presenting issues, the other concerns that were addressed included: child sexual abuse (3 participants), domestic violence (1 participant), addictions (1 participant), depression, suicide ideation or suicide attempts (3 participants), and dysfunction in their families of origin (3 participants). (Note - these are not mutually exclusive categories). Most of the participants who entered counselling for issues other than social group disengagement concluded that working through their other issues paved the way for them to consider the suitability of their social group membership and to reach a disengagement decision.

Hannah, Brian and Sean initially entered therapy to address issues of past sexual abuse. As Hannah explained, "I ran into memories that I couldn't cope with so I went into counselling." Brian indicated, "I started counselling for myself around sexual abuse that I had." This was 2 ½ years before Brian left the priesthood. He concluded, "It was actually the counselling that I had that brought me to my final decision to get the hell out of there (the priesthood).

Sean received help from a counsellor after he attempted suicide. In telling the story of his suicide attempt Sean makes the connection between his unresolved painful past and his inability to leave his social group.

> I had come from A [former social group], had a glimpse of B [new community], and then got thrown back into A [former social group] with this new understanding of who I could be or who I was as a person. I had thought by this point that I was strong enough to manage and negotiate my father and the

> community, which I came from and things along those lines. In the fall, when I did go back into my community . . . it was probably the first time I had been back there since my mother had died. It became a very messy, messy, messy situation. It led to a confrontation and it led to floodgates of a whole bunch of things opening and a whole bunch of things which I didn't have the capacity to process or deal with and I attempted to die. So it was a point where everything just fucked... child abuse, all that. A lot of the child abuse issues I didn't even fully realize. I didn't know the extent. I knew I came from a turbulent environment but I didn't know that I was sexually abused. I didn't know a whole bunch of things. Following this confrontation and this whole thing where he, himself, put a lot of things out there, things which I didn't even remember. He, himself, then confronted me and said, "You're the reason I did this to you and you're the reason I did this to your mother." A whole bunch of other horrid things happened and that day I attempted to take my life.

Sean acknowledged that through counselling "I was pushed to deal with a lot of things that I just really didn't know what I was going to do with." He said it was by "talking through who I was and where I came from" that he was able to develop the insights, skills, and supports he needed to successfully disengage from his social group.

Of all the participants, Heather was the most conscious of her need to work through past issues as a means of achieving a successful disengagement. Before she had her sex reassignment surgery Heather went for counselling to help her clear up "lingering issues" that might otherwise impede her disengagement. She indicated,

> People warned that you should be careful not to expect the surgery to solve all your problems. Fair enough. So I made sure that I solved them all before I went. I started seeing a therapist . . . I didn't want to have to be dealing with them at the same time that I was dealing with the physical stuff [sex reassignment surgery] . . . So I spent a lot of time working on clearing up any lingering issues that I had. And so when I went for the surgery . . . I felt in better mental health then I had ever been.

Of the fourteen participants who sought professional help, Laura was the only one who did not identify her disengagement as one of her presenting issues. She indicated, "I have *not* gone for counselling concerning the coming out process [leaving the Witnesses] and I haven't felt the need for it." Yet when she was a Jehovah's Witness she went for

counselling for other reasons. Her daughter was diagnosed with bulimia and had attempted suicide. Her daughter received counselling through the hospital and Laura sought counselling for herself "to learn how to deal with this problem [bulimia] that she [daughter] was facing." When her daughter's treatment was complete, Laura recalled, "I assumed that mine was too and I was saying my good-byes to the counselor who was shaking her head and saying, 'No! We are not finished with you yet.'" Laura continued to go for counselling for another two years to work on issues connected to her "background" and "family dynamics growing up." After her husband's suicide several years later, Laura went for counselling a second time but she indicated she only went "for the period of time that I needed, which wasn't very long."

In her counselling sessions, Laura never attributed her personal problems to her membership in the Jehovah's Witness organization nor did she ever discuss her growing discontent with the organization. She said, "I protected the Witnesses through all that." She would, in fact, tell her counsellor, "They're not the [reason I am] the way I am. My family is the reason, not them.'" Laura admitted, "counselling . . . was always discouraged by the Witnesses so this [seeking counselling] was a first for me."

Perhaps one could argue, in a circuitous way, Laura's counselling was connected to her disengagement process. By seeking help from outside of the organization Laura was placing her and her family's mental health needs above the group's demands and expectations. Her counselling proved to be a critical moment in her disengagement process because it allowed the "outside in" and proved to be one of Laura's first experiences of her personal self eclipsing her social self. She indicated that going for counselling specifically for her social group disengagement was not needed because of

the gains she had made with previous counselling sessions. "I think because I went through these other things with counselling, I understood what counselling was all about and I read self-help books on these various topics."

Discovering "It is not my fault"

As I indicated in previous chapters, a common experience among participants was the feeling that they did not fit into their social groups because there was something inherently wrong with them. Hillary, for example, felt like a "failed heterosexual." Faith felt there was something "wrong" with her. Hannah felt "unusual." José felt like a "foreigner," "a "half-breed," and an "outsider." Mark felt, "like one of the few." Many participants came to therapy with a diminished sense of self and an exaggerated understanding of their role in creating the dissonance that existed or had existed between themselves and their social groups. Participants found it helpful when their experiences were placed within a broader context and they were able to appreciate the multitude of factors that had contributed to the poor fit between themselves and the group. Participants could then stop blaming themselves for things that had been beyond their control.

Sean acknowledged he received wonderful support from many people and although this support was essential, it was not enough. His counsellor's ability to contextualize his painful past and convey to him that he was not responsible was what distinguished her professional support from the support he received from friends and family. She helped him to accept that as a young and vulnerable child he did not deserve the abuse and neglect he received. He was not responsible for the violent behaviour of his father. Likewise he was not responsible for the poverty of his family or the financial

repression of his community. He was the "vulnerable one," a pawn, not a mover, in a destructive system that enveloped his family and the community.

> I think one of the big things that [my counselor] did for me is she told me it's not my fault. I think that's one of the key things that came from that. While the other people supported me [they] never really looked at the issues and stuff that I was dealing with, [my counselor] supported me directly. Confronted the issues I was dealing with and helped me realize that I had such a minimal role or control in any of that and that I was the vulnerable one and that I had very little power and it wasn't my fault. I think that's probably the key difference and that helped push me to a new level as well that I finally probably believed that I wasn't . . . responsible . So while others supported and nurtured and tried to push and help and support me I think she [my counselor] had done all of that and then some. I think she probably gave me a new level of realization or a new lens to look at my experience.

Likewise Beth, who received group counselling at a women's shelter, indicated that the most helpful aspect of therapy was becoming aware that the abuse she received in her marriage was not her fault. It was important to Beth to learn about the different types and patterns of abuse. Discovering that her negative self-perceptions and her sense of being responsible for her abuse were not unique feelings but rather were typical of abused women was an important "first step."

> Beth: I went to a six week group at the Women's Shelter that mainly was an education on abuse, learning the different types of abuse and stuff like that. That was interesting because a lot of the abuse I wasn't even aware of. What's financial abuse? I didn't know what financial abuse was. And they gave me this check list and I had to check off things like, "Did your partner ever do this? Did you ever experience this?" and stuff like that. So I'm checking away... These were all forms of abuse. I had no idea.
> Catherine: What was that like?
> Beth: Sad. Some of it [the abuse] I was so used to that it was really hard to believe that it was abuse because I really thought that's the way life was. So it was like, "Whoa". Basically, I had a hell of a lot of checks under pretty much every category except the sexual abuse category. But financial abuse? Clearly! But what's financial abuse if you don't know. I thought that was the way life was.
> Catherine: So it was helpful to learn the language and learn about the different terms and then use them to help you understand your past situation?
> Beth" It was very helpful. Yeah. That was probably the first step for me to even contemplating that it wasn't me. Because, "What do you mean that's

> abuse? Oh!" That whole lingo was so foreign. I was just completely wrapped up into thinking it was my short fallings. That was abuse? Oh, I thought that was because I just sucked.

Having Pain Acknowledged

Given that many participants internalized their former groups' negative understandings of them and they had an exaggerated sense of their role in creating the dissonance that existed between themselves and their social groups, it stands to reason many did not expect compassion or understanding from helping professionals. Consequently, when helping professionals were able to acknowledge their hurt and suffering it was poignant. It was certainly a crucial moment in the development of the self as the recognition that one had suffered allowed the participant to view himself or herself in more positive and forgiving ways. In Brian's case, his therapist's acknowledgement of his pain allowed him to seriously consider why he was remaining in an occupation that he experienced as continuing to abuse him. For Trevor, acknowledgement of his pain allowed him to see himself as a survivor rather than as a dysfunctional individual.

Brian described his experience as follows:

> The other thing about her [therapist] that made a difference . . . when we did talk a bit about the sexual abuse, she was the first person that ever, ever said to me, around the whole abuse thing, "You've really been hurt." She was the first person that really recognized or said what I wanted, was longing for someone to say to me, which was to recognize that I had been hurt by all of this. Nobody had ever said that.

Brian attributed his therapist's sensitivity to his pain to his own ability to "bond" with her and to trust her. He concluded, "So that was a really [significant experience]. I knew there was a bond there the minute she said that to me."

Trevor's pain was validated by a counselor at a crisis clinic. He described his experience as follows:

> So near the end of the one year [after I left the world of the bikers and organized crime] I was burning out from the lifestyle change from the break up with the girlfriend, the change in income, the loss of friends or so-called friends, everything was completely different in my life. About a year later it really came up to…I went to crisis intervention, and talked to a counselor . . . After I talked to her she said, "God! There are people that have rope burns on their necks and slash marks on their arms from half the stress you went through. They try to kill themselves." To me that was just foreign. They had only seen half the stress [and wanted to take their lives]. I had lived!

The counsellor's comments helped Trevor acknowledge the pain and stress he had lived through and hence concede that his current difficulties were legitimate. He was then able to move away from the negative understanding he had of his present struggles, that is, he was weak and could not cope with life. Instead Trevor was able to see himself as a survivor, someone who was, in fact, doing surprisingly well given his painful past.

Talking with a Professional Who Is Knowledgeable and Respectful of Past and Present Social Group Memberships

Levine (1984) noted that one of the challenges facing individuals who are going through a disengagement process is finding a counselor or therapist who can be both knowledgeable and respectful of their past social group membership. This study suggests that knowledge and respect for one's current social group membership is also extremely important. Every social group has its own unique culture, structure, language, and behavioural guidelines. Participants found it helpful when therapists either knew something about their former and current social groups in advance or took an active interest in learning as the counselling progressed.

It was not considered a requirement that helping professionals possess "insider" knowledge of the former social groups (i.e., the helping professional was a member of the group or had once been a member). In fact this was viewed as a detriment as the counselor might lack objectivity and be personally invested in the participant either

staying or leaving the group. Interestingly, it was considered beneficial if the counselors belonged to the new social group as they could then act as a mentor for the participant and provide a bridge between the former group and the new one. In sum, it was perceived that knowledge of the past social groups helped counselors appreciate what it might have been like to have been a member of the group and the stakes involved in leaving. The professionals' knowledge of the new social group helped them appreciate what it may be like to acculturate into the new group.

Several participants revealed how helpful it was when their counselor understood their former social groups. Sean, for example, considered it advantageous that his counselor was familiar with his geographic community, his family background, and "had a firm understanding of who I was as a person". In fact, the counselor had been a support to him after his mother's death. Years later, after his suicide attempt, Sean recalled, "She was still there for me." Mary found it helpful that her counselor was "strongly Christian" and understood the impact of religious belief on one's life choices and world view. She observed,

> She [the social worker] was Anglican, very strongly Christian, which was really important for me. I could see that her strong faith stuff was different than my Mennonite one but I could hear a lot of what she said because she had that. But it came from a very different point.

Others acknowledged that counselling had been difficult because their counselors lacked the requisite knowledge and respect for their new social groups. Mark and his wife Sherry, for example, did not have a favourable experience when they sought marriage counselling to help them work through their disengagement from their cultural group. Mark and Sherry had lived in Latin America for a period of time and were contemplating a return. They had concerns about raising their children as "bi-cultural" and risking the

intensification of their feelings of not belonging in either Canada or Latin America. Mark and Sherry's attempts to instill in their children sensitivity to the global needs of the poor and to question Western consumerism and individualism were not respected by their marriage counselor.

> Our sense was that she [our counselor] didn't understand where we were at and it actually made things worse in terms of the feeling that we don't belong and we're not connected. She was fairly affluent and I would think that the things that we were talking about as being important, we got the impression she didn't understand why those would be important. So most of what she did we didn't find that helpful.

Likewise Victor's story confirms the importance of therapists having knowledge and respect for one's new social group. Victor sensed that his therapists may have been homophobic and unable to appreciate how coming out as gay might pose some unique challenges. Although Victor concluded therapy eventually helped him work through his denial about being gay, he thought his therapy lasted longer than it needed to and that the process was more painful than it ought to have been because his therapists lacked sufficient knowledge about LGBT communities and the coming out process. Victor noted,

> Therapy - it was helpful. It got me through a process that I needed to get to because of the intensity of denial. The denial probably had more of an impact on me than other things that I've gone to therapy for. So it was a mixed bag. It wasn't pleasant. I can't go back and say I would do it again. I think there were probably far better ways of me getting through that process because the therapist themselves were perhaps not educated enough to do the work. But essentially I believe in therapy to do it. I just don't think the people I had [were helpful].

Although Victor believes it is important to find a therapist with the required knowledge and expertise, he admitted it can be difficult to find someone who fits the bill and is affordable. Perhaps the degree to which this "expert" knowledge was desired and valued by participants is reflected by the fact that of the ten participants who became

helping professional themselves, five have specialized practices working with individuals who are undergoing transitions identical to the ones they went through. In essence, they have become the "experts" they once had or wished they had.

Levine (1984) suggested that a therapist's knowledge and respect for a client's former social group can help the client integrate past social-understandings into their current understandings. Wright (1987) discovered that individuals can feel "ambivalent" about their former groups after they had left them. He viewed this ambivalence as "deriving from the refusal to simplify a complex set of experiences, events, ideas, and emotional attachments" (p. 91). Wright (1987) explains:

> Some elements of membership undoubtedly make lasting and favorable impressions upon defection. Post-involvement evaluation of membership is essentially a shifting process in which favorable events and experiences are separated out from what is later perceived as wrong, immoral, or theologically adrift. As a result, one will find voluntary defectors defending certain aspects of the group while criticizing others. This kind of selectivity and separation of the more valued aspects of one's membership gives an indication of careful reflection on the part of the individual (p. 91).

This type of "careful reflection" requires a therapeutic environment free of bias and negativity. Individuals need to feel free to select the valued aspects of their past social group involvement and disregard other aspects without fearing the judgment of their therapist. This may not be possible when the therapist comes from within the former social group. Brian's experience illustrates this point.

When Brian first decided to go for counselling he was "encouraged to see this priest counsellor." On the surface, it would appear that this "priest counsellor" would have the background knowledge and expertise required. But as Brian recalled,

> I was encouraged to go to this priest counsellor who was an idiot. It was "tow the party line." He wanted me to go into treatment. It was so bizarre. He was a psychologist or something and I told him, "I'm not going back to you anymore." I

> said, "You're not helping me. You're just trying to push me into something I don't want to do."

After several more counselors, Brian started to work with a therapist who was in private practice. Brian described her as "a wonderful counsellor." Below are three quotations referring to this counsellor:

> I saw her for the next three years. . . And this is why I have the greatest admiration for her, she never said to me, "Why are you still a priest?" She never said you should leave the priesthood. Nothing like that.
>
> She was a wonderful counsellor. She never once said to me, "Are you sure you are making the right decision?" Nothing like that. I have the greatest admiration for her today.
>
> She was very positive about everything. She was positive about the decisions I made. And her questions were never questions of, "Why are you doing that?" The questions would be, "So what will that mean?" The decision you may make about this, what will that mean for what you are really moving toward? How do you understand that? It was never judgmental kinds of questions or categorizing you into a certain subsection of something or other. The way that I'd experienced from some of the others [counsellors].

These quotations reveal that a therapist's knowledge and respect of a social group must be used in the service of client self-determination. Brian's "wonderful" counselor was not a priest but along the way she learned about the priesthood. However, she was never personally invested in Brian staying or leaving the priesthood. Rather, she was invested in helping Brian make a decision that was best for him.

The need for this level of objectivity and openness needs to be emphasized. Approximately one third of the participants disengaged from social groups that were insular and held negative views about "outsiders." As "outsiders," therapists must be cautious in revealing their opinions of the past social group as these disclosures might lead to their client to consider them suspect. Several participants in the study were unable to develop or express their own opinions and sense of self within their former social

groups. Therapy offered them an opportunity to begin to understand what it was they wanted. If a therapist then tried to influence the participant by telling them what to do or not do, as Brian's "priest counselor" had done, he or she could unwittingly replicate the negative experiences the participant had in the group.

Gentle Challenging of Existing World Views and Thinking Patterns

Many participants considered it helpful when professionals gently challenged their existing world views, largely remnants of their past social group memberships, and introduced them to alternatives. Some participants had disengaged from groups that had rigid organizational structures and held uncompromising views of the world. Members were considered to be in or out; considered to be either fully accommodating to group norms and expectations or completely failing in this regard. There was no middle ground or opportunities for individuals to select what to believe or how to live. The ecclesiastical polity of several of the religious groups, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and the old order Mennonites, left little "wiggle room" for individual members to act according to personal conscience. This type of black and white, all-or-nothing approach was also evident in some of the nonreligious sample groups, such as the extremist group, one of the occupational groups, and within aspects of the transgendered and deaf communities.

Although the participants who belonged to the above mentioned groups may have developed specific ideas about the world and themselves that were different from those held by their former groups, many had nonetheless internalized the black and white, all-or-nothing approach to the world. Cognitive developmental theorists, such as Piaget (1972), Arlin (1980), and Kitchener and King (1989) argue that thinking patterns that tend towards single solutions, deductive reasoning, and a heavy reliance on authority

figures are typical of "formal operational patterns" and do not represent the highest levels of reasoning. Certainly, there were participants in this study who discovered that their rigid thinking patterns proved to be unworkable in their post-disengagement life and were, in fact, inhibiting their development.

After Hannah left the old order Mennonites, she continued to live as if she had to either accept old order Mennonite beliefs in their entirety or reject everything outright. Through Jungian analysis Hannah became aware that these "basic underlying beliefs were starting to shift." She began to challenge such ideas as the existence of heaven and hell. She had been taught all her life that they existed but through analysis she began to challenge this belief and she gave herself permission to say, "I am not sure." She noted,

> Jungian therapy really encourages one to hang on to the paradoxes. Don't try to fix them, just live with the paradox. And that helped me work through a lot of the stuff from the old church because it was like some things might be true, but [I was allowed to say] "I am not sure yet."

Faith offers a very similar conclusion about the professional help she received. She makes specific reference to her movement from "black and whiteness" to an acceptance of the greys.

> It was seeing that I could hold onto the [former] group, the values of my upbringing, the ones I believed were important and that I could let the rest go. The black and whiteness that is so often a part of these closed communities – there are no grays – I saw that gray was fine. I could sit in the nebulousness of saying, "I don't know, I don't know about Jesus, I don't know," instead of "you have to know or else you will go to hell, or whatever." I don't know whether Jesus died for my sins or what dying for my sins means. I don't know if I believe that and not feeling that I would be struck dead at any moment. [I was] sitting in the limbo of not knowing. I remember reading the book *The Cloud of Unknowing* which is a sort of mystical treatise from the Middle Ages. I remember thinking, yeah that is what I am in – the cloud of unknowing. And it is Ok. That was important.

Rather than appeal to authority for the Truth or rely on absolutist thinking, Hannah and Faith were able to appreciate the complexities and ambiguity of religious belief. This

approach afforded them a broader world view that was also more in line with "postformal thinking" (Pillari, 1998).

For Mary, a broadening world view and a move away from dichotomous thinking was a precursor to her coming out as a lesbian. Her religious upbringing and loyalty to the Mennonite church made it difficult for her to consider homosexuality as acceptable. Mary had internalized the belief that one could not be a "good Mennonite" and also lesbian. Mary could have chosen one identity over the other, but in so doing she would have reinforced the view of her religious social group that these two identities were irreconcilable. Therapy helped Mary resolve this dilemma. Mary noted,

> It was at that point I began to question . . . "Is it true that only Christians are saved?" You know, some of that literal stuff. . . Her [social worker's] son married a Jewish woman and I remember one time her telling me that they were having a Christmas gathering and her son and daughter-in-law were coming and a friend, who was Buddhist. And I looked at her and I said, "And you're all gathering to celebrate Jesus' birth?" But by the time I was even verbalizing that, I had a very different view than I began with, which would have been the view that, literally, you pray and you are blessed or you are not blessed. And there is a whole piece that you have to do faithful living.

Once Mary began to view the world in a less dichotomous fashion she was able to consider that one could be both a "good Mennonite" and a lesbian. In the end she was able to find a way to live, which allowed her to be "faithful" to both her orientation and her religious beliefs.

Heather's story is interesting in that she encountered black and white thinking among the helping professionals who were supposed to help her transition into her "new" social group. Like Hannah, Faith and Mary, Heather found the rigidity obstructive to her development. Prior to 1995, sex reassignment surgery was covered by the Ontario Health Insurance Plan (OHIP). To be deemed eligible Heather had to meet the requirements set

out by the Clark Institute of Psychiatry in Toronto. Heather described these requirements as "antediluvian." At that time, the Clark held very "conservative" and stereotypical understandings of what constituted "appropriate" gender behaviour. Individuals had to accommodate to these understandings or be denied surgery.

One of the requirements was that an individual spend one year "cross living" before they start hormone treatments. Heather had been living as a woman for two years but that was not considered "cross living" or "a valid life test" because she wore jeans and t-shirts and not feminine attire. She was in a relationship with a woman, which was also considered to be a remnant of her masculinity. Lesbianism was not considered acceptable female behaviour. In the quotation below, Heather describes her first group session at the Clark Institute:

> I come into the room and it looks like a casting call for *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. It is a room full of people with more makeup than an Estee Lauder counter and more sequins in one place than I have ever seen in my life, and hope ever to see again. It's three o'clock in the afternoon on a Saturday. Most of the people in the room are wearing what I can only charitably describe as ball gowns. So I come into the room and I'm wearing a t-shirt and jeans, which is my normal mode. And I sat down and I kind of looked around and I thought, "Oh no. This is just not going to be all that helpful."

In the end, Heather was denied sex reassignment surgery by the Clark. When she did have surgery many years later she chose to go outside of Canada. Heather could not live within the rigid definition of what constituted a woman as set out by the Clark. She recalled, "I was a feminist dyke . . .I didn't have anything in common with those drag queens. . .Those people had nothing to teach me about living the life of a woman in this society because they were not living it." Unfortunately, the helping professionals Heather encountered did not help her broaden her world views or encourage her to "see that grays were fine." In fact they tried to narrow her understandings of what it means to be a

woman and force her to comply with their conservative and dichotomous view of gender. The fact that Heather found this approach to be exceedingly unhelpful suggests that she like many of the other participants in the study valued the ability of helping professionals to broaden, not limit, one's perspective.

The Professional's Ways-of-Being

It stands to reason that participants, in trying to discover their own identity and live with authenticity, determined the identity and authenticity of their helping professionals to be of importance. Participants spoke about effective counsellors as: "real," "non-judgemental," "accepting," "nurturing," able to instill "confidence" and "hope," and feeling "comfortable" and "safe" in their presence. These ways-of-being created ideal growing conditions for the participant's emerging self. I will offer a few examples.

Sean indicated his counsellor was "a woman who was almost a friend." He described his work with her as follows:

> It was about a safe place and comfort and nurturing. She was my mother times ten, probably in the nurturing capacity in that she could fulfil what my mom fulfilled, I guess, in some way as a supporter and nurturer but she could also help me process baggage which my mom really couldn't do. So I think that was one of the key things and she really helped me.

He added:

> She was just real. . . I didn't feel that when she came into the room that there was going to be 10 questions and I would have to give her answers to 10 questions or that it was going to be pathologized or clinical. There were times we would just sit. It was a need to feel safe too. That was something that I think I probably felt safe with her as well. I think that was the big thing.

Hillary described her social worker as "unconditionally accepting." She said, "The fact that I [worked with] someone who was so accepting, so unconditionally

accepting, helped a whole lot. I can't explain how much it meant to me." Likewise, Mary spoke about the importance of acceptance and non- judgment.

> I think one of the things that was really helpful, certainly at the beginning anyway was the non-judgmental piece. It was like, "This is your story and your story is legitimate." It was helpful not being told, "Oh that can't be." I know of people who went to therapists and the person said, "I think I am lesbian or I am gay" and the therapist said, "I don't think you are." That is not helpful. (laughter). . . I know I didn't need her judgment. It was so clear to me that I didn't need that. I needed a place where it would be okay to talk.

Several participants sought help when they were in despair. Some were depressed. They did not have the energy or wherewithal to know what they wanted, how to think about their situation, or how to proceed. These participants valued their counsellors' energy and optimism and their ability to instill hope. As Beth explained,

> She [counselor] was such a fire cracker though. Very much into women's rights and she just had this energy about her. And she was one of the first people that started giving me this list of things to do. . . [She] gave me this list and I just had to keep getting through it. And she was great because she had this total energy about her and she had total confidence in everything she was telling you and it was infectious. There wasn't room for "this should work" it was "No, this is what you do and it works." And I need that. I needed that huge confidence. Somebody to put pure blind faith into that she would look out for me.

Beth concluded, "Anything that empowers you or that affirms you . . .people telling you, you can do this . . . Really! It works . . . that confidence you really need to draw on from people because you certainly don't have it yourself."

Attending to Practical Matters

Leaving a social group does not only involve psychological and sociological transitions. For six participants (38%) their social group disengagement coincided with a physical move. Many experienced a burgeoning of "practical" concerns such as negotiating custody of children (three participants), trying to find work (three participants), transitioning into higher education (five participants), and dealing with

financial issues in general (eight participants). At the point of disengagement participants were experiencing flux in many dimensions of their lives. The practical support offered by helping professionals at this juncture was greatly appreciated.

When Beth left her social group she was at a loss. Her leaving was "rather abrupt."

> It involved taking my children and essentially walking away from everything we had, the house, my friends, my possessions and just leaving with the kids. We found ourselves at [women's shelter] with just a knapsack of clothes and five bucks and that was it. And no plans.

Counsellors at the shelter connected her to legal aid, helped her secure custody of her children, receive financial assistance, and connect to a host of social services. Beth recalled,

> They just kept reassuring me, "You're OK. You're going to win this. You're OK. We'll help you get a house. We'll help you get money to feed your kids. We'll help you find employment."

Beth's most immediate concern was keeping her children and herself safe. She noted with their help "I was safe. I was okay. I could go to sleep. My kids would be there in the morning." Beth's circumstances were such that she "had to put blind faith in these people [her counselors] and their agencies." She marveled "I was completely amazed by the services they had and the stuff they were willing to do to help." She admitted that it seemed like a "hopeless situation at the time" but "it worked."

Most times the concrete help the counselor provided was in the form of "service negotiation," meaning they informed participants about, or made referrals to, the services that could address the participants' practical needs. The services/referrals that were considered the most helpful included: legal and financial services, psychological testing, career counselling, information about educational options, and information pertaining to

support groups. Counsellors also helped by devoting time in sessions to discussing practical matters and initiating problem-solving processes.

Dealing with Negative Emotions Related to Past Membership and the Disengagement Process

As indicated in Chapter 9, one of the indicators of a good disengagement outcome was the successful working through of negative emotions, such as anger, guilt, and fear, that were related to the past group affiliations and the disengagement process. Helping professions were able to ease some of these negative emotions. Faith, for example, found it helpful when she was able "to step outside of guilt . . . the most pervasive element of my membership in that group." Sean, Trevor, Beth, and Mary each made reference to helping professionals making them feel safe. Working through fear and anxiety were explicit goals of Trevor's therapy. Depression and low self-esteem were other negative remnants of group membership that were addressed in therapy.

In several instances the therapeutic technique known as reframing was used to successfully enhance low self-esteem. I spoke earlier about how a counselor at a crisis clinic helped Trevor reframe his anxiety and stress as survival. Faith offers another example of how a helping professional, in this case a minister, helped her reframe her experiences of feeling different and not fitting into her social group. Given that the minister was an "insider" of the "highest authority," his reframe proved to be especially significant because ironically it gave Faith permission to disengage.

> I explained what was going on for me. He [CRC minister] gave me an analogy that was so healing for me. He said, "Imagine there is a flower bed with a thousand tulips in it and a rose suddenly grows up in the middle of that tulip bed. The rose looks at herself and goes, 'Oh my God! I have little thorns. I am red instead of yellow. I am so ugly because I am all fluffy instead of (pause).'" But he said, "A rose is a beautiful flower. A rose is as much a flower as any other, as a tulip." He said, "You are a rose growing up in a tulip bed." That gave me another

> level of permission to leave – the recognition that he saw me as different, as I had seen myself for so many years and that it was ok to be different. Because he was the highest authority in that group, for him to give me the blessing to say, "You are a beautiful rose in a tulip bed," was huge.

Grief and loss were negative feelings that were more connected to the disengagement process than group membership *per se*. I have documented these losses in Chapter 9. However I offer this quotation as an example of the depth and intensity of these losses and the challenges they posed for participants who wanted to get on with their lives. Heather offered the following:

> I was always aware that [as a male] I was playing a role. I just knew that this was the role, or at least I was fairly certain that this was the role that life wanted me to play. It was clear that this was the role my family wanted me to play. It was clear that (pause) when I did tell my family [that I was transitioning to female] they stopped speaking to me. My step father, literally, has not communicated a single word to me in any medium in 12 years. My mother and sister? I have not spoken to in those 12 years. I have exchanged e-mails with my sister and mother, but that's it. They live in [a neighbouring city], it's not like we're miles apart or anything. . .My mother wrote me a letter about three months after I had told her that I was making this choice [to live as a female] she wrote me a letter and said "It would have been easier for me if you had died". . . You don't recover from something like that. I mean it's not like I will ever forget that she said that it would have been easier for her for me to have been dead than happy.

Even though, as Heather suggests some losses are irrecoverable, helping professionals were able to mitigate the pain. Returning to an earlier point, it was considered helpful when professionals acknowledged the pain as this acknowledgement allowed participants to feel their reaction was legitimate and not pathological. As Mark explained, it is important to "Name it," to have a counselor say, "You are going through something."

Two feelings associated with grief and loss were loneliness and emptiness. It was also considered helpful when professionals could address these feelings. One way counsellors helped was by encouraging participants to keep busy, either by way of paid

employment, volunteer work, education, or becoming involved with self-help or support groups. These activities eased the ache produced by the losses while simultaneously creating opportunities for self-discovery. Many participants also indicated that they found these activities to be enjoyable, preventing them from dwelling excessively on their pain and sadness.

Helping with the Processes of Identity Formation and Transformation

The literature is clear that individuals leaving social groups need to resolve identity related issues if they are to achieve a good disengagement outcome (Ebaugh, 1988; Jacobs, 1989, Wright, 1987). Several people in the study began counselling with the expressed purpose of "finding" themselves and concluded the professional involvements helped them achieve a new understanding of self. As I intonated in the previous chapter, there were identity related milestones associated with a good outcome. These included: an understanding of self that was differentiated from one's past social group membership, congruency between one's current and former selves, congruency between one's individual and social identities and learning to love one's self. The question I will now attempt to answer is how did professionals help participants achieve these positive identity related outcomes?

Workers' attitudes of non-judgment and acceptance were considered vital for identity development. It was important that helping professionals were able to "see" and validate aspects of the participant's being, especially when these aspects were (or had been) denied or devalued by their social groups. The first time Hillary ever acknowledged to anyone that she was a lesbian was in a telephone conversation with a social worker. The social worker's exuberant acceptance of Hillary's sexual orientation gave Hillary

permission to accept herself.

> I picked up the phone and called a therapist in the area. I said, "I am a lesbian." Her response was to laugh really hard and say, "Congratulations!" I felt this huge relief sweep over me. I had said it. I feel a tingle now even when I think about it. It was like taking the blinkers off. The fact that I called someone who was so accepting, so unconditionally accepting, helped a whole lot. I can't explain how much it meant to me.

Faith also spoke about how a therapist helped her to love and accept herself. The therapist creatively used Faith's dislike for cats as a metaphor for her self-loathing.

> I was telling my therapist once, quite close to the beginning of my therapy, that I hated cats, that I was terrified of them. She said, "I would like you to write down all the things you hate about cats." I wrote down: they never listen, they are independent, and they go their own way. I started writing things down like that. Then she said, "Now I would like you to write a list about all the things you dislike about yourself. I started writing down the exact same words. She said, "The day you come to love yourself you will love cats." And you will notice that I now have a cat. I hated, for a long time, that place in me that was so independent because it just got me into trouble and then people wouldn't love me. Then I came to a place of just loving myself. I really like myself. I think I am just a fine person. . . I like the characteristics and qualities that make me different.

It might have proved too raw and unsettling if Faith had been asked to be explicit about the things she disliked about herself. It probably felt safer to have these feelings projected onto cats. The metaphor allowed Faith to appreciate that these characteristics were, in fact, not negative. In learning to love cats, Faith learned to love herself.

Mark found it discouraging when shifts in his cultural understanding were minimized or denied. Unfortunately, Mark did not have a counsellor who was accepting and non-judgemental. He now works with individuals who, after living and working in impoverished countries abroad, are having trouble re-entering their "own" culture. His negative experiences with counselling led him to do things differently now that he is the helping professional. His approach is to,

> Give them space to talk . . .Name [for them] that what they're going through is

> that they've been changed by stepping out of their culture and what they're doing is they're trying to integrate who they are now into their own culture which doesn't look the same to them. And they're not the same person. They look the same. They talk the same and so the people around them go [what's the deal]? It's a difficult culture shock. I see it as similar to when I lived in the U.S. I talked like the people there and I looked like the people there and to that culture I didn't seem like I was "other" but I felt like "other." So I would say, "Name it." When someone comes back from an experience like that they are "other," even though this culture doesn't recognise them as "other".

Several participants found therapy helpful because it gave them time and opportunity to reflect on who they were and who they were becoming. In the rush and grind of daily living it can be hard to find time for epistemological inquiry. As Mark noted, "With all that we were committed too, especially having kids, we were getting too busy to have time for each other and time to reflect and it [counselling] gave us time to reflect."

Seigel (2005) contends that one of the ways we know our self is through reflection. He notes that a sense of self can ensue from our ability to put "ourselves at a distance from our own being so as to examine, judge, sometimes regulate, or revise it" (p.6). It was considered helpful when professionals could create a safe place for epistemological reflection and self-exploration. Mary argued that the opportunity to do this type of reflection "saved my life."

> That social worker saw me and I did some therapy with her which probably saved my life at that point in time. Not that I was consciously suicidal or anything but things were not good. And I think that was really the beginning of my taking time out to look at what was going on. Who am I? Where am I? Why am I doing this? . . . I think that was probably the first time that I ever sat down and looked at the expectations that I was trying to live up to. . . I started to look at myself. Who I was and what I was doing and what did I want. What were my values, and so on and so forth.

Beth, who is still uncertain about who she is and what she plans to do with her life, found it helpful when counselors encouraged her to try new things. The more things

Beth became exposed to, the more she became aware of the options available on the identity smorgasbord. Beth indicated,

> [Through counselling] I had the opportunity to explore new things which is really neat. Because I'm in a huge exploration phase right now because I have no clue what I want to do with myself. Anything that gives you an opportunity to explore something new, I think is fantastic. . . They [counselors at transitional housing] go, "Come on! Come on! Show up for this!" And it's really great because you need that prodding to come out of your shell and explore.

The final way that professionals helped participants address identity-related issues was to encourage them to join a group or create a network of people who could support their new self-understandings or encourage their ongoing development. These new relationships also helped balance the losses associated with disengagement. Mary describes a strategy she currently uses with clients who are coming out as gay or lesbian.

> What I do with clients now is say to them, "Name five people you can talk to about this." Most of them can't initially, about whatever it is, because it is not safe. It doesn't matter if you are talking about survivor issues or about changing identity . . . initially it starts as a sole, a very individual and alone recognition. I believe until you find somebody you can share it with it is almost impossible to make social change. So I push people. I say "five people." They might start with one or two and then they build until they have a list.

Mark found it difficult to maintain his change in cultural identity once he returned to Canada because he was "challenged in a negative way to integrate" back into his former group. However, he found it helpful to be with "like-minded people" who could challenge him in a positive way. He valued "spaces" where he could say, "This is what I am trying" and have others respond with, "Great! How is that going?" He found it was important to have a community where he didn't have to "fight" to maintain the changes he valued.

"Communities of like-minded people" such as Mark refers to, are technically informal rather than formal supports. Yet participants found it beneficial when their

professional helpers worked alongside informal types of group support. This type of collaboration is consistent with a practice in narrative therapy known as "recruiting an audience" (White & Epstein, 1990, p. 114). This technique is based on the premise that the self is socially constructed and it would be difficult if not impossible to resolve social identity issues outside of a social context. It is implied that an individual's new understandings of self would need to be made public if they were to be sustained. Helping professionals can help their clients "recruit" individuals who serve as this audience that will bear witness to and support the new understandings of self.

Participants' Experiences of Informal Supports

The importance of informal supports is underscored by the fact that twelve of the sixteen participants in the study (75%) attended at least one type of self-help or support group. At least two participants attended three groups or more throughout the course of their disengagement and at least seven participants assumed leadership positions within these groups.

These groups were considered beneficial for several reasons. First, as I have already indicated these groups helped participants build bridges to the outside world and develop new relationships. As Hillary explained it can be "difficult to connect" with people when you are "closeted". She added, support groups were "a way for people to identify, to find, and to meet each other at different levels." Hillary found her connections with a "LGBT support group" to be quite beneficial.

> I had a lot of positive connections. That was good. I wasn't coming out on my own, I felt. There was quite a diverse group of lesbians that were there. I wanted friendship. I didn't find that I bonded strongly with a lot of them but I felt I could...there were a lot of friendships, not deep friendships; more like acquaintances than pals, but that was really good that I could have that. That was comforting and it did help.

Second, support groups helped participants join with others in coping with the unique challenges associated with their common leaving experience. For example, as Chris observed, there can be many unique “process difficulties” associated with transitioning from one gender to another. A support group can provide a safe place to explore ways of presenting your “new’ gender and discovering how you might wish to present yourself. Doing this type of exploration in the “outside world” may be impossible or dangerous. As Chris explained,

> I remember people who . . . would have been called "butch" women and transitioning [to men] for them didn't seem as much of a move or a difficulty in terms of the clothing stuff and the hairstyle stuff as it was for men, transitioning to women, where some of the processes are more difficult - the electrolysis, the tracheal shaving, the hair wigs, the dressing. . . I think that one of the things about the group is that it's a place where you can talk about that. Is it difficult to come out or to go out? Are you living a double life? . . . And the group helps with that because if people don't have a space where they can feel comfortable and socially be out then that's a space for it. And then the other is sort of informal referrals and information. Which doctor does surgeries? What is the approximate cost? What's the waiting list like? How long did it take to heal? Is anybody going over here? Where do we need to do advocacy?

Third, participants found support groups helpful because they afforded them opportunities to help others. It felt good to know that their experiences and the lessons they learned along the way could be of use to someone else. As Claire explained,

> I could see so many other people [in the group] struggling but I had never felt that I was at the level that they were at. Like, I felt so sorry for some of them because I remember feeling that my transition out was different than theirs . . . I think that that helped. It was good to know there was so many. But I think what I needed was to help others. And I think that's the part that helped me the most was to be able to help others or to talk to them or help [co-leader] out.

This ability to help others had positive identity implications. Over half of the participants identified as helpers. The ability to help rather than be helped was a boost to participants’ self-esteem and helped them find meaning and purpose in their painful pasts. They saw

themselves as mentors who possessed expert knowledge that could be of use to other group members. Claire explained,

> I think it's important just to tell them that they are not alone. They'll get through. The worst part was trying to make that decision to leave. I think that's your worst part. But that's true in anything. It's trying to figure out what decision you are supposed to be making, which way you are supposed to go. Once you make the decision, it's like a load lifted. It may not be the right one, but you'll go that route.

The Disengagement Process and Implications for Social Work Practice

Both Ebaugh (1988) and Levine (1984) discovered a positive correlation between an individual's awareness of the disengagement process and the likelihood of a positive outcome. For those leaving social groups, knowledge of the process can help decrease feelings of being isolated and alone. Knowing that others have gone through a similar process can be comforting and normalizing. The ability to label experiences as a social phenomenon affecting many people can provide necessary context and affirmation. Knowledge of the specific stages and their progression can create optimism as the leaver realizes each stage will not last forever.

Knowledge of the process can also be of benefit to social workers as they help individuals negotiate each of the stages and the associated challenges. The results of this study indicate that an individual can seek help from a professional at any stage throughout the disengagement process. Yet, what is required of the social worker and the specific issues that need to be addressed vary according to the stage. The purpose of this section is to offer some direct practice guidelines for social workers specific to each stage in the disengagement process. These guidelines are based on participants' experiences of the disengagement process (Chapters 7, 8, and 9) and their perceptions of what was

helpful (see above). The guidelines incorporate what was said directly and what could be extrapolated with respect to social work practice.

Perhaps it also bears repeating that although each stage will be discussed, it is to be understood that not all individuals go through each stage nor do they go through the stages in the same sequence. A social worker's knowledge of the disengagement process will not be perceived as helpful if it is used to rigidly impose an order to an individual's experience. Instead the value lies in the social worker's ability to use his or her knowledge to identify, understand, and contextualize a "leaver's" experiences, address associated issues and help him or her prepare for the challenges that lie ahead. Also some of the guidelines may be applicable to more than one stage but to avoid redundancy I have placed the guideline within the stage where it is most applicable. Finally, social workers' ways-of-being, including acceptance, non-judgmental attitude, support of client self-determination, knowledge and respect for the social groups in question, and ability to create safety, transcend the categories and are relevant to all stages.

Phase One: Pre-disengagement

During this stage individuals could seek the services of a social worker for a variety of reasons, most of which would be seemingly unrelated to disengagement. At this point membership in the group would reflect and support the individual's self-understandings. Some might feel bewildered about their memberships and have an emerging feeling that they don't fit. Yet, for the most part these feelings would be internalized, meaning, participants would attribute their poor fit to an inherent weakness or flaw on their part. Individuals may seek help for feelings of low self-worth arising

from intragroup comparisons or to work through trauma and "lingering issues" that, once addressed, may allow them to consider the suitability of their social group membership.

Social workers can help individuals identify their nascent feelings of "not fitting" or of being "different" and begin to tease out the cause or source of these feelings. If the individual has feelings of low self-worth derived from viewing themselves through the lens of their social groups, social workers can provide the client with a new lens or mirror through which to view him or herself. At this stage social workers need to actively learn about the social group and convey an open and unbiased view about membership. As an "outsider," social workers might wish to be as non-directive as possible so as to encourage individuals to discover for themselves the significance of what they are experiencing and to decrease the chance of individuals feeling the need to pit the social worker against the group. A non-directive approach can also increase clients' sense of personal agency and allow them greater control over the timing and pace of their treatment (and also of the disengagement process). These two ingredients, client autonomy and self-determination, will also be foundational for the future task of identity development.

At this stage, social workers must be deliberate in their response to a client's "cuing behaviour." According to Ebaugh (1988) when individuals are contemplating social group disengagement they consciously or unconsciously send out signals that let others know they are dissatisfied. How a social worker, or for that matter anyone, responds to these signals or "cues" can determine if and when the disengagement will occur. Social workers need to be aware of these "cues" and respond to them in an open,

supportive and non-punitive manner that encourages client self -reflection and self-determination.

Phase Two: Disengagement Phase

Outside In. Social workers can bring "the outside in" and thus help to initiate the onset of the disengagement phase. As Ebaugh (1988) explains, social workers "can help the individual to become aware of options and to evaluate these options in the light of their personal needs, values, and interests" (p. 208). As the individual's self-understandings are beginning to become increasingly based on intergroup comparisons, a social worker needs to appreciate that one such comparison may be between the membership group and the "outside world" as mediated by the social worker. A social worker can be helpful by facilitating additional intergroup comparisons by encouraging individuals to increase their contacts with the outside world through education, "outside" friendships, and connections to other services and supports. These connections can become the "bridges" that will later ease the individual's adjustment to life post-disengagement.

Intergroup comparisons can produce a variety of feelings ranging from validation and discovery to shame and embarrassment. The social worker should not make assumptions about what the feeling states of the individual might be or should be. Instead, the worker should cautiously probe the client's feelings and adjust his or her responses accordingly. It will be important to have the individual's consider the meaning of their feeling states with respect to his or her understanding of self as a member of the social group. For example, when Faith began to see her social group through her boyfriend's eyes, she was embarrassed by the group's conservatism and insular nature.

These feelings of shame could have been explored. Why was she ashamed of her group? Was she likewise ashamed of her membership in the group? Did she feel that the qualities she was ashamed of, such as the conservatism, were descriptors of herself? How did she personally fit within the conservative nature of the group? This line of questioning can help an individual begin to delineate between his or her individual and group-based self-understandings and assess the congruency between the two.

As previously mentioned not everyone is able to make use of outside information when it is first received. Access to outside knowledge needs to dovetail with an individual's psychological and social development if it is to be of value. A social worker may be of service by helping individuals develop to the extent that they can receive and critically evaluate the outside information.

Initial Questions and Doubts. During this stage social workers can be the most helpful by providing a safe place where questions can be asked and doubts expressed. It will be important for the social worker to view the questions as avenues for client self-discovery. If the individual gets the sense that the social worker is trying to censor questions and doubts, negative feelings about the self, such as "I am wrong," or "I am bad," may result. This research showed that the reaction of others during this stage can set the course of the disengagement process. Hence, social worker must validate the questions without trying to answer them and acknowledge the doubts without trying to confirm them. Remaining supportive, objective and non-directive will be essential if the individual is to gain a sense of agency and self-direction. Perhaps the best approach would be for the social worker to respond to questions and doubts by joining with the client in mutual processes of group examination and client self-exploration. In this way

the social worker can help the individual broaden the "range of areas and issues that come under scrutiny and reevaluation" (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 85) and encourage the client to consider why it is he or she is feeling a lack of fit in their social group. The social worker can also continue to make the individual aware of identity options and alternate social group memberships as a way of "providing some relief from feeling trapped" (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 85).

Multiple Leavings. During this stage individuals can feel they are leading a "double life" or "living a lie". These feelings can alert a social worker to the possibility of a poor fit between the individual and his or her group. A potential task of social worker intervention during this stage would be to identify the source or cause of these feelings and look at ways to ease this dissonance. A worker could begin by encouraging the individual to consider their social group as multifaceted and consisting of multiple affiliations. By way of careful and precise questioning the social worker can help the individual identify the specific aspects of the social group (or other social groups) that are the most problematic for them and creating the greatest dissonance. This may be a long process as the source of dissonance may be unconscious and the individual highly defended. Looking at the multifaceted nature of social groups can challenge absolutist thinking, such as one being either in or out of the group, and likewise encourage higher level thinking processes.

Once the problematic aspects have been identified, the individual should itemize which ones he or she wishes to "prune' or "remove." It will be important to consider "pruning" and "removing barriers" as learning experiences. Social workers should help individual evaluate their actions and the consequences so as to help them prepare for

complete disengagement from the social group, if it comes to that. Future sessions could then focus on "trouble shooting." For example, if it was discovered in the pruning process that unresolved family matters complicated the process, these matters could become the focus of future sessions with the hope that once resolved, the individual will be better equipped to make more momentous changes in the future.

Social workers need to be aware that multiple leavings are by-in-large a positive coping strategy. Members learn to control the pace of their disengagement and mitigate the losses incurred by protracting them across several leavings. If individuals come into therapy wishing to leave a social group outright, a social worker may suggest a multiple leaving strategy as an initial step. If individuals follow this suggestion they may discover that their rash decision to completely disengage was premature and in the meantime they have bought themselves time to plan a more deliberate leaving, one that may hold greater potential for success.

Being the Best. If a social worker had a prior relationship with the client considering disengagement he or she may now find it difficult to understand why the client is doing an about face and recommitting to the group. Workers may find it hard to continue with a non-directive approach and instead may be tempted to directly question the client's actions. Knowledge of the disengagement process may curb this temptation.

Many participants in this study started therapy during this stage. They were largely unaware of why they were committing to their group with such intention. Instead, their identified problems included such things as depression, headaches, emotional break-down, and feelings of inadequacy, failure and exhaustion. The best approach for a social worker involved at this juncture may be to address the presenting problems with the hope

that with time, patience, and particular attention paid to the client's emotional states and self-understandings, the source of the presenting problems will surface.

It may prove fruitful if social workers pursue a line of questioning that helps the individual consider the impact of his or her "being the best." What response was the individual hoping to elicit from the group? Was it admiration, respect, or belonging? Have they received the response they hoped for? How have they felt about their efforts? Are they left feeling empty, sad, confused, validated? What has been the result? Are they exhausted, depressed, physically ill? This line of questioning may allow the individual to consider the personal costs associated with a recommitment to the group.

Choosing Life. During this stage individuals are feeling desperate and their lives may be in jeopardy. A social worker who becomes involved at this point may be required to offer crisis counselling. The social worker will need to assess risk and if individuals are a danger to themselves or others, or are in danger themselves, safety will become the primary focus of treatment. It will also be important to assess the safety of family and friends. Are children at risk for being harmed? Are they at risk for being abducted? Is custody an issue? It may be necessary for the social worker to accompany the individual to a women's shelter, crisis clinic, psychiatric hospital, or detox center. The individual may need help with practical matters such as acquiring food, shelter, legal and financial services, and other necessities. The individual may be in shock and focusing on practical matters and a social worker's use of concrete interventions might be best. The social worker will need to adopt a more directive approach until such time as the client is able to reflect on events and proceed to the next stage in the process.

Phase Three: Post-Disengagement

Period of Waiting. During the period of waiting, the main task of the post-disengagement phase, the creation of a new identity, begins. During this stage social workers can help individuals get to know and accept themselves and gradually prepare for a public disclosure of this new self. The focus of therapy should be to provide a safe place for the individual to do some identity exploration and experiment with new self-understandings. A social worker may encourage an individual to experiment with different ways of dressing and behaving. Loneliness may be a common experience at this stage and thus building friendships outside of the group may provide welcome social connections as well as aid in identity development.

Individuals leaving a social group can feel unhappy about the aspects of themselves that have produced such discontentment within their former groups. Social workers can help by reframing these "negative" aspects such as Faith's counselor did when he called her a rose in a flower bed full of tulips. They can also help by educating individuals about the disengagement process and to help them be deliberate in planning an exiting strategy. Even when individuals lose control over their disengagement and are "outed," they need to be encouraged to take as much control as possible over the process.

Counselling may take a very practical turn during this stage. Resolving past issues via insight is now a background concern with problem-solving, system negotiation, and reducing side bets moving into the foreground. "Building bridges" to the outside world is important at this stage and individual counselling should be augmented by affiliations with support groups, self-help groups, or new social groups. It will be important for social workers to convey patience and hope during this stage. Individuals need to be

encouraged to sit with uncertainty for awhile and not feel rushed into making hasty identity choices.

Establishing Distance. By this stage individuals will have publicly left their social group and may need help coping with the emotional aftermath. Social workers need to encourage clients to initiate physical and emotional distance between themselves and their former social groups. Establishing distance can be introduced as an effective pain management strategy. Anger and other negative emotions can be used constructively to maintain the boundaries necessary for further identity development.

Social workers can be the most helpful by monitoring the length and timing of this stage. Maintaining distance will help the individual demarcate the old self from the new. However, if the period of distance lasts too long, the individual's development may in fact be impeded as he or she is prevented from achieving historical congruity. The individual will need to decrease distance if he or she is to select and claim the valued aspects of former social group memberships. A social worker can help by monitoring ego strength and as it increases encourage the individual to incrementally decrease the distance between themselves and the group. It may be important to have a few trial runs. The individual could initiate contact with the group and if they are able to maintain their new sense of self and not regress, they can initiate closer or more frequent contact.

Establishing a New Identity. As I have mentioned earlier, the "new" identity that participants achieved was in some instances a return to earlier self-understandings. Several participants, such as Victor, Brian, Laura, and José, understood their earlier selves to have been their authentic self. In these instances, social workers can be helpful by encouraging individuals to recall and reclaim past understandings of self that were lost

along the way. To accomplish this end, social workers can ask individuals pointed questions related to their childhood understandings of self and their past hopes and dreams. "What happened to that earlier self?" "How was it denied, repressed, or dismissed?" "How can we find him or her again?" Social workers may encourage the individual to speak to others who knew him or her as a child to obtain richer and diverse recollections. It may be helpful to have clients bring photo albums, journals, and memorabilia into sessions to help jog their memory.

In other cases, the "new' identity was the result of a rapid growth spurt that occurred after specific barriers that had once prohibited growth were removed. In these instances social workers can help by working with the individual to identity and remove these barriers. Several participants spoke about how their religious, ideological or cultural beliefs were barriers to growth. Others spoke about how their attachments to loved ones kept them stuck developmentally. Multiple leavings and social group disengagement are two examples of strategies that help to remove barriers to growth. Isolation can inhibit growth and allowing the "outside in" can also be a useful strategy.

In still other cases, the "new" identity was considered to be present within the individual but as yet "undiscovered." Hannah, for example, spoke about her development as "the struggle of figuring out who I am." Her statements suggest that her authentic self was there all along and her task, and that of the social worker, would be to figure out the self like one might figure out a puzzle or a complicated math problem. Brian, on the other hand, spoke about the process as "slowly getting introduced to this other side of me that started coming out." He also understood the "new self" as being contained within the old but for him the task was to become introduced and acquainted with this stranger from

within. With clients like Hannah or Brian, the social work role would be to engage them in a process of self-discovery. The social worker could encourage new friendships, new social group affiliations, self-help or support group memberships, and educational and employment opportunities as means to expose these latent aspects of the self.

In the above three instances, the focus of the social work intervention would be the same: encourage the individual to return to an earlier stage of development when the self seemed to have been progressing well and then graft one's current growth to that earlier developmental site. This strategy would not be effective with individuals who do not have an earlier sense of self to return to either because they never had a stable sense of self or their sense of self was so severely stunted or malformed that there were insufficient remnants to which to graft future growth. In these instances social group memberships served as exoskeletons and once the individual disengaged from the group they crumpled because they lacked internal stability. Trevor serves as an example. He explained,

> When I was in that world [of the bikers and organized crime] I could escape that isolation of not having a self. It was almost like a despair. I didn't even have a clue about what I was going to do, what I wanted to do, what I liked, what I didn't like.

Individuals such as Trevor pose some unique challenges. How can a social worker help someone create an identity? I will offer two ideas that stem from the data and the theoretical underpinnings of this study. First, a social worker can utilize a strategy known as "environmental manipulation" (Johnson, McClelland, & Austin, 2000, p. 349). This strategy refers to social work actions that change an individual's environment, specifically the three elements of space, time, and relationships, as a means of bringing about a change in behaviour. Trevor actually spoke of such a strategy being used in the

drug treatment programs he attended. He recalled, "People, Places and Things – Everything had to go. Where I did drugs, who I did drugs with, and the things I did drugs with, the things I had to do, whatever, everything had to go."

I would suggest that social workers could adapt this strategy and instead of manipulating an environment to bring about behavioural change they could help the client create an environment that would bring about a stable understanding of self. Erikson (1968) spoke about trust being the basis for human development and growth occurring when psychological, social, and biological factors converged. Social workers could focus on the same three elements of space, time and relationship to help the client create the ideal growing conditions for the self. By creating safety, meeting over an extended period of time, establishing trust, building an authentic relationship and providing accurate and ongoing reflection for the client, the self will grow.

Second, a social worker can make use of narratives as a way to create the self. As I indicated in Chapter 4, there exists a revelatory and constructive relationship between stories and the self. As Riessman (1993) suggests, "individuals become the autobiographical narratives by which they tell about their lives" (p. 2). Freedman and Combs (1996) conclude,

> "Selves" are socially constructed through language and maintained in narrative. We think of a self not as a thing inside an individual, but as a process or activity that occurs between people.

Social workers can use narrative therapy techniques within the context of the helping relationship to facilitate the social construction of the self. They can encourage the client to talk about themselves and create a story that clarifies their own understanding of self.

Summary

Social work, with its dual focus on the person and the environment is a profession ideally suited to helping individuals who are disengaging from social groups. Social workers are taught a wide range of theories and practice paradigms, which enable them to understand the complex relationship between individuals and their environments, and which allow them to focus equally on individual well-being and social change. This theoretical diversity is essential when working with individuals who are either contemplating or going through a disengagement process. In these instances, social workers will need to draw from developmental theories, narrative theories, and social identity theories, to name a few. They will need to blend modernist notions of identity development with post-modern notions of the social construction of the self. Dual focus on personal and social identity development demands an approach that integrates one-to-one professional involvements with mezzo involvements (e.g., self-help and support groups) and the creative co-existence of formal with informal types of helping. Social workers can traverse these divergent landscapes with greater ease than some helping professionals who are more firmly wedded to a particular theory or preference for working with either the individual or group.

CHAPTER 11

Conclusions

We allow our ignorance to prevail upon us and make us think we can survive alone, alone in patches, alone in groups, alone in races, even alone in genders.
- -MAYA ANGELOU, The New York Times

I began this research with three overarching questions related to social group disengagement. I wondered if there was a definitive process associated with disengagement and if so, how it was experienced. I wondered how this disengagement process was connected to identity development and what could be learned about the relationship between individual and social identity. Lastly, I wondered what the implications would be for direct social work practice. This chapter will summarize the key findings in each of these three areas. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of possible directions for future research.

Process

The findings of this study are consistent with earlier studies (Ebaugh, 1988; Jacobs, 1989; Levine, 1984; Wright, 1987) that concluded a disengagement process does exist and can be mapped. In this study, participants ascribed order and meaning to their experiences by way of story. These stories proved surprisingly similar to those of their counterparts. Participants did experience disengagement as consisting of a sequence of events or stages with a definable beginning and end. In this study, the process was mapped using a three phase, nine stage model.

That social group disengagement is a definable process is a relevant finding. Disengagement is a common social phenomenon of our current Western age. It is predicted that most of us will disengage from at least one social group of significance

(i.e., a group that was once considered central to identity) in our life time (Alcock, Carment & Sadava, 1998; Ebaugh, 1988). Côte and Levine (2002) argue that social group disengagement may be on the rise as our awareness of social group alternatives increase. With increased mobility comes the option of physical relocation as a means to either disengage from one group and/or join another. With global communication and the World Wide Web, we now have the option of joining and disengaging from virtual social groups.

There were several aspects of this study that were unique and enabled me to contribute to existing knowledge. I studied the disengagement process from membership to post-disengagement adaptation, whereas the previous studies focused on disengagement (my second phase) with some reference to adjustment after the disengagement event (my third phase). Hence, the process I have mapped out could be considered more thorough. The inclusion of the membership phase was important as it led to discoveries pertaining to identity and how individuals strive for congruence between their former and their current selves.

Likewise, the theoretical lenses through which I examined social group disengagement, namely developmental theory and social identity theory, were unique. Altemeyer and Hunsburger (1997) used social learning theory, Ebaugh (1988) used role theory, and Jacobs (1989) used object relations theory and feminism. It stands to reason that looking at a phenomenon through a different lens will enable one to see things that were previously impenetrable. As a result, I was able to conclude that disengagement is both a highly interpersonal or relational process and a solitary one. It involves self-acceptance, a solitary exercise, and self-disclosure, an interpersonal one. It involves

severing relational ties to a social group, managing the challenges associated with self-disclosure to one's social group and the challenges associated with connecting to individuals outside of one's social group and perhaps finding a new social group.

Finally, a unique contribution of this research concerns the linkages I was able to make between the stages of the disengagement process, the phenomenological aspects and associated meaning. The use of narrative analysis allowed me to extend my contributions from merely plotting the disengagement process to looking at the "morals of the story," that is, discovering the ways in which participants understood their experiences within the context of their lives and ascribed meaning and purpose to the process.

Identity

I began this research with the premise that a large constituent of our self-understandings are derived from our social group memberships. We need to belong to social groups to know who we are. But we also desire membership because from our social groups we derive enjoyment, comfort, and a sense of belonging. Yet we can rail against these memberships when they seem to smother us and deny us our selfhood. The results of this study will not allow for a simple conclusion that social groups as a whole are either good or bad. As Maya Angelou suggests in the quotation at the beginning of this chapter, "We allow ignorance to prevail" if we think we can survive alone. We both need and desire the company of others. The results of this study will also not allow for an easy categorization of specific social groups as either "good" or "bad;" "harmful" or "beneficial." There is an old Dutch proverb that goes, "A runaway monk never speaks well of his convent." We must bear that in mind when we ponder what participants

revealed about their former social groups. This research cannot support notions that the Jehovah's Witnesses are evil, out-port communities are undesirable, and bikers abhorrent. Likewise, we cannot conclude that transgenderism is ideal, homosexuality is preferred, and all deafened adults must get cochlear implants. All we can say with surety is that our social group memberships are complex and can be both good and bad; simultaneously harmful and beneficial.

The foremost conclusion that one can draw from this study with respect to identity is that "fit" between an individual and his or her social group is the leading factor in determining whether the scales tip in favour or against membership. "Fit," as this study reveals is a temporal phenomenon. A group that once fit for an individual, may not in the future. An individual and a social group are involved in an intricate and dynamic struggle. Individuals can "outgrow" the group if the group cannot accommodate to their identity development. A group may choose not to accommodate for reasons that are rooted in their own identity concerns. An individual's growth can compromise the characteristics that make the group distinct from other social groups. It seems that both the individual and the social group have self-preservation as the goal.

The results of this study speak to the indomitable nature of the individual self. The self cannot be denied, buried, or neglected without serious consequence. As both Freud and Erikson understood, we are driven to develop. It is a deep, internal, and largely unconscious drive that propels us forward. I am reminded of the poet Dylan Thomas, who wrote, "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower drives my green age." Participants in this study revealed that when the self is denied or growth

thwarted for too long, it can die. Most participants came to a point in the disengagement process where they physically and psychologically had to "choose life."

This notion of the indomitable nature of the self is tied to the theme of fit, or congruence. Participants revealed that it was impossible to live with individual and social identity incongruence for very long before seriously damaging the self and perhaps also the soul. For participants in this study, living with incongruence led to such things as headaches, anorexia, chronic fatigue, depression, addictions, and thoughts of violence. Several participants felt they were "going crazy." Some were living in an almost robotic state. The drive for self-preservation was so strong it outweighed the pain and suffering, the losses and the turmoil incurred during the disengagement process.

This study supports the notion that identity development is a life-long process. It is possible to experience fundamental shifts in self-understanding after identity is more-or-less formed in late adolescence. However, this research provides us with some real challenges in comprehending what is meant by a "new" identity. For many participants, a new identity was, in fact, a reclamation of a past self that had been denied or "lost" along the way. Another unique finding was that the "new" identity could be independent of existing social groups. For some this meant "living in the spaces between," creating for themselves the social categories that could accurately define them.

Practice Implications

The extent to which participants engaged with professional (14/16) and paraprofessional (12/16) helpers to aid them in negotiating the disengagement process was significant. All sixteen participants required help of one form or the other, with the majority (10/16) utilizing both. These statistics underscore the need for social workers to

be aware of the disengagement process and understand the ways they can be of assistance. The results of this study suggest it is possible to delineate the skills, interventions, and professional ways-of-being that would be helpful in the various specific stages of the disengagement process. However, at this point, I will highlight the three overarching themes that emerged with respect to social work practice.

First, the more agency, or control, an individual can exercise over the timing and pace of the disengagement process, and the more "voluntary" the process can become, the better the outcome will be. Social workers can help by encouraging client self-determination, taking a non-directive approach in sessions, and encouraging clients to control the disengagement process as much as possible by doing such things as "establishing distance," self-concealing or self-disclosing in a timely manner, having "trial runs" and "multiple leavings" and doing "process imaging."

Second, the more knowledgeable a social worker can be about the disengagement process, associated challenges, and the particular social groups involved, the better. Social workers need to educate themselves about these things and also about the informal supports in the community that could be of benefit to their client. Certainly, this research offers a valuable contribution in this area.

Third, this research highlighted identity congruence as a "good outcome." Social workers need to help participants move towards individual and social identity congruence, as well as congruence between their current and past selves. This research suggests that congruence is not only a prerequisite for identity stability but also allows individuals to move forward and optimistically prepare for their futures. Bateson (2004) suggests that we all face discontinuity in our lives but it is often the choice we make

about how to interpret these discontinuities that makes the difference. If we can find continuity in our discontinuity by looking back and picking up the threads that can tie our pasts to our current state we are better equipped than those who react to each discontinuous event by starting over. This research supports Bateson's (2004) contention that constructing and interpreting a life story is an ideal means to create continuity and define identity. This idea is likewise reflected in Armstrong's (2005) autobiography of her disengagement from the convent (see Appendix K),

> I am glad that . . . I struggled to assess my past accurately and make peace with it. The experience has taught me that it is very important to look honestly at your personal life, to unravel the web of pain and anger, and see it as it really was. Until you have achieved some sense of continuity with your former selves, you cannot move forward into the future (p. xv).

Limitations of the Study

Every study has limitations. With respect to the sample, I tried to achieve diversity with respect to the types of social groups and specific social groups represented, the structure of these social groups, the manner of joining, gender, age, dis/ability, and sexual orientation of the participants, length of time in the social group, and length of time since disengagement, there were notable limitations. Although 50% identified as a member of a minority group, the sample was entirely White with little racial diversity. An unusually high percentage of participants (75%) were abused, most of whom came from dysfunctional families. Forty-four percent identified as lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and/or transgendered. Sample participants were highly educated, and articulate.

These anomalies give rise to some important questions. How would less articulate people tell their disengagement stories? Would less or differently educated individuals make sense of their experiences in different ways and derive different meanings? How

would individuals from various racial backgrounds understand their leaving experiences? Would individuals from "group oriented" cultures experience disengagement in the same way as individuals from "self-oriented" cultures? Would visible minorities have the same post-disengagement options as those who are not? How do these research findings apply to individuals who do not espouse Western-European notions of the self? I do not know the answers to these questions and I would caution against an application of these research findings beyond the context in which they were derived. However, I would likewise caution against an arbitrary belief that the findings would not be applicable. Individuals who come from collective societies, for example, may find similarities between their own experiences and those of the participants who disengaged from totalist groups. I think we need to remain open to the possibility that when it comes to examining the relationship between individuals and the social groups that define them, some universal truths may apply.

In addition to the above questions concerning transferability, narrative studies can be subjected to questions regarding credibility. Vincent Lam (2005), a Canadian medical doctor, author, and recent Giller prize winner for his fictional book, *Bloodletting and Miraculous Cures,* argued "the storyteller must tell something that is believable. It has to be convincing and cohesive. It must ring true...the result has to make sense" (Lecat, 2007, p.1). In my mind, the criterion of "ringing true" is a suitable test of credibility in a narrative study.

Hoshmand (2005) suggests that validity and knowledge claims in narrative research must be measured using a unique set of standards. She suggests that in narrative studies *pragmatic validity* and *dialogical validity* can be important. Each will be

discussed in turn. According to Hoshmand (2005), "the view of narrative truth can be formulated in terms of pragmatic validity, in the sense that an interpretation has truth value if the parties involved regard it as useful" (p. 179). As a researcher and a social worker, I am one of the "parties involved." I have gone to some length in this study to introduce the practical implications of the findings. Through member checks and prolonged engagement (see Chapter 4) I can say with certainty that a sizable number of sample participants also found the findings useful. Several spoke about the therapeutic value of participating in the study and having the opportunity to tell their stories. Others noted that they had never had the opportunity to talk about their disengagement with someone else to the extent and depth that they did with me. They discovered that in telling their stories they were able to make connections and achieve some insights that were both new and helpful. Others spoke about the value of having disengagement recognized as a unique social process. They found it useful to have their experiences "normalized" and derived comfort from discovering they were not alone. The two participants who left the Jehovah's Witnesses found it useful (and heartening) that their psychological and emotional experiences were interesting to an academic. Prior to this, people had expressed interest in their religious experiences and in learning more about the Jehovah's Witnesses but this research was unique in that the focus was on their "self" and their personal experiences.

The second type of validity Hoshmand (2005) addresses is dialogical validity, "whereby intersubjectivity in the construction of meaning is key" (p. 179). In a study such as this, many subjective realities are operative - the researcher's reality and the reality of each of the study participants. To achieve validity these realities need to merge

to become common or shared realities. This challenge can be met using a process called "narrative smoothing," which employs "condensation and omission so as to provide some degree of closure and wholeness to a given text (Hoshmond, 2005, p. 179). In this study these condensations and omissions were not done willy-nilly but were conscious choices. I made these decisions following the implementation of the process I describe in Chapter 4 whereby I "tested" common themes and story-lines against the participant's larger story and against the other participants' stories. This involved frequent rereading of the transcripts and a constant shifting of gaze between the parts and the whole, or the figure and the ground. Hiedegger (1962) refers to this "part-to-whole process" as the "hermeneutical circle" (as cited in Hoshmond, 2005, p. 179). Working to achieve dialogical validity improved the veracity of my findings. However, ultimately it was I who made the final choices about which narratives, themes and story-lines to privilege, which ones to omit and which ones to condense. I tried to the extent that I was able to support my findings with narrative data and to make my choices transparent. Nevertheless, as Hoshmond (2005) concludes in a narrative study "understanding is always partial and the validity of knowledge claims can only be contingent" (p. 180). Whether this is the "reality" of narrative analysis or in fact a limitation is a topic of debate.

Areas for Future Research

This study used a *critical case sample* with the rationale that the experiences of those who have undergone a momentous change in self-understandings can inform us about less extreme identity transitions. All of the participants in this study had *voluntarily* disengaged from their social groups. I would like to extend this research to include less

extreme transitions and involuntary leavings. There are several reasons for pursuing these lines of inquiry. The transferability of my original findings could be tested and opportunities for a broader application of the theoretical and practice implications could be explored. One could perhaps argue that this study's findings may not be relevant to the "general public" who have not undergone such extreme identity transitions. I suspect that this is not the case. Consider, for example, the impact of retirement or job loss on an individual's sense of self. The resulting changes in professional and personal identity are "common" experiences. Another consideration concerns the changes in cultural identity that can accompany immigration. Lastly, when we regard Côte and Levine's (2002) argument, that in this late modern age "social identities are becoming increasingly transitory and unstable," I can conclude that the benefits of increased knowledge in this area could be far reaching.

A strong theme emerging from this research concerns the role of others in self-understanding. Twelve participants (75%) indicated that support groups helped them to achieve a positive outcome. In collecting my data I had several opportunities to speak to the facilitators of these groups. I became intrigued with the work these pioneers are doing. These groups aim to help individuals with specific identity transitions, for example, "coming out" groups for gays and lesbians, a local support group for individuals who are leaving their religious group, and a group that assists women leaving polygamous marriages. I wish to study these groups to discover how and perhaps why they are considered so helpful. What can we, as social workers, learn from these groups that can help us to facilitate good outcomes? How can formal supports work collaboratively with informal supports?

A separate but related topic concerns internet support groups (ISGs). Close to a third of my sample indicated the support and connectedness they received from an ISG was essential to their successful transition. I wish to gain more of an appreciation into how ISGs function and the role of ISG members in a user's self-understanding. How do ISGs resemble "face-to-face" support groups? How is identity both revealed and protected? Can the professional social worker work online? This unexpected finding has gripped my imagination.

Conclusion

In the Shakespearean play, *Hamlet*, the character of Polonius prepares his son Laertes for travel abroad with a speech in which he challenges him "to thine own self be true." Like Laertes, participants in this study were challenged to be true to themselves. There can be no doubt that for many participants, rising to the challenge took courage and was accompanied by fear, confusion, losses and profound sorrow. Yet, to deny the truth of one's self was either impossible or deemed undesirable. As Mary summarized,

> We need to recognize the cost. And it is a high cost for us to deny the truth of what we are. Whether that be sexual orientation, whether it is gender, whether it is a job, career, anything. I think when we attempt to conform for the sake of belonging the cost is much higher than most of us realize.

Appendix A

A Qualitative Investigation of Social Group Disengagement
Faculty of Social Work
Wilfrid Laurier University

Interview Guide

<u>Interview # 1 - Understanding the Social Group and Associated Self-Definitions</u>

Before Audio-Tape Recording:

- [ ] Explain Study (Purpose)
- [ ] Specify the nature of involvement from the participant
- [ ] Explain confidentiality (and limits)
- [ ] Clearly state that reason why the data is being collected and how it will be used.
- [ ] Go over the Informed Consent Form - have participant sign it.
- [ ] Discuss audio-recording. If participant is agreeable, turn the audio-recorder on.

Begin Audio-Tape Recording:

1. Can you describe for me the social group that you left?

    Probes:
    - type of group (religious, gender, occupational, cultural etc.)
    - nature and structure
    - values and beliefs

2. Can you tell me about your membership in this social group?

    - When did you become a member (through birth, during adolescence, during adulthood?)
    - Did you join on your own or with others (family, peer group, etc.)
    - How did you become a member? (What were the circumstances of your affiliation?)
    - How long were you a member?
    - What were the requirements of membership?

- What was the significance of membership for you and your understanding of self? Did this change? If so when and why?
- How did you experience membership (liberating, nurturing, constricting, joyous, affirming, devaluing, sense of belonging, comforting etc.)? Did this change? If so when, how, and why?
- What was membership like for you as you grew up/developed? (For example, what was membership like for you as a young child, as a school age child, as an adolescent, as an adult etc.)? How did your experience of membership change through time?
- Did the group change during your membership? If so, how? Did these changes contribute to your leaving? If so, when, how and why?
- Did you and/or your perception of the group change? Did these changes contribute to your leaving? If so, how and why?
- What were some of your best experiences as a member of the group?
- What were some of the worst experiences?
- What were some of the reasons why you stayed in the group?

3. A Question Related to Social Self Appraisals:

- When you were a member of the group how did you compare with other members with respect to beliefs, values, behaviour, sense of self, experience of membership etc.?

When the interview is completed, I will discuss with the participant how he or she is feeling about the revelation of personal information and perhaps “reliving” or “rethinking” events and experiences associated with their past social group membership. I will ask if the are in need of informal or formal supports as a result of the disclosures made in this interview. I will have a list of numbers for participants to call if they need it. I will also encourage the participant to write their thoughts and reflections over the next week or two to be discussed/processed in the second interview. I will make arrangements for the delivery of the interview transcript.

Interview # 2 - Understanding Disengagement and Current Self-Understandings

Before Audio-Tape Recording:

- ❑ Go over the Informed Consent Form - have participant sign consent to second interview
- ❑ Discuss audio-tape recording. If participant is agreeable, turn the audio-recorder on.

Before we begin talking about your experiences of disengagement and what life is like for you now, I would like to ask you a few questions related to the last interview:
[Questions arising from the interview and initial coding and analysis]

Now that you have had a few weeks to reflect on our past interview, is there anything you wish to add? Any clarifications you wish to make?
[The participant will be encouraged to discuss any notes they have made since the last interview]

Do you have any questions to ask me?

1. How did you come to leave the group?

Probes:
- precipitating factors
- what was happening in the group?
- what was happening for you?
- actual event or series of events
- reasons for leaving
- measure of accommodation and tolerance
- emotional experience of leaving
- who was the active agent in the leaving (you? The group? Others?)
- regrets?

2. Describe for me the process of leaving beginning with the (name the precipitating factors mentioned above). (Give some sense of time sequencing if possible).

Probes:
- specific turning points/memorable moments in the process
- emotional experience of the process and its various stages
- what was helpful/supportive; painful/difficult
- relationships with people throughout the process

3. Describe your relationship to the group today.
   - Can you maintain a connection to the group without belonging?
   - How would you describe your current relationship with the group (e.g., peripheral, cut off, isolated from, non-existent, pleasant)?
   - How and what do you feel with respect to the group and your current relationship with it?

4. I would like to ask you some questions about your social relationships
   - Did your family, close friends, peers, belong to the social group? Do they still belong or have they also left?
   - What are their views of the group? How do you think they understand membership?
   - What has been the reaction to your leaving?
   - How has leaving affected your social relationships?
   - At the time of disengagement how do you think you compared with individuals who remained members with respect to beliefs, values, behaviour, sense of self, experience of membership etc.? How do you think you compared with those who never belonged to the group?
   - How do you think you compare now?
   - Tell me about your current social relationships.

5. I would like to ask you some questions about you current understandings of self?
   - Did your sense of self change as a result of leaving the social group?
   - How would you describe yourself now? What adjectives would you use?(Are the terms related to the group from which the individual disengaged, e.g., "an ex" _____? Are the terms related to another social group membership, perhaps one that was joined following disengagement? Are hybrid or hyphenated terms used?)
   - Do you belong to another social group which provides you with a new or alternate social identity?

6. How much of the group (values, beliefs, culture etc.) continue to shape who you are today and how you view yourself? (Give specific examples).

7. To what extent has past membership in the group, and leaving the group, impacted on you?

8. What would you describe as a "good leaving"? Was your leaving good? Why or why not? What factors hindered or eased the leaving process?

9. What types of supports, clinical interventions were helpful (or could have been helpful) for you along the way?

10. Concluding comments and remarks.

When the interview is completed, I will discuss with the participant how he or she is feeling about the revelation of personal information and perhaps "reliving" or "rethinking" events and experiences associated with their social group disengagement and current functioning. I will ask if the are in need of informal or formal supports as a result of the disclosures made in this interview. I will have a list of numbers for participants to call if they need it.

I will thank them for their participation.

Appendix B

A Qualitative Investigation of Social Group Disengagement
Faculty of Social Work
Wilfrid Laurier University

Confidentiality Agreement For Transcriber

In the course of your involvement in the transcribing of audio-tapes you are expected to maintain confidentiality regarding any information you may learn about the participants in the study. Any identifying information pertaining to the research participants shall not be shared with anyone outside of the researcher (Catherine de Boer).

I, ____________________________, have on this date, read the above confidentiality agreement and accept the principles and practices contained in it.

______________________	______________________
Signature	Witness
______________________	______________________
Date	Date

Appendix C

A Qualitative Investigation of Social Group Disengagement
Faculty of Social Work
Wilfrid Laurier University

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

Principal Investigator: Catherine de Boer, Ph.D. Candidate
Chair: Dr. Nick Coady

I agree to participate in a qualitative investigation on social group disengagement. This study will be conducted by Catherine de Boer, a doctoral candidate in the Faculty of Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University (WLU). I understand the purpose of the study is to gain an understanding of social group disengagement, specifically the subjective experiences of individuals such as myself, who have disengaged from a social group. The study will explore how individuals who have disengaged from social groups have negotiated the transition and any accompanying shifts in self-understanding. I understand that I will be one of approximately 10-15 individuals who will be interviewed.

My participation in this study will assist social workers to understand the realities of social group disengagement thereby improving their ability to offer assistance to individuals who are either considering disengagement, in the process of disengagement, or who have already disengaged. Increased knowledge of disengagement experiences will be useful for social workers in therapeutic settings who are working with individuals who are wrestling with the decision to leave or stay in a social group or are struggling to cope with the aftermath. Likewise the insights gained from this study may be useful to any individual or group, who care about the emotional well-being of individuals going through a major identity transition associated with a disengagement experience and are eager to lend their well meaning and informed support.

I understand that my participation in this study will involve two interviews with the researcher. Each interview will be audio-taped and will be 1 - 2 hours in length. The first interview will focus primarily on the social group I have left. I will be asked questions about the group, my past membership in the group, and how my membership in the group contributed to my self-understandings at that time. The second interview will focus on my disengagement experiences and any associated outcomes. I will be asked questions about my current relationship to the group, my current understandings of myself, how these have been achieved and to what effect. I will also be asked about the events or circumstances leading up to my disengagement, factors which hindered or supported my leaving process, and any post-leaving impressions and comments I may have. I will be given the opportunity to reflect on the transcribed tape of the first interview before embarking on the second.

____
Participant's Initials

I understand that the audio-tape of each interview will be transcribed by either the researcher or a professional transcriber who has signed a confidentiality form. My participation in this study will be kept confidential. My name and identifying information will not be included in the final manuscript. I understand that I will be asked to complete a general demographic information sheet. I understand that all tapes, transcripts, consent forms, and demographic information sheets will be stored in a locked cabinet. Tapes will be destroyed when all the transcripts are completed and checked for errors. Transcripts, consent forms, and demographic information sheets will be destroyed after the study is completed and the possibility of publishing new articles from the data is exhausted. I agree that excerpts from the transcriptions may be used as part of the final research report and in subsequently published articles and presentations, and that my name and identifying information will not be included. I understand that some of the transcripts will be shared with Dr. Nick Coady, and other members of Catherine's committee. The purpose of this sharing is to allow for their assistance and guidance during the data analysis phase of the project.

I understand that participation in the study requires the active sharing of my experiences with the researcher. I will be asked to reflect on these experiences, and to reveal my own insights, and understandings of these experiences. I know that it is a possibility that I may feel uncomfortable speaking about personal and sensitive matters. I may be challenged to think about my experience in a new manner which may produce feelings of anxiety, discomfort, or isolation. I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I have the right to stop the audio-recorder and/or interview and/or leave the study at any point. I can also refuse to answer any question. If I decide to withdraw before the data collection is completed my data will be either returned to me or destroyed if I make that request.

I will not be receiving any financial remuneration for my time or expenses I may incur in order for me to participate. However, the researcher will make every effort to ensure that little to no costs are involved. I may experience the opportunity to discuss my opinions and experiences in a private and confidential manner as a benefit. My contributions will be used to advance social work knowledge and may serve as the basis for subsequent studies and publications. I will receive a summary of the research findings.

If I have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, or if I experience negative effects as a result of participating in this study, I can contact the researcher, Catherine de Boer, at Wilfrid Laurier University, 75 University Avenue West, Waterloo, Ontario N2L 3C5, and 884-1970 ext. 2683. I can also contact Dr. Nick Coady, the Chair of Catherine's dissertation committee at 884-0710 ext. 2666. I understand that this project has been reviewed and approved by the University Research Ethics Board. If I feel I have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or that my rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, I can contact Dr. Bill Marr, Chair, University Research Ethics Board, Wilfrid Laurier University, (519) 884-0710, extension 2468.

____

Participant's Initials

I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Interview # 1

Subject's signature________________________________ Date ______________

Investigator's signature________________________________Date ______________

Interview # 2

Subject's signature________________________________ Date ______________

Investigator's signature________________________________Date ______________

____
Participant's Initials

Appendix D

A Qualitative Investigation of Social Group Disengagement
Faculty of Social Work
Wilfrid Laurier University

Telephone Script

Hello _______________. My name is Catherine de Boer. I am a Ph.D. Candidate in the Faculty of Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University. As part of my doctoral program, I am undertaking a qualitative investigation of social group disengagement. I am particularly interested in hearing individuals speak of their experiences of voluntarily leaving a social group and how those experiences have had an impact on their understandings of themselves. I plan to interview Individuals who have left a social group that was once very important to them and their self-understandings, the leaving of which could be described as "momentous".

I understand that you have left a social group, namely _________________. [Here I will reveal how I came to know this, who referred me to this individual etc.].

I wondering if I could talk to you a bit about my study to see if you would be interested in participating and if so, whether your situation would meet the sample criteria.

[If agreeable, I will discuss with the potential participant the sample criteria ensuring that each criterium is pertinent to the individual's particular social group and circumstances].

I would like to conduct two interviews with you. The first interview will focus primarily on the social group from which you have disengaged. I will ask you questions about the group, your past membership in the group, and your sense of how your membership in the group contributed to your self-understanding. In the second interview I will ask you questions about the disengagement experience and associated outcomes. I will ask you about your current relationship with the group, current understandings of yourself and how they were achieved and to what effect. Pending your approval I will audio-tape each interview and then have the tape transcribed. The interviews will be conducted in the early part of 2004. Each interview will take about 1-2 hours of your time. Your name will be kept confidential and any identifying information will be removed from the transcript and will not be included in the dissertation or any associated publication. You are one of perhaps fifteen individuals who will be participating in this project.

I hope that the opportunity for you to share your leaving experiences with me will prove to be of benefit to you. You may appreciate the opportunity to participate in the advancement of social work knowledge via academic publications. However, you should be aware that participation in the study will require the revelation of personal information and this may result in some feelings of discomfort. You may be challenged to think about your experience in a new way which may produce feelings of anxiety or discomfort. You have the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any point during data collection. You can request that the audio-tape recorder be shut off at any point during the interview. I would encourage you to discuss any feelings of discomfort with me so that any adverse effects of participating in this project can be minimized and dealt with immediately.

This study has been approved by the University Research Ethics Board at Wilfrid Laurier University and you can contact the Chair of the REB, Dr, Bill Marr at (519) 884-0710, ext. 2468 if you have any questions about the ethics of the project. You can also contact me at (519) 884-1970 ext. 2683 or the Chair of my dissertation committee is Dr. Nick Coady, at Wilfrid Laurier University (519 884-0710, ext. 2666) with any questions or concerns.

Would you be interested in participating in this study?

Appendix E

A Qualitative Investigation of Social Group Disengagement
Faculty of Social Work
Wilfrid Laurier University

Email Script

To: ________________________

Subject: Doctoral Research Project

Date: ______________________

From: “catherine de boer” <dexx3920@mach1.wlu.ca>

Dear ______________________

My name is Catherine de Boer. I am a Ph.D. Candidate in the Faculty of Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University. As part of my doctoral program, I am undertaking a qualitative investigation of social group disengagement. I am particularly interested in interviewing individuals who have left a social group. I would like to hear of their experiences of disengagement and how these experiences have had an impact on their understandings of themselves. I plan to interview Individuals who have left a social group that was once very important to them and their self-understandings, the leaving of which could be described as “momentous”.

I understand that you have left a social group, namely ________________ . [Here I will reveal how I came to know this, who referred me to this individual. Some of these individuals I may have had contact with before so I will remind them of when we last met and spoke about this research project].

If you are willing to participate I would like to conduct two interviews with you. The first interview will focus primarily on the social group from which you have disengaged. I will ask you questions about the group, your past membership in the group, and your sense of how your membership in the group contributed to your self-understanding. In the second interview I will ask you questions about the disengagement experience and associated outcomes. I will ask you about your current relationship with the group, current understandings of yourself and how they were achieved and to what effect. Pending your approval I will audio-tape each interview and then have the tape transcribed. The interviews will be conducted in the early part of 2004. Each interview will take about 1-2 hours of your time. Your name will be kept confidential and any identifying information will be removed from the transcript and will not be included in the dissertation or any associated publication. You are one of perhaps fifteen individuals who will be participating in this project.

It is my hope that the opportunity for you to share your leaving experiences with me will prove to be of benefit to you. You may appreciate the opportunity to share with me knowing that others may learn and benefit from your knowledge and experiences. Your contributions will be used to

advance social work knowledge via the dissertation, related academic publications, and presentations. However, you should be aware that participation in the study will require the revelation of personal information and this may result in some feelings of discomfort. You may be challenged to think about your experience in a new way which may produce feelings of anxiety or discomfort. You have the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any point during data collection. You can request that the audio-tape recorder be shut off at any point during the interview. I would encourage you to discuss any feelings of discomfort with me so that any adverse effects of participating in this project can be minimized and dealt with immediately.

This study has been approved by the University Research Ethics Board at Wilfrid Laurier University and you can contact the Chair of the REB, Dr, Bill Marr at (519) 884-0710, ext. 2468 if you have any questions about the ethics of the project. You can also contact me at (519) 884-1970 ext. 2683 or the Chair of my dissertation committee is Dr. Nick Coady, at Wilfrid Laurier University (519 884-0710, ext. 2666) with any questions or concerns.

Would you be interested in participating in this study? If so, I can send you more information about my study and the sample criteria via email to ensure that your situation meets the sample criteria. I would also be willing to talk to you by telephone if that would be easier for you. You can contact me at 884-1970 ext. 2683.

I thank you for considering my request,

Catherine de Boer
Ph.D. Candidate
Faculty of Social Work
Wilfrid Laurier University
519 884-1970 ext. 2683
dexx3920@mach1.wlu.ca

Appendix F

A Qualitative Investigation on Social Group Disengagement
Faculty of Social Work
Wilfrid Laurier University

Information Letter to Agencies

Catherine de Boer
Faculty of Social Work
Wilfrid Laurier University
Waterloo, ON
N2L 3C5

Date

Name
Title/Position
Agency or Organization Name
Address

Re: A Qualitative Investigation of Social Group Disengagement

Dear ____________________,

My name is Catherine de Boer. I am a doctoral student in the Faculty of Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University. As part of my doctoral program, I am undertaking a study on social group disengagement. I understand that in your capacity as _______________ [state title or position] at the ____________________ [state agency or organization] you provide ____________________ [state the services provided by the agency] to individuals who __________________ [state the social group from which these individuals have disengaged]. I am particularly interested in interviewing individuals who have left a group such as _____________ [state the social group which is the primary focus of the agency]. I would like to listen to the accounts of their experiences of disengagement and how these experiences have had an impact on their understandings of themselves. I hope to interview individuals who have disengaged from a social group which was once considered central to how they understood themselves, the leaving from which could be described as a momentous or profound experience.

I am enclosing a list of the sample criteria. [Note - the sample criteria will be specific to the type of disengagement which is the focus of the agency]. I would greatly appreciate any assistance you may give me to locate potential research participants. You can either encourage potential participants to contact me directly or forward their names and contact information to me **provided they provide you with permission to do so.**

Participation in this study will involve two interviews with myself, the researcher. Each interview will be audio-taped and will be 1 - 2 hours in length. The first interview will focus primarily on the social group the participant has left, in this particular instance ____________ . I will ask him/her questions about the group, their membership in the group, and how membership contributed to his/her self-understandings at that time. The second interview will focus on the disengagement experiences and any associated outcomes. I will ask questions about the individual's current relationship to the group, his/her current understandings of self, how these have been achieved and to what effect. I will ask about the events or circumstances leading up to the disengagement, factors which hindered or supported the leaving process, and any post-leaving impressions and comments he/she may have.

I would like to audio-tape each interview and have each tape transcribed. The interviews will be conducted in the early part of 2004. Each interview will take about 1-2 hours of the participant's time. Names will be kept confidential and any identifying information will be removed from the transcript and will not be included in my dissertation or any associated publication.

It is my hope that the opportunity for individuals to share their leaving experiences with me will prove to be of benefit to them. They may appreciate the opportunity to participate knowing that others may learn and benefit from their knowledge and experiences. Their contributions will be used to advance social work knowledge via my dissertation, related academic publications, and presentations. However, participants should be aware that involvement in the study will require the revelation of personal information and this may result in some feelings of discomfort. They may be challenged to think about their experience in a new way which may produce feelings of anxiety or discomfort. They have the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any point during data collection and can request that the audio-tape recorder be shut off at any point during the interview.

This study has been approved by the University Research Ethics Board at Wilfrid Laurier University and you can contact the Chair of the REB, Dr, Bill Marr at (519) 884-0710, ext. 2468 if you have any questions about the ethics of the project. You can also contact me at (519) 884-1970 ext. 2683 or the Chair of my dissertation committee is Dr. Nick Coady, at Wilfrid Laurier University (519 884-0710, ext. 2666) with any questions or concerns.

Participation in this study will assist social workers to understand the realities of social group disengagement thereby improving their ability to offer assistance to individuals who are either considering disengagement, in the process of disengagement, or who have already disengaged. Increased knowledge of disengagement experiences will be useful for social workers in

therapeutic settings who are working with individuals who are wrestling with the decision to leave or stay in a social group or are struggling to cope with the aftermath. Likewise the insights gained from this study may be useful to any individual or group, who care about the emotional well-being of individuals going through a major identity transition associated with a disengagement experience and are eager to lend their well meaning and informed support. I thank you for considering my request and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Catherine de Boer, M.A., M.S.W., R.S.W.
Ph.D. Candidate
Faculty of Social Work
Wilfrid Laurier University
519 884-1970 ext. 2683
dexx3920@mach1.wlu.ca

Note: Rather than write generally about disengagement as I have done in this sample letter, each letter will be tailored to the specific type of disengagement the agency or organization has as it's focus. For example, if I am writing a letter to an agency which provides counselling and support to transpeople (individuals who once identified as a male but now identify as a female or vice versa) I will write specifically about disengagement from one's gender group. If, however, I am writing to an agency which provides support to individuals who are leaving extremist groups, I will write specifically about disengagement from the extremist groups.

Appendix G

A Qualitative Investigation of Social Group Disengagement
Faculty of Social Work
Wilfrid Laurier University

Verbal Debriefing Statement

Answering questions of a personal nature can sometimes be uncomfortable. If talking to me today has upset you, or if you have experienced any anxiety, stress, grief, or discomfort or emotional upset as a result of taking part in this study, I would encourage you to seek out informal and/or formal support. Please feel free to contact the numbers on the contact information sheet you have been given. Someone can help you if you want to talk about anything that might have upset you.

If you have any questions about the study itself, you can contact the researcher, Catherine de Boer or the chair of her Dissertation committee, Dr. Nick Coady. Any questions you have that are related to the ethics of this study or if you feel your rights as a participant have been violated, you may contact Dr. Bill Marr, Chair, University Ethics Board at Wilfrid Laurier University. These numbers are also on the contact information sheet you have been given.

Thank-you for taking part in the study. I appreciate your time and openness when speaking with me today.

Appendix H

A Qualitative Investigation of Social Group Disengagement
Faculty of Social Work
Wilfrid Laurier University

Contact Information Sheet

If you need to talk to someone about your feelings, you can call:

If you are calling from Kitchener, Waterloo, or Cambridge:

Distress Line	745-1166

If you are calling from Guelph, Wellington, or Duffferin:

Distress Line	821-3760
Community Mental Health Clinic	821-2060

If you have any questions about the study, you can call:

Catherine de Boer, Principal Investigator	884-1970 ext. 2683
Dr. Nick Coady, Chair of Dissertation Committee	884-0710, ext. 2666

If you have any questions about the way you were treated by the researcher, you can call:

Dr. Bill Marr, Chair 884-0710, ext. 3753
University Research Ethics Board
Wilfrid Laurier University

Appendix I

A Qualitative Investigation of Social Group Disengagement
Faculty of Social Work
Wilfrid Laurier University

General Demographic Information Sheet

1. Numbered Code: ________________________________
   (To be assigned by researcher)

2. Age: ________________________________

3. Gender: ______________________________

4. Do you identify yourself as a member of an ethnic, cultural or minority group?
   Yes ___ No _____
   If yes, please specify ____

5. Country of Birth: _________________________

6. First Language Spoken: ____________________

7. Relationship Status: single ____ married ____ common-law ____ divorced ____

   separated ____ widowed ____ partnership _____

8. Do you have children? Yes ____ No ____
   If yes, what are the ages and gender of your children? _________________________
   ____
   ____

9. What is your highest level of education? ________________________________
   Diploma(s) or degree(s) you have earned: _______________________________
   ____
   ____

10. What is your occupation? ____

Appendix J

Empirical Studies on Social Group Disengagement

Researcher(s)	Discipline	Theoretical Perspective	Methodology	Sample Size	Sample	Purpose of Study
Ebaugh (1988)	Sociology	Role Theory using a combination of the structuralist perspective (role taking) and social interactionism (role making)	Grounded Theory Life History Method	N = 185	67 = ex-nuns 10 = transexuals 106 = "exes" - individuals who left a variety of roles which they defined as central to identity (Four types - occupational roles, familial roles, membership in ideological groups, and stigmatized roles)	To discover the similarities and differences experienced by people exiting various roles which they had defined as central to their lives, in particular the impact on self-identity. (Note- Ebaugh understands social group disengagement to be a component of role exit.)
Wright (1987)	Religious Studies	Social Constructionism	Qualitative Research Comparison of members and "defectors".	N = 90	30 = Children of God 30 = Hare Krishna 30 = Unification Church In each group 15 were members and 15 were "defectors".	To study disengagement processes, (causes and patterns) and post disengagement adjustment from cult movements.
Jacobs (1989)	Women's Studies	Psychoanaytic (Object Relations) and Feminist Perspectives	Qualitative Research	N = 40	10 = from Charismatic Christian groups 20 = Hindu-based groups 5 = Buddhist groups 5 = Other	To study disengagement from religious movements, specifically the process of disaffection whereby devotees break the social and emotional ties which once held them to the group.
Altemeyer & Hunsberger (1997)	Psychology of Religion	Social Learning Theory	Survey Research Qualitative Research	N = 4264 N = 46	4264 = Introductory Psychology students at the University of Manitoba and Wilfrid Laurier University (Survey Research) 46 = individuals who were identified in the survey research as "amazing apostates"- those who had abandoned a religion in which they were raised and they once believed in. (Qualitative Interviews)	To understand the transformation of individual who go against influences in their past, their upbringing and socialization, to abandon the religious traditions in which they were raised. Note- This study also includes individuals (N= 24) who "convert" to religious traditions and beliefs.
Levine (1984)	Psychiatry		Qualitative Research Psychological Inventories	N = 800+	800+ = individual group members 100+ = families of group members 25 = radical groups	To understand and trace the commitment and leaving processes of individuals involved in "radical" groups (drug cults, communes, religious and ideoloical groups, therapeutic communities etc.) from the height of commitment to six months post disengagement.

Appendix K

Non-fictional Accounts of Disengagement used as Nonreactive Measures[1]

Author	**Title of Work**	**Type of Social Group &Identity**	**Additional Details**
Agnew, V. (2003)	Where I Come From	Geographic, Socio-economic and Cultural	Immigration from India and acculturation to Canada
Armstrong, J. (2005)	"Making a Break from Bountiful," April 9, 2005 edition of the *Globe and Mail*	Religious	Ray Blackmore's voluntary "exile" from the Fundmentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Later day Saints (FLD), a polygamous colony in Bountiful, British Columbia
Armstrong, K. (1981/2004) Armstrong, K. (2004)	Through the Narrow Gate: A Memoir of Life In and Out of the Convent The Spiral Staircase: My Climb out of Darkness	Religious and Professional	Dispensation from a Roman Catholic Teaching Order (Convent)
Bronson, P. (2005)	What Should I Do With My Life? The True Story of People Who Answered the Ultimate Question.	A variety of social groups, including professional, religious, and socio-economic.	50 accounts of individuals who made radical changes in their lives
Cameron, E. (1997)	No Previous Experience: A Memoir of Love and Change	Sexual Orientation	Coming out as lesbian in mid-life after living a heterosexual life
Colapinto, J. (2000)	As Nature Made Him: The Boy Who Was Raised as a Girl	Gender	The biography of David Reimer, who after a botched circumcision was surgically altered and raised as a girl. At the age of 14, David started to live as a male.

Author	Title of Work	Type of Social Group &Identity	Additional Details
Franz, R. (2002)	Crisis of Conscience	Religious and Professional	Resignation from the international governing body/supreme council of the Jehovah's Witnesses
Grealy, L. (1994)	Autobiography of a Face	Physical Identity	Autobiography of the social identity implications of facial disfigurement caused by cancer (involuntary leaving)
Hasselbach, I. (1996)	Führer-Ex: Memoirs of a Former Neo-Nazi	Extremist	Renunciation of membership in the international Neo-Nazi movement
Hine, P. (2006)	Leaving Magical Groups	Extremist	Left an international magical order of magicians and occultists
Khan, S, (2002)	Aversion and Desire: Negotiating Muslim Female Identity in the Diaspora	Religious-Cultural	A study of the narratives of 14 Muslim women, who immigrated to Canada from Pakistan, India, Egypt, Turkey, Somalia, Iran, and Uganda.
Kroeger, B. (2003)	Passing: When People Can't Be Who They Are	Sexual Orientation (2 accounts) Racial (2 accounts) Socio-economic (1 account)	Biographies of individuals who left social groups they pretended to belong to (and others assumed they belonged to) but in fact they were "passing".

Author	Title of Work	Type of Social Group &Identity	Additional Details
Kuffel, F. (2004)	Passing for Thin: Losing Half my Weight and Finding Myself	Physical Identity	An autobiography of profound weight loss and the social identity implications
McBride, J. (1996)	The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother	Racial	Not a leaving so much as an exploration of the identity implications for a Black man discovering his mother's white Jewish identity
Smith, R. (2004)	The Rest of the Iceberg	Professional	Voluntary retirement from professional sports at the peak of his career (NFL football)
Walls, J. (2005)	The Glass Castle	Territorial-socioeconomic	A memoir chronicling the transition from a poor nomadic childhood to a New York celebrity writer.

[1] Two of my study participants are published authors who have written about their disengagement experiences. I read each of their accounts but cannot reference them, as their inclusion on this table would reveal participants' identity.

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