

How Families Navigate Religious Disaffiliation: A Grounded Theory

by

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ABSTRACT

Religious disaffiliation, defined as the act of leaving or choosing to no longer affiliate with a religious tradition, has individual, relational, psychological, and emotional consequences. While not every family experiences challenges after the disclosure of religious disaffiliation, the relational challenges associated with disaffiliation are well documented. Negative relational consequences include loss of family and community ties, secret keeping, lying, and tension in family relationships. While disaffiliation research is becoming more common, there are still large gaps in the literature about the relational impacts of disaffiliation, as well as information about families who navigate these changes well. The current study aimed to begin filling these gaps in the literature by focusing on how families maintain family relationships and family functioning after religious disaffiliation from the perspective of the disaffiliated family member. Using grounded theory, the researcher interviewed 20 individuals who disaffiliated from their family's religious tradition about the disaffiliation experience and the factors that allowed them to maintain family relationships and functioning. The analysis resulted in the development of a dynamic model characterized by two processes, disaffiliated individual actions and actions experienced as a family. Both processes are built upon a foundation of love and the desire to have a relationship. Clinical implications and future research directions will be discussed.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Religious disaffiliation is occurring across religious bodies at higher rates than ever before in the United States (Thiessen & Wilkins-LaFlamme, 2017). While experiences of religious disaffiliation vary, researchers suggest that disaffiliation impacts identity, mental health, physical health, and relationships. As such, religious disaffiliation is a phenomenon that therapists need to study and be prepared to treat clinically. Relationally, religious disaffiliation can have a profound impact on family relationships. How families react to religious disaffiliation lies along a spectrum, with some families maintaining relationships and family functioning and others reacting with emotional cutoff and dissolved relationships. This study examines how families maintain relationships and family functioning after the disclosure of religious disaffiliation.

Study Justification

Religious practices, beliefs, and communities play an important role in family functioning and relationships (Kelley et al., 2020; Kelley et al., 2022; Mahoney, 2010; Marks, 2006). In the United States of America (USA), 77% of Americans report that religion is very important or somewhat important to their lives, while only 22% consider religion to be not too important or not important at all (Pew Research Center, 2014). The vast majority of Americans report that religion is important to them, and Christians are currently the largest religious group in the USA (Pew Research Center, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2022). However, the number of religious *nones*, defined as individuals who do not affiliate with a religious group, is rapidly growing (Thiessen & Wilkins-LaFlamme, 2017).

Religious disaffiliation is occurring at higher rates than ever before in the USA (Thiessen & Wilkins-LaFlamme, 2017). In large part, religious nones are individuals who were raised in a religious tradition and have chosen to leave that tradition (Thiessen & Wilkins-LaFlamme, 2017); however, there is a growing number of religious nones who were raised without a religious identity by religious none parents (Bengston et al., 2018; Merino, 2012). If current trends of religious disaffiliation continue, it is projected that religious nones will be the majority group or closely resemble the number of Christians in the USA by 2070 (The Pew Research Center, 2022). As such, over the next 50 years, it can be expected that a significant number of American families will experience the phenomenon of religious disaffiliation.

Although there is a lack of research on the relational impacts of religious disaffiliation, the studies that do exist express profound impacts to family relationships, family interactions, family functioning, and overall well-being of family members. In their study of individuals in therapy after leaving the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Jindra and Lee (2021) found that some of the main goals of therapy were to process relational challenges such as, feeling inauthentic around family members, tension within their family unit, and feeling lonely and left out of their family. Similarly, participants in Bjorkmark and colleagues (2021) study expressed a sense of social isolation after losing friendships and family relationships post-disaffiliation. Many families who experience disaffiliation report a sense of loss and confusion about how best to move forward (Knight et al., 2019). In fact, of all the consequences of disaffiliation, of which there are many, researchers suggest that relational challenges are the most difficult

to navigate (Bjorkmark et al., 2021) and that there is a lack of resources available to help families navigate these challenges well (Knight et al., 2019).

Knight and colleagues (2019) found in their study that families experiencing religious disaffiliation struggled to find relational therapeutic services to help them navigate these challenges. When they did find services, they reported that therapists were ill equipped to work with religious disaffiliation and that services were seldom helpful. As such, Knight and colleagues (2019) called for an increase in relational research to better understand the unique experiences and clinical needs of families experiencing religious disaffiliation. The present study will begin to address the gap in the literature and illuminate factors that help families experiencing religious disaffiliation to navigate this change while maintaining family functioning and family relationships. The goal of this study is to understand how families navigate family functioning and family relationships in ways that maintain connection post-disclosure of religious disaffiliation.

Inquiry Framework

This study used constructivist grounded theory methodology to answer the research questions. As such, analysis is meant to be inductive with themes emerging from the data. While this study is not meant to test or apply theory, I did use the six domains of the McMaster Approach to Families (Miller et al., 2000) as a sensitizing framework to flexibly guide the study. The McMaster Approach to Families defines six domains of family functioning that have a direct impact on a family's ability to navigate challenges competently or with significant difficulty (Hampson & Beavers, 2019). The six domains include: problem solving, communication, role functioning, affective responsiveness,

affective involvement, and behavior control (Miller et al., 2000). Each of these domains is defined in the literature review.

While this study does not test the McMaster Approach to Families, we were able to investigate how the McMaster Approach aligns with the experiences of families experiencing religious disaffiliation. Interviews with participants allowed us to collect data on what factors helped the disaffiliated individual maintain family relationships and remain connected to their family post-disclosure of their choice to disaffiliate. Through participant interviews, we learned that some of the factors that contribute to maintained family functioning and relationships align with the six domains of the McMaster Approach. However, some domains of family functioning central to the McMaster Approach do not have a strong bearing on a family's ability to navigate disaffiliation. This aspect of the study is addressed in the discussion section of this manuscript.

Inquirer's Stake

I was raised in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, commonly referred to as the LDS or Mormon church. Growing up, my family was very involved in the church and openly identified as members in our community. We attended weekly services, had many friends in our congregation, and my parents served in positions of leadership within the church organization. When I was 19, I chose to serve a mission for the church where I moved to California for 18-months to teach others about the church and our beliefs. While I was on my mission, my parents chose to disaffiliate from the church. When they told me they had decided to disaffiliate, I felt a range of emotions – angry, sad, disappointed, confused, shocked. The disclosure of their disaffiliation was difficult and brought with it many questions about how they raised us, what this meant

for the future of our family, and what I wanted my future with the church to be. Though challenging at times, we were able to maintain our family relationships, and, in many ways, we are stronger now than we were before. The relational challenges associated with disaffiliation have received some attention in academic literature; however, there has been significantly less attention given to how disaffiliation is navigated well and the positive outcomes, individual and relational, that can come from the choice to disaffiliate. Both perspectives on disaffiliation, and everything in between, are important stories that therapists, researchers, and the world at large, need to hear. I believe that this study begins to fill the gap in the literature around how families maintain connection post-disclosure of religious disaffiliation and brings to light an important and, to this point, overlooked experience and perspective.

Study Boundaries

It is important to acknowledge the assumptions, boundaries, and limitations of this study and its design. At its core, this study assumes that religious disaffiliation fundamentally impacts family relationships and functioning. While the impact of disaffiliation is different in each family, there is an impact that should be acknowledged. Additionally, this study assumes that some families can maintain family functioning and relationships post-disclosure of religious disaffiliation. The study is based upon these assumptions and illuminates these important perspectives of religious disaffiliation.

A boundary to this study that is important to note is that this study is focused only on immediate family functioning post-disclosure of religious disaffiliation. Religious disaffiliation does not only impact immediate family relationships; rather, there may be changes in extended family relationships, friendships, community relationships, and,

depending on the person and their unique context, professional relationships. This study only speaks to the family of origin and how this system navigated functioning and healthy relationships post-disaffiliation. At times, participants discussed their marital relationships; however, this data was marked during data analysis to ensure it was not included in the results. Another boundary to the study is that it only speaks to the experience of family functioning post-disclosure of religious disaffiliation. In many families, the changes to family functioning and relationships begin long before an individual chooses to formally disaffiliate. These impacts to family functioning may begin when someone begins to express doubt or ask questions about their religious beliefs, when they explore materials (i.e., books, different translations of the Bible, religious music, etc.) from another religious group, or express a desire to expand their spirituality. While these time points are no less important than the decision to disaffiliate, they are more difficult to operationalize. For this reason, I focused on the specific time point of disclosure of disaffiliation.

The greatest limitation to this study is the use of individual interviews to study a family phenomenon. This choice was made due to doubts about the ability to recruit entire families to the study. The researchers also had concerns about potential ethical issues around interviewing families together about such a challenging and vulnerable topic. Even if we were to interview family members separately, there would be limits to confidentiality in what is reported in the results section. Although the data would be de-identified, families could potentially put the pieces together and find their family members in the manuscript, possibly putting a participant at risk of disclosing information to their family indirectly. Another limitation to the study, as outlined in the

methods section, is that the researcher did not strictly define disaffiliation within the inclusion criteria. While this helped with recruitment and allowed the study to speak to the diverse experiences of disaffiliation, it may also make the sample less homogenous in that definitions of disaffiliation may impact how it affects the family system. For example, a family may react very differently to a child who has disaffiliated but continues to attend weekly religious services with their family compared to a child who refuses to attend weekly services. Both children have disaffiliated, but it could potentially have a different impact on the family.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate how families navigate family functioning and relationships after the disclosure of religious disaffiliation. This study begins to fill the gap in the literature around how families navigate religious disaffiliation. Using constructivist grounded theory, we aimed to answer the following questions: *How do families navigate family functioning after the disclosure of religious disaffiliation?; What domains of family functioning are essential to maintaining family functioning and relationships?; What do family members do to enhance family functioning after the disclosure of religious disaffiliation?; and What do family members do to repair challenges to family functioning that result from religious disaffiliation?*

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

While the religious landscape of the USA is shifting, there are still large numbers of individuals who identify with religious organizations. In 2010, the Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project (Pew Research Foundation, 2010) reported that in the USA, 78.3% of people identified as Christian, 16.4% identified as unaffiliated, 1.8% identified as Jewish, 1.2% identified as Buddhist, and less than 1% of the population identified as Hindu, Muslim, a Folk Religion, or another religion. In 2014, the Pew Research Center conducted the Religious Landscape Study with over 35,000 participants from across the USA. This survey provides important information about the religious beliefs of Americans, as well as the religious landscape of America currently. In this survey, 70.6% of respondents identified as Christian (including Evangelical Protestant, Historically Black Protestant, Catholic, Mormon, Orthodox Christian, Jehovah's Witness, or Other Christian), 5.9% identified as belonging to a Non-Christian Faith (including, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Other World Religions, and Other Faiths), and 22.8% identified as unaffiliated or religious "nones" (including, atheist, agnostic, and nothing in particular). Most recently, in 2020, the Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project (Pew Research Center, 2022) reported that 75.5% of Americans identified as Christian, 18.6% identified as unaffiliated, 1.7% identified as Jewish, 1.2% identified as Buddhist, and less than 1% identified as, Hindu, Muslim, a Folk Religion, or another religion.

This data suggests that while the religious landscape in the USA is rapidly changing, religion remains an important part of many Americans' lives. The Religious Landscape Study reports that 53% of Americans consider religion to be very important in

their lives, 24% consider it to be somewhat important, 11% report it is not too important, and 11% feel it is not important at all (Pew Research Center, 2014). As such, a large number of Americans and American families could potentially experience a member of their family disaffiliating from their religious tradition. In fact, as discussed in a following section, data projections from the Pew Research Center (2022) postulate that by 2070 religious “nones” could become the largest religious group in the USA or be close to or equivalent to the number of Christians in the USA. In either scenario, if current trends in the religious landscape continue, we can expect a drastic increase in the experience of religious disaffiliation in American families over the next 50 years.

Religion and the Family

Religion and spirituality are experienced both individually and relationally (Walsh, 2013). While everyone has their own relationship with their religious identity and beliefs, these experiences are embedded within larger systems, such as the intergenerational transmission of religion, an immediate family’s religious identity, the larger religious community of which they are a part, the local congregations with whom they worship, and many more. Within family systems, religion can impact the way family relationships are created, maintained, and transformed throughout the lifespan (Mahoney, 2010). Walsh (2013) posits that most families value a sense of spirituality. In fact, she reports that “moral and spiritual values” is the second most ranked factor that contributes to family strength (Walsh, 2013, p. 190). Although every religion espouses a different set of beliefs, most major religions support the notion of well-functioning, healthy families built upon the values of love, selflessness, commitment, and ethical treatment of one another (Mahoney, 2010; Onedera, 2008).

In their review of the literature on relational spirituality, Mahoney (2010) suggests that religion has a profound impact on the processes underlying family functioning. Religion strongly influences the maintenance of family relationships based on the following three relational spiritual mechanisms: (1) reliance on one's relationship with Deity, (2) family relationships being infused with spirituality, and (3) reliance upon one's wider religious community (Mahoney, 2010). Krok's (2018) study supported this in finding that religion was positively correlated with levels of closeness, safety, and emotional wellness within a family unit. Marks (2006) proposes a model of family health and religion wherein he emphasizes the importance of religious practices, religious beliefs, and religious community. Within his model, he illuminates both the positive facets of these three factors and the negative facets. On the positive side, shared religious practices can benefit marital and parent-child relationships. Shared religious beliefs and practices promote long-term, satisfying, and well-functioning marriages. Additionally, couples with a shared religious community experience increased social support and a higher quality of marriage. The negative aspects of religion and relationships found in this study are discussed below.

Similarly, Kelley and colleagues (2020) found that religion has both a unifying and dividing influence on marital relationships. Using the same three categories, religious beliefs, practices, and community, they report that religious beliefs provide a sense of unity around the importance and purpose of marriage, which helps couples to find common ground with one another. Spiritual practices were found to be unifying as they provided an opportunity to spend time together and show love to each other. Lastly, the religious community was unifying in that it provided social support to the couple and

opportunities for the couple to support others. Additionally, before marriage, participants noted that their religious communities provided a space to potentially find a likeminded partner.

Spillman and colleagues (2012) found that levels of religiosity within a family unit predicted more positive interactions within families, both within and beyond generational boundaries. Kelley and colleagues (2022) also found that religion has a unifying and dividing influence on relationships across generational boundaries. In their study, Kelley and colleagues (2022) analyzed data from parent-child interviews in the American Families of Faith project (Marks & Dollahite, 2017). In terms of unifying aspects, they found that religious beliefs unified parent-child dyads by providing beliefs about the parent-child relationship and parental responsibilities, providing common ground for the parent(s) and child to relate on, and increasing parental focus on their children. Additionally, religious practices united parent-child dyads by providing opportunities to spend time together, including gendered practices that gave same-gender dyads opportunities to spend time together. Lastly, specific religious practices, such as prayer, facilitated opportunities for parents to give their children guidance. In this study, the religious community was found to unite parents and their children by providing a common social support system and providing a larger community for parents and children to interact with together.

As alluded to in several of the above studies, research has found that religion can have both negative and positive, unifying and dividing impacts on family systems (Dollahite et al., 2018; Kelley et al., 2020; Kelley et al., 2022; Marks, 2006). As such, the research on the impact of religion on family relationships and functioning yields mixed

results. Returning to the above studies, Marks (2006) summarizes the literature around the unifying and dividing aspects of religious practices, beliefs, and communities on entire family systems. Of religious practices, he notes that families where individuals are forced to engage in religious practices that they do not want to engage in can cause strain to family relationships. In terms of religious beliefs, he notes that there are some religious beliefs that could result in abuse within family relationships and tolerance of abusive behaviors from the wider community. He also notes that interfaith families experience unique challenges as they navigate differing identities and sets of beliefs. Lastly, religious communities tend to be supportive of family systems; however, some religious groups may not be accepting of all family presentations, such as single-parent families, divorced families, or LGBTQIA+ families.

In their study of married couples, Kelley and colleagues (2020) also found dividing aspects within the categories of religious beliefs, practices, and communities. Within religious beliefs, they report that when beliefs are not shared within the couple unit, this can cause challenges and disagreements. Additionally, teachings around gender and sexuality may bring about challenges between partners who have different views. Regarding religious practices, they found that, at times, religious practices require the couple to spend time away from each other, including gendered practices that naturally separate heterosexual couples. Lastly, within the category of religious communities, division can occur if one partner feels disconnected from their religious community or they feel that their partner is spending an inordinate amount of time interacting with the community. Again, these results speak to the unique challenges faced by couples where there are differing religious beliefs.

Kelley and colleagues (2022) also report that there are experiences that both unify and weaken parent-child dyads within the realms of religious belief, practice, and community. Within religious beliefs, parents and their children may feel divided when there are disconnects between the family's belief system and popular societal beliefs and when there are differing beliefs within the family unit, including across generations. In religious practices, division occurred when children wanted to participate in activities that were contrary to their religious practices, including when children do not participate in religious practices due to a desire to fit in or spend time with their peers. Lastly, parents and children may feel divided in their faith community when parental responsibilities within the community detract from time spent together as a family. Once again, this study highlights the unique challenges within family units where there are differing religious beliefs and/or identities.

In families where there are differing religious beliefs or varying degrees of religious practice, families experience unique challenges (Dollahite et al., 2004; Lambert & Dollahite, 2006). Vaaler and colleagues (2009) found that while involvement in a spiritual community generally decreases rates of divorce in married couples, when couples differ in their degree of belief in the Bible or their frequency of church attendance, it actually increases their chance of divorce. Similarly, Curtis and Ellison (2002) found that these same factors (i.e., differences in belief in the Bible and church attendance) predict higher levels of arguing in couples. In extreme cases, religious incongruence may even increase the risk of interpersonal violence (Ellison et al., 1999). Bartkowski and colleagues (2008) and Stokes and Regnerus (2009) found that in family systems where a child espouses different beliefs than their parents and/or other family

members, they are more likely to experience challenges within the parent-child relationship, as well as challenges to their overall well-being. In their sample of interfaith couples in Northern Ireland, McAloney (2014) found that participants in interfaith couples had significantly worse mental health than their same-faith counterparts. Based on previous literature, they hypothesize that this could be because differing beliefs lead to couples not providing each other with adequate support, an increase in disagreements and conflict around differing beliefs, and additional outside stressors from community members who disapprove of their relationship.

Dollahite and colleagues (2018) acknowledge the mixed findings around the intersection of religion and family and created a model of eight dualities to reflect the ways in which religion both helps and harms families. The eight dualities include: (1) “transcendent and mundane spiritual experiences may affect families”, (2) “families may experience God as a close confidant and an authority figure”, (3) “religion in families may involve accepting and refusing actions”, (4) “religion in families may include religious expectations and relational compensators”, (5) “religion in families may generate and address relational struggles”, (6) “religion in families may be relationally divisive and unifying”, (7) “religion in families may bring perplexing mysteries and profound meanings”, and (8) “religion in families may be a transforming and a maintaining influence” (p. 226). Several of these dualities are applicable to this study and its focus on family functioning and relationships post-disclosure of religious disaffiliation. The third, fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth dualities are particularly relevant to this study.

A faith transition of any kind, including disaffiliation, naturally transforms a family system. Shifting religious identities and beliefs will fundamentally impact family relationships, which could generate challenges within the family system and transform religion into a dividing influence, even if it has been uniting and a tool to navigate challenges in the past. Based on how a family interacts with their religious identity and beliefs, they may be accepting of a member's decision to disaffiliate and shift their belief system ("accepting actions") or refuse to accept this shift ("refusing actions"), potentially resulting in strained relationships or cutoff (Dollahite et al., 2018. P. 226). To summarize, Walsh (2013) says that,

Spirituality can foster a sense of meaning, wholeness, harmony, and connection with others – from the most intimate bonds, to extended kinship and community networks, to a unity with all life, nature, and the universe. Like other domains of influence, spiritual beliefs and practices can be hurtful, destructive, and divisive. Thus, spirituality can be seen as inherently relational, with the potential to nourish or to harm (p. 189).

Statistics on Religious Disaffiliation

Thiessen and Wilkins-LaFlamme (2017) report that religious "nones", defined as individuals who are religiously unaffiliated, are growing at a higher rate than any other religious group in the USA. Religious nones may be individuals who identify as having left the religious tradition they were raised in or individuals who were raised without a religious identity. Historically, religious nones have been viewed as exclusively individuals who left the religion they were raised in; however, research suggests that the rates of intergenerational transmission of a nonreligious identity are increasing over time

(Bengston et al., 2018). Bengston and colleagues (2018) found that instead of intergenerationally passing on a religious identity and set of beliefs, their sample intentionally passed down humanistic values and atheism. Bengston and colleagues (2018) also found that in families with nonreligious parents, children were more likely to identify as nonreligious as well. Similarly, Merino (2012) found that individuals who were raised with no religious identity tend to remain religiously unaffiliated into adulthood, are more skeptical of organized religion, and are more likely to choose religiously unaffiliated spouses if they are married.

As the previously cited statistics indicate, the percentage of individuals in the USA who identify as religiously unaffiliated is rapidly growing. In the USA, the percentages moved from 16.4% in 2010 (Pew Research Center, 2010), to 22.8% in 2014 (Pew Research Center, 2014), with a slight decrease to 18.6% in 2020 (Pew Research Center, 2022). Although there has been a slight drop in religious nones recently, it is projected that the number of religiously unaffiliated individuals will grow to 21.2% by 2030, 23.6% by 2040, and 25.6% by 2050 (Pew Research Center, 2015). Woodhead (2016) notes that due to the project's reliance on census data, and other non-specified factors, it is likely that the Global Religious Futures Project – from which we have reported the 2010 and 2020 statistics – are underestimating the actual number of religious nones in the USA. Therefore, these numbers may be an underestimation of the actual number of religious nones in the USA. Additionally, these statistics do not allow for a nuanced definition of being a religious none. For example, even post-disaffiliation, some people continue to identify with a religious organization, even though they are no longer

affiliated. Therefore, on a survey they may choose to identify themselves as Catholic, for example, even if they no longer affiliate with the church in their day-to-day lives.

Researchers at the Pew Research Center hypothesize that if trends in religious disaffiliation continue, by 2070 religiously unaffiliated individuals will closely approach or even exceed the number of Christians in the USA (Pew Research Center, 2022). Based on recent and current trends in disaffiliation, they tested four plausible scenarios that could occur by 2070: (1) Christians will no longer be the majority group in the USA, but will maintain their position as the largest religious group, (2) religious nones will become the largest religious group in the USA, but not the majority group, (3) religious nones become the majority group by a slim margin, and (4) Christians will maintain their majority group status. Researchers hypothesize that, based on current trends, the second scenario is the most plausible and the fourth is the least realistic.

While this may seem an implausible prediction based on the historical traditions of Christianity in the USA and the current amount of power Christians hold in the USA, many countries around the world have followed similar trajectories. Most notably, Great Britain recently shifted to religious nones being the majority religious group (Woodhead, 2017). Woodhead (2017) reports that when she began her research in 2013, 41% identified as religious nones. Two years later, in 2015, 50.6% identified as religious nones, making this group the country's majority. The USA is still far behind these numbers, but our current trends closely resemble those of Great Britain (Woodhead, 2017). As such, it is possible that the USA could become a majority non-religious country in the near future, assuming current trends continue. Even if religious nones do not become the new religious majority in the USA, these projections continue to suggest

that a large number of individuals and families in the USA will experience disaffiliation and its relational impacts within the next 50 years.

Religious Disaffiliation

Religious disaffiliation is defined as “change in either individual role-related activity (termination of organizational membership or cessation of active involvement in organizational activity) or individual symbolic connectedness (disidentification with a specific religious group or its belief system)” to one’s religion of origin (Bromley, 1991, p. 166). Disaffiliation is a complex phenomenon that differs widely from person to person, making it difficult to define and capture holistically. Examples of individuals who consider themselves disaffiliated may include: an individual who no longer believes in their religion’s teachings, but continues to attend weekly services with their spouse, an individual who has requested to take their names off of their church’s records, an individual who identifies as a member of their religion culturally but no longer engages in any practices or espouses the beliefs, and many more. For this reason, researchers have struggled to optimally define disaffiliation (Bromley, 1991), resulting in many words and phrases to discuss a similar process. Popular words used in the literature include, deconversion (Fisher, 2017), faith crisis (Webb, 2001), disaffiliation (Bromley, 1991), and others.

Many reasons may lead someone to disaffiliate from their religious organization. Everson (2019) suggests that reasons related to politics, culture, social expectations, demographic characteristics, cognitions, education, emotions, psychological factors, relational factors, and trauma may contribute to the decision to disaffiliate. Vargas (2012) found that political ideology, skepticism around religion, stressors, and sociodemographic

characteristics have an impact on contemplating disaffiliation. Norenzayan (2016) compiled the many potential reasons for disaffiliation into four simple categories: cognitive, motivational, cultural, and psychological. In their grounded theory of how people move from Christianity to Atheism, Perez and Vallieres (2019) present the core categories of reason and enquiry, personal development, and criticism and discontent as the core processes that lead to disaffiliation and the adoption of Atheism.

In recent years, there has been a dramatic increase in television programs, podcasts, books, documentaries, and online forums about religion, spiritual/religious abuse, and religious disaffiliation. There are websites, Facebook groups, Instagram accounts, and TikTok channels devoted to discussing faith deconstruction and navigating disaffiliation. A simple search on TikTok shows that the following hashtags have yielded billions of views of videos associated with these themes across the platform:

#religiousdeconstruction (18.6 million), #exreligious (77.5 million), #deconstructiontiktok (30.4 million), #exvangelical (1.1 billion), #xmormon (1.2 billion), and #exfundie (311.8 million). While there is no research specifically examining how the dissemination of these materials impacts rates of disaffiliation, it seems plausible that the accessibility of these materials could impact an individual's decision to disaffiliate from their religious organization. Additionally, the number of online spaces where people share their individual disaffiliation journeys may be comforting and normalizing to individuals contemplating disaffiliation while simultaneously providing a space for them to process their own journey and share their story. Regardless of the reasons for disaffiliation, those who choose to disaffiliate often experience intense

consequences, particularly for those disaffiliating from high-demand religious structures (Nica, 2019).

Religious disaffiliation results in both positive and negative consequences for those who choose to leave their religious tradition (Brent, 1994; Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010; Wright et al., 2011). Examples of positive consequences include feelings of freedom, a decrease in anxiety, and the ability to live a more congruent life (Brent, 1994; McSkimming, 2017; Wright et al., 2011). Negative consequences may include loss of identity, loss of community, loss of social support, family challenges, guilt, shame, confusion, loss of a moral code, a decrease in confidence, resentment toward organized religion and deity, and fear of punishment from deity (Berger, 2015; Brent, 1994; Davidman & Greil, 2007; Hookway & Habibis, 2015; Sahker, 2016; Wright et al., 2011). While there are numerous individual consequences experienced by the person choosing to disaffiliate, there are also relational consequences that impact family relationships and functioning.

Impact on the Family

While not every family experiences a loss of family relationships or decrease in functioning due to religious disaffiliation (Bjorkmark et al., 2021), the negative relational consequences of religious disaffiliation are well documented. Jindra and Lee (2021) found that clients in therapy for religious disaffiliation from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints needed to process several relational challenges, including: uneasiness in family relationships, family members being intrusive about life choices, feeling left out, feeling inauthentic in family relationships, lying to family members, loneliness, tension in family relationships, and fear of disclosing their disaffiliated status to family members.

Participants who feared disclosing their disaffiliated status to immediate family members, extended family members, and/or friends described themselves as “leading two lives” – being a fake version of themselves with people that did not know their disaffiliated status and their real selves with those who knew. The anticipatory anxiety of telling their loved ones exacerbated the general distress they felt throughout the disaffiliation process.

Knight and colleagues (2019) report that, in their sample, all families experienced a sense of loss and struggled to understand how to maintain family bonds post-disaffiliation. More specifically, participants noted lack of effective communication within their family units, feeling misunderstood by their family members, struggling to navigate religious family events and activities, struggling through uncomfortable interactions with family members, and family members having painful reactions to their disclosure of disaffiliation. Researchers also noted that within family units, different family members had very different accounts and perspectives on the relational impact of disaffiliation, which, in some cases, made it difficult to come to a place of acceptance and common ground.

Bjorkmark and colleagues (2021) found that those who chose to disaffiliate became isolated socially, losing family connections and friendships. For those who maintained their social relationships, they still felt barriers to connecting wholly post-disaffiliation. In their study, participants described being rejected by their loved ones and having to mourn their loss even though their loved ones were still living. Participants shared that this rejection left them feeling like outsiders from their former community while simultaneously feeling unknown and outside of the “new world” they had entered via disaffiliation. Bjorkmark and colleagues (2021) note that, in their sample, participants

stated that the loss of significant relationships was the most difficult consequence of disaffiliation experienced.

Zimmerman and colleagues (2015) studied family relationship outcomes when a family member discloses that they are an Atheist. Using the Circumplex Model (Olson et al., 1978), they examined what cohesion, adaptability, and communication looks like post-disclosure. In their sample, families that maintained a sense of cohesion were supportive of each other and believed that religion was insignificant; whereas families who struggled with cohesion were unable to relate to one another, disengaged from family relationships, and expressed anger around the disclosure of Atheism. Families who remained adaptable were accepting of each other, loving, and took their time processing the disclosure. Families who became rigid dismissed the disclosure and made active efforts to reengage their family member in religious beliefs and/or practices. Interestingly, some families who maintained healthy communication were able to speak candidly about the disclosure; however, others limited the amount they spoke about it or avoided the topic altogether. Families with unhealthy communication were characterized by tension and dishonesty.

Intersectionality is important to consider when examining the relational impacts of religious disaffiliation. Due to strict gender roles and rules around sex and sexuality in many religious organizations, it is not uncommon for disaffiliation to coincide with an individual discovering, exploring, and/or accepting their gender identity or sexual orientation. Jindra and Lee (2021) report that participants who were simultaneously coming out and disclosing their disaffiliation status experienced increased distress and anticipatory anxiety around coming out to their loved ones about both aspects of their

lives. Manalang (2021) found that for members of Generation Z and millennials with minoritized racial identities, the potential loss of family and cultural ties was a barrier to disaffiliation. When faced with the choice to disaffiliate from their religion and risk losing their family and community ties, participants reported that it was too high of a risk and that they would rather stay affiliated with their religious organization to maintain these essential social bonds.

While there is a growing body of literature around the relational impacts of disaffiliation, there are still large gaps in this research area and a need for more relationally focused studies. As outlined in the family and religion section, for religious families, religion acts as a great unifying force for married dyads, parent-child dyads, and entire family systems. When a member of the family chooses to disaffiliate, these points of unity and connection are deeply changed and may transform into points of division. In many families, religion underlies family functioning and played, and continues to play, a pivotal role in family creation, maintenance, and transformation throughout the lifespan (Mahoney, 2010). In families where this is the case, disaffiliation will intimately impact family functioning, maintenance of family relationships, and transformations within the family unit throughout the lifespan. These shifts to family functioning and relationship maintenance will likely have a direct impact on the family's ability to navigate this family change.

Though there are no published studies examining the existential challenges that come from disaffiliation, they are important to note, and we can hypothesize how they may impact family functioning and relationships. Most religious organizations prescribe belief systems around the importance of family and family roles. In some churches, the

sanctity and validity of a marriage relies on a couple's commitment to their marital vows and the church. Some churches believe and teach that families will remain together after death, predicated upon their faithfulness and adherence to religious teachings and rites. In families who believe these teachings, there is an extra layer of grief in that they not only have to process the disaffiliation but question the validity of their marriage in the eyes of God and the church and/or if their family will remain together after death. These ambiguous losses are difficult to process, and it is likely that they will have a significant impact on emotional well-being, family relationships, and family interactions.

As outlined in the above studies, disaffiliation has the potential to impact many different factors of family functioning and relationships. In this study, we used the domains from The McMaster Approach to Families (Miller et al., 2000) – problem-solving, communication, roles, affective responsiveness, affective involvement, and behavior control – as a sensitizing framework to guide the creation of an interview guide and provide the researcher with a place to start analysis. The use of The McMaster Approach to Families as a sensitizing framework is described at length in the methods section.

The McMaster Approach to Families

The McMaster Approach to Families (Miller et al., 2000) defines the foundational elements of family functioning to aid therapists in their treatment of family systems. The McMaster Approach is comprised of: (1) a theory of family functioning, (2) multiple assessment tools, and (3) a theory of therapy that can be used by therapists working with family systems (Miller et al., 2000). For this study, I discuss the theory of family functioning and one of the assessment tools is discussed in the methods section. The six

domains of family functioning outlined in The McMaster Approach are used as a sensitizing framework in this study.

The McMaster Approach posits that there are six foundational domains underlying family functioning: problem-solving, communication, roles, affective responsiveness, affective involvement, and behavior control. Each domain can be viewed from an instrumental or affective viewpoint. In the context of this theory, instrumental is defined as being related to the challenges of everyday life (i.e., finances, household work, etc.). Affective is defined as related to experiences that elicit feelings or emotions from family members. In addition to instrumental and affective viewpoints, many of the dimensions have additional factors that are of importance and may impact overall family functioning. Each of the six domains are discussed in detail below.

Problem-Solving

Problem-solving is defined as the family's ability to successfully solve problems in a way that maintains effective family functioning (Miller et al., 2000). Within the context of this theory, a problem can be anything that a family struggles to solve and/or something that significantly challenges the family's ability to function effectively. As noted above, the problems a family interfaces with may be instrumental or affective in nature. It is important to note that every family, based on their unique circumstances will define problems differently and, depending on the family, some things may or may not be conceptualized as problems. For instance, in the context of this study, the experience of religious disaffiliation may be defined as an affective problem in some families while others may not conceptualize this experience as a problem. If it is defined as a problem,

family members may take active steps to reengage their family member in religious beliefs or practices which may increase feelings of tension, sadness, or anger.

Communication

How a family relays information to one another is categorized as communication. While this theory acknowledges that there are many forms of communication used in family systems (i.e., verbal and nonverbal), the focus in this domain is on verbal communication. In addition to instrumental and affective communication, this domain also looks at the clarity of communication and if communication is direct or indirect in nature. Religious disaffiliation can impact communication in many ways. As outlined above, Zimmerman and colleagues (2015) found that some families can maintain effective communication post-disclosure of a change in religious affiliation, whereas others struggle to communicate openly and authentically. In some families, family members may be able to approach one another with respect and curiosity regarding the choice to disaffiliate. Other families might approach each other with the intention of changing their family member's mind or in an argumentative or condescending manner.

Roles

Family roles are the ways in which individuals within the family behave to fulfill family needs. These roles are generally well-established patterns within the family system. Again, roles may be instrumental or affective in nature and may be geared toward either necessary or other family functions. Necessary family functions are defined as areas requiring consistent attention to ensure effective family functioning. Other family functions are simply any other area of family life that must be attended to but are not fundamentally necessary to the well-being of the family. Family functions, whether they

be necessary or other, can be categorized as either instrumental or affective in nature, or they may be a combination of both. In many religions, traditional gender roles are built into theological beliefs about marriage and the family. In some families, the father may be considered the spiritual head of the household; however, if he chooses to disaffiliate, this role will fundamentally change. Depending on the religious body, the wife may become the religious head of the household or, if this role is bound by gender, it may be passed to an older son, member of the extended family (i.e., grandfather, uncle, etc.), or a man outside of the family system (i.e., clergy, friend, congregation member, etc.).

Affective Responsiveness

How families respond emotionally to different experiences is defined as affective responsiveness. When assessing for responsiveness, the focus is on the quality and quantity of the emotions expressed. The quality of responsiveness is defined by the range of emotions expressed in the family (i.e., is a full range of emotions expressed or are emotions only expressed in one area, such as anger). Additionally, are the emotions expressed consistent with the experience eliciting the reaction. For example, if a child disclosed stealing \$100 from their parents, the parents reacting with disappointment or frustration would be viewed as consistent, whereas a parent reacting with joy and encouragement would be viewed as inconsistent with the experience. The quantity of responsiveness is viewed as the amount of affective responsiveness displayed within the family system and is evaluated on a scale from under-responsive to over-responsive. In the context of religious disaffiliation, each family member will have a different emotional reaction based on their own beliefs and personal level of affiliation. This fundamentally shifts what would be a consistent emotional reaction. An example of a potential

consistent emotional reaction would be a sibling who had disaffiliated from their religion years before expressing gratitude that they are no longer alone after another family member also chose to disaffiliate. An example of an inconsistent emotional reaction would be a parent expressing joy when their child's choice to disaffiliate dictates that they have to cutoff communication and enter into a period of shunning.

Affective Involvement

Affective involvement is defined as how involved the family is with each other in terms of their values and how they spend time together. It is important to note that affective involvement goes deeper than the amount of time a family spends together or how they spend that time; rather, it is viewed more as investment and interest in one another. In this domain, the family is assessed for if they take an interest in one another and value their differences, as well as how they show this interest in one another. Religious disaffiliation fundamentally impacts affective involvement in that disaffiliation represents, to some degree, a shift in values and beliefs. It also, depending on the individual, may impact how a family spends time together, particularly if the disaffiliated individual chooses to cease service attendance, reading religious texts, engaging in prayer, or attending church sponsored activities (i.e., Boy Scout troop, holiday parties, bazaars or other fundraising efforts, congregation book club, etc.). Depending on the individual and their religious tradition, disaffiliation may also limit the number of life events and/or religious rituals (i.e., baptism, confirmation, marriage ceremonies, taking communion, etc.) they can participate in with their families. An individual may choose to not attend these events, or the religious organization may mandate that they cannot participate.

Behavior Control

Lastly, the concept of behavior control includes the patterns families show of controlling each other's behavior. Behavioral control can be present in three different spheres of family life: dangerous situations, psychobiological needs, and social behavior. Regarding dangerous situations, behavior control is defined as how families monitor and control behavior in an effort to maintain the safety of each family member. In reference to psychobiological needs, behavior control is viewed as how families organize around meeting psychobiological needs such as eating, using the bathroom, showing emotion, etc. Behavior control in social situations is defined as how behavior is monitored and/or controlled in situations where the family is socializing together or with people outside the family system.

Similar to problem-solving, each family has different views on behavioral control and what behaviors are or are not appropriate in these spheres of family life. In the context of this paper, in some families, openly expressing disagreement with a religious doctrine may be viewed as appropriate and acceptable, whereas in other families it may be viewed as disrespectful or inappropriate. In addition to the actual standards a family has around behavior, it is important to note that every family will have a different view on how flexible they can be around these set standards. Continuing the previous example, perhaps in one family it is viewed as acceptable to disagree with a religious doctrine when conversing within the family unit, but it would be viewed as disrespectful or inappropriate to disagree in front of extended family members (i.e., grandparents) or outside of the family (i.e., at Sunday school).

Dysfunctional Transactional Patterns

These six domains are viewed as foundational to family functioning. How these domains are expressed in family life determine whether a family is functioning effectively, ineffectively, or somewhere in the middle. Miller and colleagues (2000) note that when a family is not functioning effectively, they are engaging in dysfunctional transactional patterns that may be present in one or more of the six domains. It is important to note that no family is perfect and will have lapses in each of these domains regularly; however, this does not mean they are not a well-functioning family. Families who consistently engage in dysfunctional transactional patterns in one or more of the defined domains are those who are viewed as not functioning effectively. In these families, the theory posits that these dysfunctional transactional patterns serve a purpose within the family unit and serve to decrease anxiety in the family system for the entire family, select members, or one individual member. The anxiety is so intense that the family is willing to threaten their overall family functioning to alleviate it with the dysfunctional transactional pattern. The McMaster Approach posits that attending to the dysfunctional transactional pattern and the domain(s) it impacts is how to increase family functioning and create change in the family system.

According to The McMaster Approach, dysfunctional families generally present in the following ways (Hampson & Beavers, 2019). Regarding problem-solving, families are less likely to settle disagreements or find common ground with one another when there are differences. They are also less likely to resolve problems within the family unit, making them prone to dealing with more problems for a longer period of time. Families with poor communication are less clear in relaying their messages and are more likely to engage in indirect communication practices. Dysfunctional families are unstable in the

assignment of family roles and family members are not held accountable for the responsibilities they have been assigned. Families low in affective responsiveness are limited in what emotions they express, as well as how they can express their emotions and are more likely to exhibit inconsistent emotional reactions, like the examples presented above. Extremes in affective involvement are characteristic of dysfunctional families, such as a family that shares no common values and spends no time together and a family that spends all their time together and does not express any differences. Lastly, dysfunctional behavior control can be inflexible and overbearing or, on the opposite side of the spectrum, there may be no guidelines for behavior and an “anything goes” attitude within the family.

The Missing Influence of Religion

As indicated above, no theory of family functioning creates a holistic picture or accounts for every domain of family life that may impact family functioning. In fact, Miller and colleagues (2000) acknowledge that the six domains outlined in the McMaster Approach do not create a complete picture; rather, they call attention to the domains of family functioning that are most relevant to therapists and within a clinical setting. Bloom (1985) created a self-report assessment of family functioning using foundational works in the family functioning field (Moos & Moos, 1981; Olson et al., 1978; Skinner et al., 1983; van der Veen, 1965). Based on the personal growth dimension of Moos and Moos (1981), Bloom (1985) included three components of personal growth, later termed the value dimension, in his scale. The value dimension included questions about intellectual-cultural values, active-recreational values, and moral-religious values. Bloom (1985) later acknowledged that the moral-religious domain was more adequately captured by the title

religious emphasis. Results showed that each of the components included in the value dimension differed significantly between intact and separated families (Bloom, 1985). Bloom (1985) suggests that this result indicates an important relationship between religion and overall family functioning and encouraged future research in this area.

Purpose of this Study

While it is widely accepted in family science that religion is experienced relationally (Walsh, 2013) and that there are relational consequences to disaffiliation, there is a lack of research in couple and family therapy around religious disaffiliation, its relational impact, and potential clinical implications. In their study, Knight and colleagues (2019) found that participants expressed a deep need for better therapeutic services for relationally navigating religious disaffiliation. Participants conveyed dissatisfaction with the services they had received and challenges finding services at all. Only one participant disclosed that therapy was a helpful experience. Knight and colleagues (2019) call for more systemic, relational research on the impact of religious disaffiliation and I hope that this study helps to answer this call and begin to fill the gap in the literature around the relational impacts of religious disaffiliation.

The purpose of this study was to better understand how families navigate family functioning and family relationships after the disclosure of religious disaffiliation. Using grounded theory, I interviewed disaffiliated individuals who remained connected to their affiliated family members to better understand what factors allow families to navigate functioning and family relationships in ways that maintain connection. The goal of this research was to better understand how families maintain functioning and family

relationships post-disclosure of religious disaffiliation from the perspective of the disaffiliated individual.

Research Questions

This study aimed to fill the gap in the literature around the process of maintaining family functioning through the experience of religious disaffiliation. Using grounded theory, this study resulted in a theory of how families navigate family functioning after the disclosure of religious disaffiliation. The main research question guiding this study was: *How do families navigate family functioning after the disclosure of religious disaffiliation?* Additional research questions included: *What domains of family functioning are essential to maintaining family functioning and relationships?; What do family members do to enhance family functioning?; and What do family members do to repair challenges to family functioning that result from religious disaffiliation?*

CHAPTER III

METHODS

This study investigated the process of navigating family functioning after a family member discloses disaffiliation from the family's religious tradition. Constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) was used to study this process. Constructivist grounded theory is an inductive form of grounded theory research that more openly acknowledges the role of the researcher in theory construction (Charmaz, 2014). Originally, grounded theory, as defined by Glaser and Strauss (1967) was a set of steps whereby a researcher could discover a theory within the data collected. From this lens, the theory was already in existence, it simply needed to emerge from the data with the help of the researcher (Charmaz, 2014). In constructivist grounded theory, the researcher joins with the data to construct a theory, as opposed to finding it within the data. The researcher's role in data analysis and the creation of theory is much more overt in constructivist grounded theory. As such, the data combined with the researcher's interpretations of the data, including their assumptions, life experience, and theoretical standings, creates a theory grounded in the data. Constructivist grounded theory allowed me, as the researcher, to transparently position myself in the research process and acknowledge my influence on the study design, data collection process, and data analysis procedures (Charmaz, 2014). I used the McMaster Approach to Families, outlined above, as a sensitizing framework (Blumer, 1954) to guide the creation of the interview guide and provide me with a place to start my inquiry (Charmaz, 2014).

Participants

I interviewed 20 individuals for this study. Participants were individuals who had disaffiliated from their family's religious tradition. While each member of the family has a different perspective on how family relationships are impacted by disaffiliation, in this study, this experience was explored from the perspective of the individual who chose to disaffiliate. Inclusion criteria for participation included: (1) the individual must have at least one immediate family member who is still affiliated with their religious tradition and (2) that the individual must have disclosed their decision to disaffiliate to their family within the last five years. Researchers suggest that avoiding conversations about challenging topics (i.e., religion, politics, etc.) is a protective measure people take to maintain important relationships (Zimmerman et al., 2015). Therefore, the point of disclosure represents a particularly vulnerable time where families may not be protected from conflict or the consequences of challenging conversations. While families who disaffiliate together or do not disclose their choice to disaffiliate likely experience tension and shifts in family functioning, the experience is arguably different than families who must openly navigate tension and differences in belief in their interactions. The purpose of recruiting individuals within five years of the disclosure of disaffiliation was to ensure that the experience is "fresh" in their minds so they could more easily recall details about family functioning. It should be noted that one participant reported on their demographic form that they disclosed their disaffiliated status 7 years ago, technically making them ineligible for the study. When they were asked during their interview about how long it had been since they disclosed their disaffiliation, they reported that they had disclosed to their family within the eligibility requirements of the study. While their responses

differed in the two locations, the researcher decided to keep them in the study and report the 7-year data point in the demographic table above (Table 1).

Participants self-defined disaffiliation based on their own experiences.

Disaffiliation experiences are diverse and, as such, can look very different from person to person and family to family. In one family, disaffiliation may look like a person ceasing to attend their weekly religious service, whereas, in another family an individual may continue to attend religious services but feel emotionally and spiritually that they are removed from the organization. Even the language around disaffiliation is diverse with deconversion (Fisher, 2017), faith crisis (Webb, 2001), and disaffiliation (Bromley, 1991) all used to describe similar processes. As such, I believed it was best not to put a strict definition on disaffiliation, instead allowing people who feel they have disaffiliated to participate in the study.

Ninety percent (n = 18) of participants identified as female, and 10% (n = 2) identified as male. Ninety percent (n = 18) of participants disaffiliated from a Christian denomination and 5% (n = 1) each disaffiliated from Islam and Janism. On the demographic form, participants were asked to identify on a scale from 1 to 10 how important religion was to them pre-disaffiliation. With the exception of one participant who marked the number 4, all of the participants reported that religion was between a 7 and 10 in importance with an average rating of 9.1. Currently, post-disaffiliation, 55% (n = 11) of participants identify as having no religion, 30% (n = 6) identify as spiritual, but not religious, and 15% (n = 3) identify with a Christian denomination. Fifty-five percent of participants (n = 11) reported that all of their family members were still affiliated with their family's religious tradition while 45% (n = 9) reported that at least one other

member of their family was also disaffiliated from their religion. On average, participants had disclosed their disaffiliated status 22.65 months, just under 2 years, prior to the interview, with a range of 4 months to 7 years. A full summary of demographic characteristics collected can be found in Table 1.

Table 1
Sample Demographic Characteristics

Variable	<i>n</i>	%	<i>M</i>
Age	20		28.15
Gender			
Female	18	90	
Male	2	10	
Race			
White	18	90	
Asian	1	5	
Black/African American	1	5	
Ethnicity			
Non-Hispanic	19	95	
Hispanic	1	5	
Sexual Orientation			
Heterosexual	13	65	
Bisexual	6	30	
Homosexual	1	5	
Relationship Status			
Married	12	60	
Dating	5	25	
Single	4	20	
Annual Household Income			
\$16000-\$30000	2	10	
\$31000-\$45000	2	10	
\$46000-\$60000	4	20	
\$61000-\$75000	1	5	
\$76000-\$100000	5	25	

Table 1 Continued

Variable	<i>n</i>	%	<i>M</i>
\$100000+	6	30	
Education Status			
Some High School	1	5	
High School Diploma	3	15	
Associate's Degree	3	15	
Bachelor's Degree	9	45	
Master's Degree	2	10	
PhD	1	5	
Not Listed (some college)	1	5	
Employment Status			
Employed for Wages	6	30	
Homemaker	6	30	
Part-Time Employment	4	20	
Student & Part-Time	2	10	
Out of Work & Searching	1	5	
Self-Employed, Part-Time	1	5	
Current Religion			
No Religion	11	55	
Spiritual, not Religious	6	30	
Christian	3	15	
Catholic	1	5	
Non-denominational	1	5	
Universalist Unitarian	1	5	
Importance of Religion (1-10)			9.10
How long since the disclosure of disaffiliation (in months)?			22.65
Affiliation Status of Family Members			
All Currently Affiliated	11	55	
Mixed Affiliation Status	9	45	

Table 1 Continued

Variable	<i>n</i>	%	<i>M</i>
Reasons for Disaffiliation			
Disagreement with Beliefs	19	95	
Social/Political Issues	17	85	
Religion's History	15	75	
Religious Leadership	12	60	
Family Challenges	8	40	
Identity Challenges	9	45	
Not Listed	6	30	

In addition to demographic characteristics, I also collected data using the Family Assessment Device (FAD; Epstein et al., 1983) which is a measure of family functioning based on the McMaster Approach to Families. Participants were asked to complete the FAD for the weeks and months after they had disclosed their disaffiliated status to their family members. A full summary of the FAD results for this sample can be found in Table 2. Something interesting about the FAD results for this sample is that on each subscale – problem solving, communication, roles, affective responsiveness, affective involvement, behavior control, and general functioning – the results were fairly similar with average scores ranging from 2.18 (behavior control) to 2.66 (problem solving). A score of between 2-3 is indicative of moderate functioning as 1 represents “good functioning” and 4 represents “worse functioning” (Miller et al., 2000, p. 174). These results suggest that despite the challenges families faced post-disclosure of religious disaffiliation, they continued to function moderately well overall.

While the average scores paint the picture of moderate functioning, it is important to note that the range of scores in each subscale varied some. For instance, the subscales of problem solving, communication, and affective involvement had the most scores

between 3 and 4, indicating worse functioning. Seven participants scored between 3 and 4 on problem solving, nine scored between 2 and 3, and only four scored between 1 and 2. On the communication subscale, five participants scored between 3 and 4, eleven scored between 2 and 3, and only four scored between 1 and 2. Lastly, on the affective involvement scale, six participants scored between 3 and 4, eleven scored between 2 and 3, and only three scored between 1 and 2. This suggests that while participants, overall, perceived moderate functioning within their families, the subscales of problem solving, communication, and affective involvement were more detrimentally impacted than the other subscales. These reflections and others are discussed in more depth in the discussion section of this manuscript.

Table 2***Family Assessment Device (FAD) Data***

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Problem Solving	2.66	.79
Communication	2.48	.54
Roles	2.65	.25
Affective Responsiveness	2.48	.26
Affective Involvement	2.62	.50
Behavior Control	2.18	.33
General Functioning	2.45	.43

n = 20

Through the processes of data collection and analysis, I determined that 20 participants were sufficient to reach saturation in this study. Charmaz (2014) defines saturation as “when gathering fresh data no longer sparks new theoretical insights, nor reveals new properties of...core theoretical categories” (p. 213). It is important to note that saturation is not simply seeing similar stories between participants. Rather, saturation

is reached when categories are indicative of strong, thorough analysis and create insightful theoretical relationships (Charmaz, 2014).

Sampling Methods

I engaged in purposeful sampling to recruit participants (Charmaz, 2014). Wright and colleagues (2011) found that individuals who have disaffiliated from religious organizations, particularly fundamentalist organizations, have a strong online presence. As such, I primarily used social media, including Facebook and Instagram, to recruit for this study. I posted approved recruitment materials on my personal Facebook and Instagram accounts. I also engaged in snowball sampling by making my posts “shareable” so people could post recruitment materials to their personal accounts and/or share with people they know who would be qualified for the study. The Facebook post was shared 39 times after being posted to my personal account. Lastly, I utilized the Tech Announce system through Texas Tech University, posting the approved post one time.

From these recruitment efforts, 108 individuals reached out to me interested in participating. Each individual who reached out was sent the screening questionnaire via email or social media messaging platforms. 79 individuals completed the screening questionnaire. Of those 79, 68 were eligible to participate in the study. Common reasons participants were ineligible were that their disclosure did not fit the time frame outlined in the eligibility criteria or they had a relationship with the researcher outside of the study. At this time, I assigned each eligible individual a number and used a random number generator to select the 20 participants. Of the 20 participants who completed the study, 70% (n = 14) learned about the study through social media, 15% (n = 3) from Tech Announce, and 15% (n = 3) from word of mouth.

While using purposeful sampling is standard in constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018), there are both pros and cons to this sampling method. Purposeful sampling is important to use in a constructivist grounded theory study because it provides the researchers with a pool of participants who have similar experiences which align with the research goal. This sampling method increases the likelihood that the selected participants can “purposefully inform” the researcher and allow them to create a comprehensive and holistic theory (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 158). While this is a pro of the sampling method, it can also be a con in that purposefully selecting a homogeneous group (in terms of their experience) may cut us off from important information that others not exactly fitting our narrow inclusion criteria could provide. As such, it was essential when analyzing the data and reporting the findings, to do so within the scope of this project and that we do not claim this theory to be generalizable to those outside of our target participants.

Ethical Protection of Participants

This study posed minimal risk to participants. During the interview, participants may have encountered some psychological distress as they discussed their experience with religious disaffiliation and changing family dynamics. To minimize this risk, the researcher provided participants with ample opportunity to read the consent form, reviewed the main points of the consent form with them before the interview began, and reminded them that they could skip any questions or end the interview at any time with no penalty. I also compiled a list of resources that participants could use if they needed a place to process the interview once it was complete. I sent this list of resources to every participant via email within 24 hours of ending their interview.

Data Collection

Three forms of data were collected from participants: (1) demographic data, (2) The FAD (Epstein et al., 1983), and (3) semi-structured interviews.

Demographic Data

Demographic data was collected through an online survey distributed via Qualtrics. See Table 1 for a summary of the demographic characteristics of this sample. Participants were emailed the link to the demographic survey and asked to complete it before their interview. The first page of the demographic form included the IRB approved informed consent form. After agreeing to the consent form, participants were taken to a series of demographic questions. Participants were able to skip any question they did not feel comfortable answering. The demographic questionnaire included the following information: age, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, relationship status, annual household income, education status, employment status, occupation, participant's current religious status, the family's religious tradition(s) (i.e., the tradition the participant left), importance of religion to the family pre-disaffiliation, how long since the disclosure of disaffiliation to family members, number of people in immediate family, affiliation status of their immediate family members, and their personal reasons for disaffiliation. Common reasons for disaffiliation, obtained from prior research, were provided with the instruction to "select all that apply". Additionally, there was a text box entry option where participants could describe additional reasons for disaffiliation that may not have been listed. Six participants marked "not listed" when answering the question about their reasons for disaffiliation. Example responses include: "lack of evidence for fundamental claims of Christianity", "mental health", and "abuse cover up".

The Family Assessment Device (FAD)

The FAD (Epstein et al., 1983) was designed based on the McMaster Approach to Families to assess family functioning from each family member's perspective. The FAD has seven sections: problem-solving, communication, roles, affective responsiveness, affective involvement, behavior control, and general functioning. Each section contains five to twelve statements (sixty statements total). Participants respond on a Likert scale from one to four with one representing "strongly agree", two representing "agree", three representing "disagree", and four representing "strongly disagree" (Sherman & Fredman, 1987). Participants are instructed to rate each statement based on how accurately it describes their family using the scale above (Miller et al., 2000). It is estimated that this measure takes fifteen to twenty minutes to complete (Miller et al., 2000).

Assessment questions directly reflect the definitions of each domain of family functioning, as outlined in the literature review. Sample questions for problem solving include: *We usually act on our decisions regarding problems;* and *We resolve most emotional upsets that come up.* Sample questions for the communication domain include: *We don't talk to each other when we are angry* and *You can't tell how a person is feeling from what they are saying.* Example questions from the roles section include: *Family tasks don't get spread around enough;* and *If people are asked to do something, they need reminding.* Affective responsiveness is measured with questions such as: *We are reluctant to show our affection for each other;* and *We cry openly.* Affective involvement questions include the following examples: *If someone is in trouble, the others become too involved;* and *We get involved with each other only when something interests us.* The last domain, behavior control, is represented with questions such as: *You can easily get away*

with breaking the rules; and If the rules are broken, we don't know what to expect. While general functioning is not a domain included in the McMaster Approach to Families, there are twelve statements in the FAD that assess general functioning outside of the six defined domains. Example questions include: *Individuals are accepted for what they are;* and *We don't get along well together.*

The FAD questionnaire was converted to a digital format via Qualtrics and emailed to participants to complete before the interview began. Before beginning the questionnaire, participants were instructed to think about the weeks and months following the disclosure of their disaffiliation. Participants were asked to respond to the FAD based on their recollection of this time.

The FAD is scored by adding up the scores of each question in a section and dividing the total by the number of questions in that section. Negatively worded questions (i.e., *we don't hold to any rules or standards*) are reverse coded. A section score of one represents “best functioning” and a section score of four represents “worse functioning” (Miller et al., 2000, p. 174). Based on the FAD score, the interviewer planned to tailor the interview questions based on how the participant perceived their functioning; however, after the first several interviews, the researcher ascertained that due to the simplicity and generalized nature of the questions in the FAD, participant responses were not sufficient to guiding the interviews. In the first several interviews, I asked all of the questions on the interview guide to see how interview responses aligned with and/or expounded on the FAD responses. I learned that even when scores suggested that participants may not have robust responses (i.e., their scores suggested that communication was smooth within the family unit), they often had profound responses to each of the questions in the guide.

Based on these experiences, I chose to ask all participants the entirety of the interview guide, barring time, regardless of their FAD responses.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Each participant engaged in one interview lasting forty-five to sixty minutes. All interviews were audio recorded. A semi-structured interview protocol was used in each interview (Appendix D). All questions were framed around the disclosure of disaffiliation and how this disclosure impacted each domain of family functioning. Questions around general functioning (separate from the subsection on the FAD with the same name) in relation to the disclosure of disaffiliation were also be asked. Examples of general functioning questions include: *How were family relationships impacted by your choice to disaffiliate?; Did you feel closer to your family during this time or more distant? What contributed to that feeling?; Were you able to talk openly about disaffiliating?; What does the choice to disaffiliate mean to you?; What are positive consequences of your disaffiliation that you've seen in your family? Negative consequences?; How has your family changed post-disaffiliation?; and How was your choice to disaffiliate disclosed to your family?* Before the interview began, participants were reminded that they could skip any questions they did not feel comfortable answering and that they could end the interview at any time with no penalty. Participants could complete the interview over the phone or via a HIPAA compliant version of Zoom, depending on participant preference. Eleven participants (55%) completed the interview via Zoom and 9 (45%) completed the interview over the telephone.

Procedures

Following IRB approval, I began recruiting participants. Interested parties were directed to contact the lead researcher via email if they were interested in participating or had questions about the study. My name and academic email were on all recruitment materials. After receiving interested emails and messages on social media platforms, I answered any questions potential participants had about the study. Those interested in participating, were sent the eligibility screening survey (Appendix A) via email. This survey was based on the eligibility criteria outlined above. Due to the number of eligible people, I assigned each eligible individual a number and utilized a random number generator to select the 20 participants. Upon being selected, these individuals were sent an email notifying them of their selection and asking if they were still interested in participating. All eligible individuals who were not selected were emailed notifying them that their number had not been selected, but that I would reach out if I needed additional participants.

Selected participants were sent a digital copy of the IRB approved consent form (Appendix B) via email to read, complete, and return to me. Participants were directed to read the consent form in its entirety and to contact me if they had any questions. All completed consent forms are being stored in a Microsoft Teams folder on a password protected computer. Only I have access to this Microsoft Teams folder.

Upon receipt of the completed consent form, I sent the participant an email with two Qualtrics links: the first to the demographics survey (Appendix C) and the second to the FAD. Within this email, each participant was given a unique participant ID number to record on their surveys so that survey data was deidentified. Deidentified survey data is stored in Qualtrics and was transferred to an Excel Spreadsheet that is being stored in the

study's private Microsoft Teams folder on a password protected computer. In this email, the researcher also set up the interview time. Participants were able to choose if they wanted to complete their interview over the phone or on a HIPAA compliant Zoom call. On the established day of the interview, the lead researcher sent a reminder email to the participant about the interview and to complete the two Qualtrics surveys before the interview began, if they had not already. The consent form was briefly reviewed before the interview. When the audio recorder was started, participants were asked to confirm that they read the consent form and to provide verbal consent for participating in the study and being audio recorded. I conducted all interviews using an approved semi-structured interview guide (Appendix D). After completing their interview, participants were sent a digital \$25 gift card to Amazon to compensate them for their time and willingness to participate. This study was funded by the Office of Graduate and Postdoctoral Fellowships at Texas Tech University through a Graduate Student Research Award. Participants were sent a list of mental health resources (Appendix E) via email within 24 hours after completing their interview.

Data Analysis

After interviews were completed, they were transcribed verbatim for analysis using NVivo Transcription software. After transcription was complete, I checked each transcript for accuracy, making changes to the transcripts, as needed. Data analysis was conducted using Charmaz's (2014) coding procedures. Due to the amount of time it took to acquire permission from the IRB to use transcription software and the swiftness with which the interviews were completed, I was unable to analyze and collect data simultaneously. To use the data obtained to inform further data analysis and "follow

leads” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 25) present in the first few interviews, I gave myself time after each interview to review the interview and reflect on how to improve future interviews. This resulted in subtle changes being made to the interview guide (i.e., lead ins for questions, re-ordering questions, etc.) that informed future interviews and aided in eliciting rich data from participants. For instance, in the first few interviews, I asked the question “how did your family initially react to your decision to disaffiliate” and then asked “how open had you been with your family about your thoughts/feelings leading up to your choice to disaffiliate”, as originally outlined in the interview guide. In the first few interviews, I felt like this order of questions was confusing and forced participants to go back-and-forth in their timeline. Once I changed the order it felt like participants were telling their story more naturally and that they were better able to build off their previous responses, eliciting a richer response.

The first step in data analysis was open coding (Charmaz, 2014). At this stage of analysis, I familiarized myself with the data by reading transcripts thoroughly. Line by line, I highlighted important phrases, words, and passages assigning them a simple code that reflected what was happening in the data (Charmaz, 2014). During this stage, I attempted to stay as close to the data as possible, avoiding making interpretations or assigning clinical jargon to the data. After the transcripts were coded, I compiled the codes to prepare for focused coding. During focused coding, I met with an external auditor to discuss what had been found in the data so far and potential codes that could be carried into focused coding. Examples of codes that I recognized at this stage should be carried forward were forming a supportive community, setting and respecting boundaries,

and having empathy for affiliated family members. This meeting was also used to begin developing definitions for the codes.

After open coding was complete, I engaged in focused coding procedures (Charmaz, 2014). As described by Charmaz (2014), focused coding is the process of “studying and assessing [the] initial codes” (p. 140). At this stage, I analyzed the codes I initially created in the context of the data. Codes that stood out, revealed patterns, and were strong in the context of the data were carried forward in the analysis process. Codes that were carried forward were selected based on their relevancy to the research questions, the richness of the data associated with the code (i.e., participants provide thick, rich descriptions associated with the codes) and how often the codes were found in the data, including how many separate transcripts include the code (i.e., at least 1/3 of participants [$n = 7$]). At this stage, I returned to the data to look specifically for instances of the focused codes that I may have missed in the open coding phase or before these codes were identified in the data.

Next, I engaged in axial coding. While not all grounded theory studies use axial coding, it can help the researcher present a more coherent and detailed account of the data. Axial coding provides a framework for researchers to use to clarify their analysis and increase its strength (Charmaz, 2014). Axial coding focuses on connecting categories and subcategories (Charmaz, 2014). Strauss and Corbin (1998) describe axial coding as a means of bringing data back together after breaking it down during open and focused coding. As such, during axial coding, I focused on specific questions within the data, such as: “when, where, why, who, how, and with what consequences” (Strauss & Corbin,

1998, p. 125). While I used axial coding's framework in this study, I held it tentatively to avoid constraining analysis (Charmaz, 2014).

Up until axial coding, I had largely conceptualized each theme as standing alone – a separate action not connected to the others. In asking these larger questions, I was able to recognize that the codes did not stand on their own; rather, they were connected by how the action was experienced – individually or as a family – and relied on the foundation of love and having a desire to continue the relationship. Axial coding was also an important part of determining the dynamic nature of the model. In asking the questions outlined above from Strauss and Corbin (1998), I was reminded of memos I wrote during the open coding process that highlighted important contextual information about the participants and their stories. Reviewing my memos, such as “this participant spoke to the developmental changes that occurred for her in conjunction with her disaffiliation – going to college was a huge help because of her adult status and the physical boundary that being on campus naturally provided” reminded me that the actions outlined in the model do not occur in a vacuum. The context of each participant and their unique disaffiliation experience mattered and impacted how the model unfolded in their life. This is attended to in the visual model (Figure 1), as well as in the results section.

Lastly, I engaged in theoretical coding procedures (Charmaz, 2014). Theoretical coding, similar to axial coding, allows the researchers to theorize about the data, the codes created in analysis, and how they are connected to each other (Charmaz, 2014). Theoretical coding helped the already established codes and categories take form into a coherent story (Charmaz, 2014). Additionally, theoretical coding allowed me to apply already established theories to the grounded theory created during analysis (Charmaz,

2014; Holton, 2010). Essential to theoretical coding is that connections to extant theories are organic and emergent from the data, as opposed to forced into the analysis (Charmaz, 2014; Holton, 2010). Similar to the use of a sensitizing framework in this study, I held any connections to preexisting knowledge and/or theory tentatively in an effort to ensure that it aligned with the data and that it was not a forced effort to make the grounded theory fit with already accepted knowledge in the field. At this point in data analysis, I reviewed my memos and situated them within the analysis, as appropriate (Holton, 2010).

Theoretical coding was completed with two external auditors in separate meetings. During these meetings, I shared several visual interpretations of the model with the external auditors, describing what I felt was depicted well and what needed adjustment. Working with the external auditors, we were able to establish visuals for each aspect of the model and put each aspect together to form a coherent visual that adequately depicted each piece of the model. The first model I presented included three circles side-by-side with two interconnected and one on its own. The interconnected circles represented the individual and the family, with boundaries resting in the intersection of the circles. The circle standing alone represented community. Through explaining this model to the auditor, I recognized that community was not actually standing alone and should be included with the other themes pertaining to the disaffiliated individual. This shift, which was a steppingstone to the final model, more clearly told the story of the data and more accurately portrayed the themes that emerged from the data.

Additionally, during theoretical coding, I was able to revisit the McMaster Approach to Families and determine how this theory aligned with the model from the current study, as well as how it differed. Reviewing my memos was a critical aspect of

this part of coding as I had discussed the McMaster Approach and its relationship to the data in some of my memos. For instance, with Participants 1 and 21, I wrote specifically about family roles and how their responses differed from what is outlined in the McMaster Approach. While family roles were not ultimately included in the model, it is discussed in the discussion section of the manuscript.

Sensitizing Framework

The McMaster Approach to Family Functioning was used as a sensitizing framework in this study. Sensitizing concepts are defined by Blumer (1954) as ideas that researchers can use which, “suggest directions along which to look” in the phenomenon they are studying (p. 7). As opposed to definitive concepts which are more rigid and well defined, sensitizing concepts provide researchers with more general areas to explore throughout the research process (Blumer, 1954). In the context of constructivist grounded theory, Charmaz (2014) references the usefulness of sensitizing concepts as they can act as “tentative tools” for researchers to use in their studies (p. 30). Charmaz emphasizes the importance of holding sensitizing concepts tentatively and encourages researchers using constructivist grounded theory to keep their minds open and dispose of sensitizing concepts if the data is taking them in a different direction (Charmaz, 2014).

In this study, I used the McMaster approach to guide my inquiry into family functioning. The concept of family functioning on its own is broad. The McMaster Approach provided me with a few areas to begin thinking about family functioning, which helped me to create the interview guide and provided a starting point for my interactions with participants and data analysis. In this way, the McMaster Approach was simply a launching pad for my inquiry, as opposed to a strict map I followed or an end

point for my analysis to fit within (Charmaz, 2014). During data analysis and through memos, I did recognize that the data and experiences of my participants differed somewhat from the McMaster Approach. Once this was realized, I set some aspects of the approach aside and took the analysis in the direction suggested by the data (Charmaz, 2014).

Reflexivity

Although I had planned to use a team for data analysis, I ultimately chose to complete data analysis individually due to time constraints. To enhance the validity and trustworthiness of the study, I engaged in reflexivity exercises where I reflected on my connection to the research area and what I believe about faith transitions, family functioning, and the intersection of family and religion. I engaged in regular memo writing and gave myself time during the research process to reflect and think about the data (Charmaz, 2014). In addition to these internal reflexivity measures, I also worked with two external auditors who are both experts in grounded theory to ensure the efficacy of the research methods and that my research procedures were rigorous in nature.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Interviews with participants about their experience of maintaining family relationships after disclosing religious disaffiliation resulted in a model characterized by two interrelated, dynamic processes: disaffiliated individual actions and actions experienced as a family (see Figure 1). Both processes rest upon a foundation of communicating love and the desire to continue relationships. This foundation was a pivotal part of the motivation participants needed to engage in the actions carried out individually and with their affiliated family members. The individual actions identified by participants included: (a) feeling empathy for affiliated family members, (b) flexibly participating in religious practices, and (c) forming a supportive community. Participants also identified actions they took with their affiliated family members, noting that they also observed their family members making similar efforts. Actions taken as a family include: (a) setting and respecting boundaries, (b) respecting differing beliefs, and (c) communicating about religion and adjacent topics. The gradient shaded cylinders behind the model represent that the model is dynamic, not static, in nature. Additional factors such as the passage of time, individual growth, and family changes (i.e., aging, additional people disaffiliating, having children, etc.) have an impact on how these themes are acted out and experienced.

Communicating Love and a Desire for a Relationship

At the core of all of the themes in this model is love shared within the family unit and an overt desire for family relationships to continue. As depicted in the model, this factor is foundational to every other theme present. Without love and a desire to have a

relationship, there would be no need to be respectful, set and respect boundaries, have empathy, or any other action noted by participants. Eleven participants overtly discussed how expressing their love and a desire to continue the relationship in their interview; however, every participant discussed wanting to be connected to their family and making intentional efforts to reach this goal, whether that included overtly stating this desire or not.

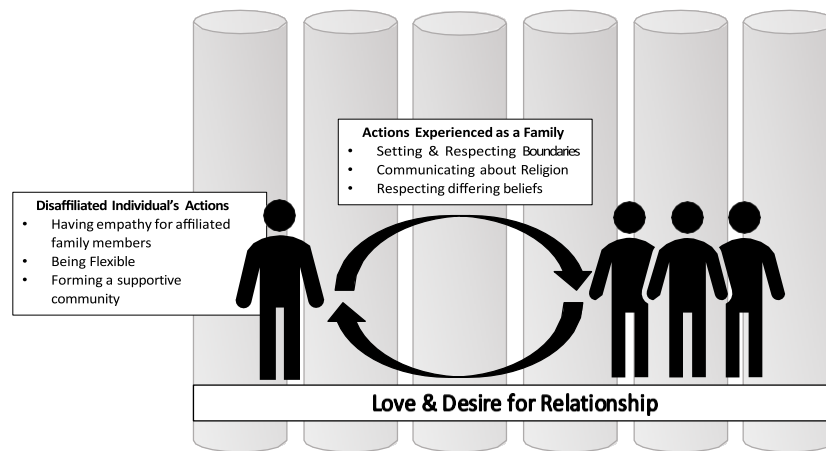


Figure 1. Model Illustration

Some participants discussed how the love in their family was foundational to all their interactions and steady even amidst the challenges that came from their disaffiliation. Before telling some stories of challenges she experienced with her family after disclosing her disaffiliation, P2 commented, “I would say the love never changed. For all these examples I’m about to give, the love and caring was always there. We would never end a conversation without making sure the other one knew that we still loved them.” Similarly, P18 explained how love and trust were steady even during disagreements. “And even if they disagree, we have a trust in each other that underneath

that, we still love each other and it doesn't really matter." P21 expressed her gratitude that amidst the challenges within her family, she never felt their love for her change. "I'm really thankful that I haven't seen a shift in the way that they love me and the fact that they still want to call and talk to me." P14 described how during moments of crisis, her family is skilled at meeting each other where they are and trying to focus on the importance of their relationships over anything else. "It's like we're all on the same level at that point and it's coming down to, we're a family. What do we do to fix this? It's almost like religion doesn't matter at that point, which is actually really nice."

For other participants, they made overt efforts to tell their families that they love them and want to remain connected with each other. P6 shared, "We always end the conversations with, I want you to know that I love you, give me a hug." Likewise, P1 voiced, "I think a big part was me communicating to them, I love them. I still want to be a part of family things. I want to have good relationships." Participants also reported that it was helpful when their family members communicated openly with them their love and desire to be connected. P7 recounted, "They always said, they don't agree with my beliefs just like I don't agree with their beliefs, but that's okay for them. They still love me. I'm still their daughter. They know I'm a good person." In addition to feeling like it was important for her to communicate love to her family, P1 also disclosed how it was helpful for those messages to be shared with her: "I think just them letting me know that they love me and care about me and want me to be happy." P2 remarked that hearing her parents say things like "we love you so much", "you will always come first to us", "you're never going to be alone", and "we're never going to abandon you, we're always going to be here" was particularly helpful: "Just hearing those things from them. I know

they're true and they've said those things in the past. Sometimes just hearing them again, it makes me relax and it usually is good feedback.”

P4 and P8 summarized well what participants generally shared about how love was a foundational piece of maintaining family relationships post-disclosing religious disaffiliation. P4 said: “I think it comes down to...setting our love for each other and our relationship as the main focus or the main goal.” At the end of her interview, P8 reflected on friends of hers who had also disaffiliated from their religion, but had not maintained family relationships. She articulated that, at times, being cut off from her family seems like the easier option, but that because she loves her family so much, she is willing to work and struggle to keep their relationship strong.

I feel like we've made good strides in repairing our relationships and I think that can happen because both sides didn't want their relationship to disintegrate. We both were committed to keeping it going and that's the only way it could have worked because there were a lot of hard obstacles to overcome to get to the point we are. We needed everyone to be committed to making it work.

Disaffiliated Individual Actions

Feeling Empathy for Affiliated Family Members

Feeling empathy for affiliated family members was described by participants as an internal process of trying to see their family member's perspectives, trying to put themselves in their family members shoes, and trying to empathize with their affiliated family member's emotional experience of their disaffiliation. In discussing how they were able to maintain and preserve family relationships, participants often reflected on the challenges experienced with their family members. This is often when participants

discussed the importance of empathy and taking a step back from challenges in an effort to understand where their affiliated family members were coming from and how their religious beliefs influenced their reactions. When asked what was most helpful in maintaining relationships with her family, Participant 17 (P17) simply said, “You know, kind of try to hear it from the other side.” P20 said,

I think trying to come from a place of love and understanding of where they might be coming from because it’s easy for me, my initial reaction is discomfort and sometimes anger, depending on what they’re talking about. Not necessarily at them, but at the thinking that goes around why they’re saying the things they are. And so, I think something that helps is trying to understand where they’re coming from in those conversations.

Similarly, P10 articulated, “They’re just responding how they’ve been taught to respond... I was taught this too, I just see it differently now on the other side. This is how I was taught. These are the appropriate things to think when someone leaves.” P7, reflected on a specific conversation about her leaving her religion and what that meant to her family based on the beliefs of their church. She noted, “So, I can see why my family, especially my grandparents, are upset about me leaving because to them, they see it as, oh my gosh, now we’re not going to live eternity with our granddaughter.” P14 similarly stated, “Because I do have the experience of being in the same faith. I do understand why she’s still part of it. I understand her viewpoints. I get it because that was me at one time.” P1 reflected, “That would make a lot of sense that they would feel sad about this decision I’ve made...So I can see because I was once there and I can understand where they’re coming from and why it would be impacting them.” P13 commented on the

empathy he felt for his mother and the emotional impact of his disaffiliation for her. He said, “The main thing that helped was, I understand. I sympathize with her a lot...she feels like her world’s coming apart.”

Several participants explained that their ability to have empathy, in part, came because they shared the same religious beliefs as their affiliated family members for many years. As such, they intimately understood, and in some cases had experienced themselves, how their family members felt when they stepped away from the religion. P21 expressed, “I can put myself in their shoes and I can say, like when I believed those things, I was also sad when people said they didn’t believe the same I did.” P20 also described how she was able to pull on her own experience of seeing her siblings leave their religion before she did to have empathy for her parents when she ultimately decided to leave their church. She shared, “I know [my parents] were sad about it because in the past [when] my siblings had left, I was sad about that as well.”

P2 voiced an interesting experience she had of feeling more empathy for her parents years after she had disaffiliated. In her experience, she was the first to disaffiliate in her family. Several years after her, one of her siblings chose to step away from their faith. About watching her parents experience another child’s disaffiliation, she said, “I got to watch it as an outsider for the first time and I truly, I think, understood what they went through...I saw my parents for who they were and as people who were hurt.”

While the action of having empathy for their affiliated family members is described here as an individual experience, participants did discuss relational experiences of empathy. More specifically, some participants expressed how sharing their empathy with their family members was helpful and strengthened their relationships. For example,

P3 described an incident where her mother expressed to her “it feels like you think you’re the only one who is hurting here.” During this conversation, she responded to her mom, “I know full well that you guys are hurting too. I probably didn’t communicate that very well, though.” Reflecting on this conversation and the importance of empathy, P3 said, “I think both of us being able to communicate, like we can see the other person [and] how it’s hard for them. I think that was really helpful.” Similarly, P4 expressed how empathizing and validating her in-laws helped conversations to go smoother. This participant shared how she approached her in-laws stating, “I know this is really hard for you to hear and this must be so painful. It sounds like you were really confused and caught off guard that we left.”

Being Flexible around Participating in Religious Practices

This theme describes the stance that most participants took when posed with opportunities to participate in religious practices with their affiliated family members. It should be noted that three participants discussed choosing not to participate in any kind of religious practice with their family and that the vast majority of participants had set boundaries around what they would and would not do, as discussed below in the section on boundaries. However, when it came to practices such as going to church meetings, participating in religious holiday traditions, engaging in volunteer work with religious organizations, reading religious texts, and praying, participants described feeling open to participating, even if it felt meaningless or uncomfortable.

Participants spoke to how they chose to be flexible in how they participated in religious practices as a way to maintain the peace, compromise, and/or protect the feelings of their affiliated family members. P12 simply described how when he was

living at home he, “used to do some things for the sake of my grandparents, so that they don’t get upset”. Similarly, P4 said, “If my in-laws want to share a religious message, I think my husband and I have come to the point where we’re like, this is important to them and it’s not harming us to sit here and listen.” P11 described, “We could put up a stink about praying, but it’s not really worth it. So, you know, there’s a little bit of, ok, we have to tolerate something we wouldn’t normally do, as far as like a compromise to keep everybody happy.”

Other participants discussed how choosing to participate in religious practices was a way to honor the importance of religion to their affiliated family members and show respect or support for their affiliated family members. Speaking of Christmas services, P21 explained how she attended services out of respect for her parents even though she would not have gone if celebrating on her own: “I came home for Christmas and had I been on my own, I would not have gone to Christmas Eve service, [but] my parents are like ‘we are going to Christmas Eve services’ and I was like, ‘ok!’” P1 described how although the practices mean something different to her now, she participates out of respect and love for her family: “I’m going to do it because I respect them and I want to be with my family and they want me to be with me.”

P7 reflected on how she supports her mother and her responsibilities in their church congregation: “If my mom speaks in church, I’ll go home and I will support her because that’s her taking time to talk about something she believes in and teach about her beliefs.” P2 reported how she initiates participating in holiday worship services and celebrations of religious milestones in the lives of her family members to show her support: “I usually will be the one to go to my mom and [say], ‘I actually got this

Christmas dress to wear to church, I would like to be with everyone on Christmas Day.’ That’s important to me.”

Similarly to P1, many participants recounted how they continued to participate in religious practices even though they no longer held meaning for them or held different meaning than they did previously. P15 disclosed, “I don’t care about the praying thing because that’s just their thing they do. I know the routine and if I don’t believe in it, it doesn’t matter. It’s just nice for them.” Also speaking about prayer, P21 articulated,

Anytime we’ll pray for a meal, I bow my head and close my eyes. If they asked me to pray, I will do it because I know the words. I know how to do it. I know what sounds sincere. Even if I don’t feel that I believe the words that I’m saying, if they ask me to pray, I will still do it.

Speaking of her experience with religious holidays and their associated traditions, P19 noted, “We haven’t changed anything about the way that we would normally do holidays and so, obviously, it feels a bit different for me now, but I personally don’t have any issue with celebrating the way that someone else is comfortable with.” P6 also discussed holiday worship services and how she continues to attend with her family even though she has set a boundary about not going to more standard, weekly services: “I think it’s beautiful and I love the music and it still moves something inside of me. So, like Easter services, Christmas services, things like that, I will go and I’ll sit with you all and everything.” This response, in particular, describes the flexibility that participants held when approaching the decision to participate in religious practices or not. This flexibility did not mean that participants did everything or did not set boundaries. On the contrary,

they approached each practice separately, took time to think through how they wanted to approach it, and how to communicate their decision to their family.

Forming a Supportive Community

While no questions were asked in the interview guide about community or people outside of the family unit, thirteen participants discussed the importance of forming a supportive community and how this community enhanced their relationships with affiliated family members. Participants expressed how there were times where they wanted to discuss their struggles with religious disaffiliation, vent about the responses of those still within their religion, and complain about their religious organization and their experiences there. Participants recognized that their affiliated family members were not an appropriate place to have these conversations and that opening these topics of conversation with them may result in offending them, hurting their feelings, or creating conflict. As such, participants voiced the benefit of building a community of individuals who were non-judgmental and supportive of their choice to disaffiliate. For some participants, this community included family members and friends who were supportive or had also disaffiliated, friends who were never affiliated with their religion, or people with similar experiences they had met through social media. Having this community allowed participants to engage in these important conversations and get their thoughts and feelings out without risking or harming their relationships with affiliated family members.

While this community served different purposes for different participants, a common function of this community was to receive validation and understanding from people with similar experiences. P10, who disaffiliated from the Church of Jesus Christ

of Latter-day Saints, simply noted how they, “call post-Mormon friends to get some validation, support, [and] understanding.” P5 discussed various people she goes to when she needs to feel understood including her husband, who recently left their church, ex-religious groups, friends in her community, and a local mom’s group. She said, “So, I do feel like I have people where I can be like, ‘oh, this happened at family dinner, so obnoxious.’ And they can be like, ‘I get it.’ I have a group of people who get it. Online and in person.”

P7 shared how she has formed a community that is able to support and validate her through challenges with her affiliated family members: “Having a support group of people that I could talk to and validate that I wasn’t crazy. I wasn’t setting unrealistic boundaries. People that could support me and encourage me and validate me and my feelings.” P6 also commented on how forming a community was helpful when she was navigating challenges with her affiliated family members or needed to make decisions: “my partner’s dad...he disaffiliated himself, so he’s like, ‘I understand, yes, let’s discuss this.’ And they do very much help me navigate those tough decisions.”

In addition to feeling validated and understood by this community, participants reported how these communities were a safe place for them to vent, be completely authentic, and feel safe in having vulnerable conversations. P19 stated the importance of having a place to express herself fully: “Talking to my husband or my best friend about things because that way I don’t have to keep things bottled up.” P11 recounted how finding a social media group that “gets it” because all the members “went to the same college...and all decided to be ex-Mormon” gave her a safe place for her to process her experiences. She said, “finding something that helps reflect your feelings, helps solidify it

and feel like it's real. It helps you process what's happening." P13 also articulated the importance of building a community of people similar to himself where he can be completely himself: "Since I didn't have a support system since I disaffiliated, I found a new support system, which has helped me a lot because I don't feel alone."

P3 and P18 also spoke of the safety found within the communities they built for themselves. P3 noted, "We do have other friends who I feel very emotionally safe with and they continue to want to talk about religion and I actually feel fine about it because I know that our friendship is unconditional." Similarly, P18 remarked, "Having a support network of friends and some family members that feel non-judgmental and are a safe place to talk about some of the fears and worries and problems that can come up." P16 stated how having a safe space to discuss topics that were off limits with her family helped protect family relationships: "Having other people in my life that I can talk to about the things that I can't talk to my family about and being able to rebuild that community outside of the church, I think that's helped the most."

Actions Experienced as a Family

Setting and Respecting Boundaries

The disaffiliation process included a focus on boundaries with affiliated family members, with seventeen participants stating this was a part of their experience. A hallmark of this theme was that this is a *process* with wide variation in where participants were at with setting and respecting boundaries. This ranged from lack of boundaries with family members being problematic in their relationships to boundaries improving familial relationships. For those that had not yet set boundaries with their family, participants connected this with being harmful to family relationships: "I probably haven't set any,

which is contributing to the problem” (P10) and “Um, no. I actually think that’s a big problem in my life is that I have not set any official or spoken boundaries” (P14).

While P10 and P14 felt they had not yet set any official boundaries with their affiliated family members, they went on to discuss internal boundaries they had set within themselves that helped to preserve family relationships. Speaking of a desire to set boundaries, P10 commented on how she was starting to experiment with boundaries on social media by setting them within herself. Speaking of watching videos on Marco Polo, she said, “I’m going to double time it or I’m going to skip because I can’t hear that. I have to protect myself right now and have to keep my peace as my priority right now.” Similarly, P7 explained an internal boundary she had set regarding commenting on social media posts or responding to her affiliated family members’ comments on her posts about her previous religious organization: “It’s a thing where I just don’t comment because, for me, they’re not going to change my mind. I’m not going to change theirs. They believe in what they believe in. I believe in what I believe in.”

Other participants had actively set boundaries with their families, had experienced their family members setting boundaries with them, and were working towards enforcing and respecting those boundaries, respectively. P4 shared that boundaries had helped to improve communication and relationships with her affiliated family members: “Just being able to talk openly and having strong boundaries and respecting those boundaries, I think it is getting better.” Common areas that participants reported setting boundaries around were topics they felt comfortable talking about with their affiliated family members, deciding to not send each other materials (i.e., articles, videos, scripture verses, etc.) in an effort to push each other towards re- or de-conversion, and setting guidelines

around how affiliated family members could interact with disaffiliated family member's children around religion. Several participants discussed how boundaries had been set around how and if they discuss religion with their affiliated family members. P2 voiced, "I would tell them there are some things that I am willing to talk to you about, but there are some topics that are just too personal and private."

Similarly, P20 disclosed, "I think another big thing is boundaries. Sometimes we're not ready to talk about certain things and we have to set boundaries on those topics so that we don't have conflicts arise." P3 remarked on an experience where her mother had set a boundary about not wanting to discuss specific topics. P3 articulated how it was difficult, at times, to respect this boundary and how she had to find other spaces to discuss these topics: "I was able to be like, okay, I'm going to try to respect her boundaries and not keep bringing this stuff up. I'll talk about it with my therapist instead." P5 reflected on an experience where she set a boundary with her parents about not discussing religion and her gratitude for her parents respecting that boundary: "I don't want to go there. Let's just have a good time. They respected that pretty well, so I was grateful." P15 also noted how her parents had respected the boundaries she set regarding her children. She stated, "I think the boundaries are mainly when it comes to my children. I don't think that my parents have really pushed in thinking back, they haven't really pushed anything on me."

Participants described how setting boundaries had a positive impact on their relationships or allowed them to move forward in more productive ways. P18 commented on an experience where an affiliated family member reached out for clarification on their boundaries, which helped them feel supported.

We've had someone who was still in the church watching one of our children and they were very considerate to ask first if it was okay if our kids went to church with them, get our take and opinion on it. So, it felt like we were being supported in that way and given that choice rather than just pushed into it if we were uncomfortable.

P3 explained how seeing her parents respect her boundaries helped her feel more confident that they could preserve their relationship: "I think they're trying to respect that and I'm glad they have...I know that it's contributed to me feeling like we can keep getting together if I can trust that you're not going to keep bringing this up." P1 shared how in setting boundaries, she also tried to be transparent about her feelings and what would be helpful in their relationships moving forward: "So, just being really transparent about how I was feeling and what was going on and what would be helpful from them towards me."

Communicating about Religion and Adjacent Topics

When asked about how, if at all, participants communicate with their affiliated family members about religion, participants were fairly split on how they approach these conversations. 8 participants disclosed that their main tactic is to avoid conversations about religion and adjacent topics (i.e., politics) and 12 disclosed that they regularly attempt to have open conversations with their affiliated family members. It should be noted that there is overlap between these tactics, meaning that those who tend to avoid conversations do have experiences of leaning in and discussing these topics with their affiliated family members and those who commonly discuss these topics with their affiliated family members do, at times, choose to avoid conversations or specific topics.

With these two subthemes, context appears to be key. The timing, topic, and who the conversation was with all had an impact on how the participant approached the conversation and how they felt their affiliated family members approached the conversation.

Avoiding Conversations. When discussing their tendency to avoid conversations about religion and adjacent topics, participants were open to exploring why they avoid and how this has become a tactic they commonly use with their affiliated family members. For some participants, their families had an already set pattern of avoiding challenges or conflict, so it felt like a natural step to avoid potentially challenging discussions about religion. For example, P19 voiced, “now that I’m an adult, we avoid it together because I feel that’s something they’re not really comfortable discussing. So, anything where it feels like we might have a differing opinion, we just step around it.” Similarly, P18 reported, “A lot of my siblings and one of my parents would rather avoid or make things into jokes and not really address the problem. It is dependent on the thing, but I feel like avoidance is the biggest thing that my family does.” P5 recounted that her family tends to ignore hard conversations and that she wishes that could be different: “We ignore all conversations about hard topics and then we pretend nothing happened and that is how things operate with my parents, [my] family. It’s really hard.” P16 disclosed that her family tends to avoid challenging conversations, but she tried to change the status quo and engage in conversations about religion post-disaffiliation. She remarked that this attempt fell flat as her affiliated family members continued to avoid even after she had opened the door to have the conversation. After being met with

avoidance, she decided to avoid the conversations herself: “So, I’ve just gone back to avoidance because I think that’s just how my family handles things at this point.”

For other participants, the avoidance did not happen naturally, rather they had specific conversations with their affiliated family members about the need to avoid specific topics or made personal decisions to avoid these topics. P3 articulated an experience she had when her affiliated family members visited her family for Christmas. She intentionally chose to not bring up religion with her family during their visit and expects that her family members made the same internal choice: “I have no intention of bringing up religion and I’m sure that they were also intentional about it.” P14 reflected on how her dad often tries to bring up religion, but she intentionally chooses to disengage from the conversation and avoid the topic: “I just either try to change the subject or I actually disengage and maybe leave the room.”

Other participants explained their avoidance as an intentional choice to keep their perspectives and thoughts from their affiliated family members. In discussing her feelings about how involved her parents are in their religion, P15 shared, “It’s just me holding my tongue every once in a while because it’s not important.” In response to how they navigate conversations about religion, P10 voiced, “Not honoring myself and being quiet...what’s helped these relationships is me not saying anything.” P21 reported that she tends to be a “poke the bear kind of person”, but with conversations about religion has realized that she cannot “poke” her affiliated family members about everything all the time. She recounted that being more selective about topics to engage with and topics to avoid has helped improve family relationships: “Being a little more choosy about what issues get talked about on both sides. We have managed to do that. I would say that’s

probably the most helpful thing.” P2 disclosed how her family implemented a rule about not discussing religion in ways that could be controversial: “Most of the time, we implement a no controversial church talk. You can talk about your own personal experiences...[but] anything more in the know, we just avoid because it doesn’t feel very relevant or applicable at that time.”

Similarly, other participants spoke of how they will engage around topics that really matter to them, but will avoid topics that are not as important, are likely to result in conflict, or are not directly impacting their family. P4 remarked, “I think in those areas, if it’s not directly impacting the family or what we’re doing, we don’t talk about it. We keep our opinions to ourselves unless it’s specifically important to what we’re doing as a family.” P13 said that he and his sister are extremely open with each other; however, post-disaffiliation there are some conversations they have chosen to avoid to preserve their strong bond. “With my sister, we now have specific conversations that we don’t touch. We don’t want to get into a fight.” P5 articulated how they choose to avoid bringing up religious topics because they do not want to risk offending their family or driving them away: “I won’t even have those conversations with people. I won’t instigate conversations. I just don’t go there because I don’t want to offend my family. I don’t want to drive them away from me.” P12 felt that his family relationships had not significantly changed post-disaffiliation, in large part because he avoids sharing his beliefs with those in his family who are strongly affiliated with their religion. He noted, “I don’t show them my beliefs. So, I just agree with them and try to avoid those conversations so they don’t get to know.” Similarly, P14 stated, “I feel like the relationships are good. They’re still close, but on my side there are things I can’t say

around them or parts of myself I have to push down a little bit to preserve their feelings or beliefs.” Lastly, P8 commented that she believes avoiding the topic of religion has been healthy for her family.

I just don’t really talk about religion anymore and I feel like that’s been healthy. It’s something we had to discuss when it happened...but now it’s been a little over a year and we just don’t really talk about religion a lot anymore and that’s been beneficial to just trying to move on and find other ways to connect.

Being Receptive to Conversations. Participants spoke of times when they themselves and their family members were receptive to having conversations about religion and adjacent topics. For some participants, they wanted to ensure that they could openly discuss challenges and differences in opinion to keep their relationship close. P20 explained, “They’re always receptive to having a conversation...I don’t know if they normally start the conversation, but they usually are receptive and also would like to talk about it.” P4 expressed, “I think it’s really forced us to have tough conversations and I think that has brought us closer together. We can talk about hard things and get through it and still care about each other.” Similarly, P6 described, “[my family was] like, okay, now we have to face these issues when they arise, which has helped greatly in navigating those challenges because we do just sit there and talk it out.”

For others, they wanted to make it clear to their affiliated family members that they still wanted to hear about their involvement in religion because it was such a big part of their lives. Several participants shared feeling like their affiliated family members were “walking on eggshells” around all topics related to religion, which cut them off from each other significantly. In response to this, many participants voiced the

importance of overtly telling their family that they wanted to hear about their experiences in church since it is such a large part of their lives. P8 told her family, “I’m okay with you in everyday conversation bringing up things you do in your life with your religion because that is a big part of your life.” P3 expressed to her parents, “I don’t mind you telling me what’s going on at church or talking about people at church. It’s not like you can’t ever say we have this event at church or this is what’s going on because that’s their life.” P16 voiced how she has approached casual conversations with her family about religion: “I think one thing that I’ve tried to do is give my family members who are still in space to talk about church without letting it get weird for me.” Lastly, P15 reported, “I think that I have talked normally about the church, as well...I try to engage like it’s something just, I try to note things that are good that happen. I’ve kept up where for the most part, I’m not antagonizing the church.”

Some participants spoke of how meaningful it has been for them to recognize their family members receptivity through asking questions, being vulnerable, and making an effort to discuss religion and their experiences with disaffiliation. P5 reported how it was when her in-laws were curious and had a conversation with her about her reasons for disaffiliating: “In the same day that I told them, they actually were asking me questions like, ‘what do you think about this?’ So they felt more comfortable to ask me things, which I thought was cool.” Similarly, P6 recounted that when she first disaffiliated, she was able to have a powerful conversation with her mom where she validated her reasons for leaving their church: “She was like, ‘those are reasons I can’t really argue with. I’m still sad and I hope that one day you can come back, but for now, I respect your

decision.” P8 disclosed an experience where she was able to express her emotions to her mother who was receptive to listening.

I tried to open up to her a little bit about this is really hard for me, this was a big decision, and it has been a struggle. It’s not something like me trying to hurt you, but it’s something that’s been hard for me too. Just trying to be vulnerable. I feel like that helps a little bit with her...I feel like [that’s] been helpful to a degree.

Like P8 noted, many participants felt that being vulnerable with their affiliated family encouraged their affiliated family members to be receptive to having conversations with them. P2 remarked, “I’ve noticed that my sisters and my parents have got a lot better about being transparent and that transparency is actually freeing. If there’s anyone in the world that will not judge them, that it’ll be us.” P3 articulated how when she initially disclosed her disaffiliation, her affiliated family members expressed sincere concern about how their relationships could continue. Her mom, in particular, was dedicated to finding ways to maintain their relationship, which required receptivity and vulnerability of both of them: “the fact that my mom and I were able to be more straightforward with each other about our feelings and our hearts and the fact that she was willing to navigate the uncomfortableness is what has made a difference.”

Respecting Beliefs

Whether or not participants felt they were receptive to conversations about religion with their affiliated family members or avoided them, respecting each other’s beliefs was an important part of preserving family relationships. As discussed previously, participants described having empathy for their affiliated family members and understanding intimately their belief system and its importance, since they once shared it.

As such, participants recognized that these beliefs were important to their family members and needed to be respected, even if they held strong feelings in opposition to those beliefs. P8 reflected on how religious beliefs are sacred and, for many, intrinsic to their worldview which makes them more sensitive to discuss. P8 stated, “I feel like in any conversation, not attacking things that are really sacred and special to them always is a good start.” Similarly, P20 recognized that some of the ways her beliefs had changed would be devastating for her family to learn, so she chooses not to push those beliefs on her affiliated family members out of respect for them and their belief system. She commented, “They don’t even know that I don’t believe in God because I know that that would be really hard for them to hear, and I totally understand that. So, unless they ask, I’m not going to push on them.” P1 spoke to how because religion is part of her family’s core beliefs, it is not worth trying to change or attack those beliefs. She recounted, “When the goal is to try to change the person’s mind about whatever it is we’re talking about, then it just doesn’t go anywhere because it’s really hard to change someone’s mind about a core belief.” P1 identified that this leads to negative emotions and conflict, but if the goal is different “it’s just trying to understand how the other person sees it and allowing them to believe what they want to believe and just respecting it and agreeing to disagree, I think that’s when it’s been better.” Similarly, P19 disclosed how she had shown respect by not pushing her beliefs on her family saying she would never say things like, “I can’t believe you guys believe this or you still go to church’ or like ‘here are all the reasons I don’t believe this anymore.’ We’ve been respectful of each other’s ideas and beliefs.”

As demonstrated by P19’s above quote, when reflecting on the importance of respecting each other’s beliefs, many participants spoke of this concept in a reciprocal

way. Participants were intentionally trying to show respect and they felt respected by their affiliated family members. Participants and their affiliated family members showed respect in different ways, but commonly discussed agreeing to disagree, trying to understand each other, not trying to convince each other to believe differently, and not attacking or shaming each other for their beliefs. P7 remarked that mutual respect is maintained “As long as I’m not pushing them to leave the church or they’re not pushing me to be more faithful within the church.” Similarly, P3 said, “We’re not trying to convince you of what we believe or don’t believe.” P4 also noted, “If I do find an opening, I try to put a little blip in there, but I make sure I say this is my opinion or where I’m coming from instead of being like, I think you should think this way.” P1 spoke to the importance of going into conversations with the intent of wanting to understand and not convince others to believe differently: “I think going in with wanting to understand versus persuade them to think or believe something different.” P4 also stated the importance of respecting each person’s voice and not shaming each other when having conversations about differing beliefs with their affiliated family members. They stressed the importance of how you address disagreements – to not attack the other person but instead state things like ““wow, what you said feels hurtful. How can we move through that? How can we express those feelings with each other in a way that’s going to be productive?”” P20 beautifully summarized the importance of mutual respect of each other’s beliefs and communicating that respect in their interactions.

I think it’s a mutual respect for each other and the choices that we’re making, which is really hard to do when you are the one in the religion because anyone who leaves and participates in things not approved by the church are demonized

so much. Like that decision is demonized a lot. So, I'm really proud of my parents for being able to respect all of us who have left. It took them a while to become more open minded, but they see that we are following what makes us happy and what we feel right doing, so they respect that about us and we respect that they're happy and feel right in staying in the church.

Dynamic Process

As depicted by the gradient shading in the background of the model, this model is dynamic, not static, in nature. At multiple points during the interviews, participants noted how their interactions with family members shifted or how they anticipated them shifting in the future. Factors such as the passage of time, aging, self-improvement, other members of the family disaffiliating, and changes to the family structure, such as births, were all noted as factors that had changed or had the potential to change family interactions.

Of the passage of time, P1 stated, "I think they've come around over time. It's just a difference of religion now and it doesn't become like a source of conflict or provocation anymore, so much, which is nice." Similarly, P2 commented that 4 – 5 years post-disclosure: "my relationships are pretty open. The longer that it's gone on, they're more willing to ask me questions or understand my perspective and I do the same. I think I understand a lot more now than I did then about them." P3 speculated that it took time for her family to accept her decision to leave their religion because they needed to grieve the losses that were associated with her decision: "I feel like maybe they needed time to go through their grieving process and get to that acceptance." Lastly, P4 explained how time was helpful for them to trust their family with their emotions and experiences: "I

think for me, time has really been helpful for me expressing my emotions and recognizing that they haven't stopped their love or stopped wanting a relationship with me.”

Some participants expressed how their own efforts in self-growth helped to shift their interactions with their family members or see their situation from a different perspective. P21 described, “I know that I personally have changed the way I communicate, but I attribute that to going to therapy.” Similarly, P8 shared, “I started therapy for the first time in my life. I joined a mindful self-compassion meditation class, things that helped me be more in tune with myself.” In addition to therapy, participants mentioned other self-growth efforts, such as journaling and reading psychoeducational books.

Several participants also voiced how experiencing disaffiliation with other family members, whether before or after their own disaffiliation, was, at times, helpful. The disaffiliation of family members, especially if it occurred after them, could be a challenge if family members thought that they had influenced others' decisions; however, it largely was helpful to have other family members in the same situation. P18 recounted how her brother had left their religion before her, which influenced how her affiliated family members treated her in her own disaffiliation: “Me leaving was not the first time they had experienced it, which I'm sure plays a little bit of a role. They've seen him leave and go through his own ups and downs and understand that, in the end, it's okay.” Similarly, P20's sister was the first family member to leave in her family which helped her have empathy for her affiliated family members and helped them to not make active efforts to reconvert her to their religion: “She was the first one to leave and I was still in the church

at that point... I think my parents had already learned from my sister [what] could be harmful. So they haven't tried actively to bring us back."

In regard to future shifts, many participants brought up concerns about how things could shift in the future with their affiliated family members. The majority of concerns were regarding the need to set boundaries around their own children. P14, who did not yet have children, reported feeling nervous about how things would change with her parents when she and her partner chose to have children of their own: "It's like when my husband and I start having children...I know [it's] something I'm going to have to deal with [in] the future and that makes me nervous." P20 also was starting to anticipate changes they would need to make if they had children: "I haven't had too many problems, but I guess I have more worries of if we have kids in the future, bringing up religion with them."

P8 and P20 already had children and were anticipating the need to make additional boundaries as their children age. P8 disclosed, "I know there will be more things, especially involving my children, that will come up and I guess I'm still figuring that out because it's been a struggle." Similarly, P15 spoke of concerns about how things could change as her children get closer to the age of eight, when some religious rites take place in their religion: "I think once my kids get closer to eight, we're going to have to really dive in."

Lastly, several participants articulated desires they had for things to change with their affiliated family members. Participants often recognized that there were areas of improvement they wanted to attend to and boundaries they wanted to renegotiate with their families. P16, commenting on how she and her family were currently interacting,

simply remarked, “I hope that changes. That would be nice.” Similarly, P21 said during her interview “that’s one area that I would like to see improvement on.” P15 even shared an excitement to read the final report of this paper to get ideas from other people in a similar situation to her, expressing: “I can’t wait to read the study to see what other people think because I need advice.”

Regarding the desire to renegotiate boundaries, P20, speaking of her and her family’s tendency to avoid challenging conversations, said that she would like to set new boundaries or utilize different skills to improve communication: “I do think that we could figure out a productive way to actually talk about the topic or figure out how to set boundaries around whatever is making us uncomfortable instead of just pushing it aside and trying to pretend like it’s not affecting us.” P3, who had previously set strong boundaries with her family regarding topics they could and could not discuss reflected, “lately I’ve been thinking...I do kind of want to bring up some things again. I don’t know. I’m still trying to figure out if that’s a good idea and what my goals would be.”

Although different in nature, each of these topics convey how a myriad of life and relational experiences can impact how families choose to interact with one another around religion and disaffiliation. As families and individuals change, so will their interactions with one another. Therefore, this model is not meant to be a “one size fits all” or static solution for families experiencing religious disaffiliation. The dynamic nature of relationships and beliefs necessitates flexibility, growth, and change in how families interact around these topics.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Historically, there has been a gap in the literature about how families are able to maintain or preserve family relationships when experiencing religious disaffiliation. This study begins to fill this gap by providing practical actions that participants engage in regularly to connect, navigate differences, and continue their relationships with affiliated family members in meaningful ways. The present study suggests a model characterized by two interrelated, dynamic processes that aid families in navigating changes and connecting after the disclosure of religious disaffiliation. The first process, disaffiliated individual actions, describes actions that the disaffiliated individual takes on their own or experiences internally that help them to navigate challenges and remain connected to their affiliated family members. These actions include having empathy for their affiliated family members, being flexible in their decisions regarding how to interact with religious practices, and forming a supportive community.

While each aspect of the model provides important insight into how families maintain their relationships, the most unexpected finding is the importance of the disaffiliated individual forming a supportive community and the individual and relational benefits of this action. Although it can be a complex relationship, researchers suggest that religious involvement and having a religious community has a number of positive impacts on physical health, mental health, and overall well-being (Asarri, 2013). A common finding in disaffiliation literature is that individuals who have disaffiliated report losing family, friendships, and community ties (Bjorkmark et al., 2021). Given the benefits of having a religious community, it is not surprising that disaffiliated individuals

would have the need or desire to form a new community for themselves. In this study, participants had preserved their family relationships, even if they looked drastically different than they did pre-disaffiliation. Having maintained these relationships, one may assume that the need for new community is not necessary since parts of their pre-disaffiliation social network remained intact; however, even with continued family relationships, participants needed to create a supportive network.

For some participants, their newfound community was in-person, but for many it was online or a combination of in-person and online. Finding community online is consistent with other studies about religious disaffiliation. Nica (2019) described how participants found social support in online forums, particularly in the beginning stages of disaffiliation. Starr and colleagues (2019) also found that individuals disaffiliating from their religion used online communities to help maintain or improve their in-person relationships. Participants in their study reported that they used online communities to ask for advice, particularly pertaining to challenging relationships. Participants in the present study reported that their supportive community, whether online or in-person, served a similar function as they were able to air concerns, vent, and ask for advice from those in their supportive community.

Participant responses suggest that feeling isolated post-disaffiliation is not simply the absence or loss of relationships, but also an internal feeling that they are experiencing disaffiliation alone and that they are misunderstood by those they remain connected with. The latter point aligns with findings from Bjorkmark and colleagues (2021) who found that participants who had maintained relationships with those from their religion felt misunderstood and distant in those relationships. For participants in this study, forming a

supportive community created a sense of solidarity with others experiencing disaffiliation and created a space where participants felt understood, validated, and supported in their decision. This network fills needs that their affiliated family members no longer can and serves a protective function for relationships with their affiliated family members. By finding a place where they can air concerns about their previous religion, openly discuss their experience of disaffiliation, and process their experiences with their affiliated family members, participants could be more authentically engaged with their affiliated family members and feel less of a need to discuss potentially controversial topics with them.

In addition to forming a supportive community, participants also expressed the importance of feeling empathy for their affiliated family members. Research consistently suggests that empathy is an important part of individual and relational well-being (Behler & Berry, 2021). The experience and impact of feeling empathy across differences is a common area of research. Research consistently suggests that humans are most likely to feel and show empathy towards those they are close to or similar to (i.e., ingroup), as opposed to people who are distant or different (i.e., outgroup; Behler et al., 2021). With this research sample, the relationship is somewhat more complicated in that a disaffiliated family member appears to be an ingroup and outgroup member simultaneously. As a member of the family, they are part of the ingroup; however, their differing religious beliefs and/or identity places them in the outgroup religiously. This dynamic is not unique to families experiencing disaffiliation. Similar dynamics are seen in families where members have differences in race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, political affiliation, and other social identities (Harwood et al., 2006). This dynamic is well described by the term “intergroup”, meaning that the group maintains a family identification despite the

internal differences within the unit (Soliz et al., 2009). This intergroup identification may help disaffiliated individuals to feel empathy for their affiliated family members because there continues to be an ingroup dynamic to their relationship making them more likely to experience empathy for each other (Kurzban et al., 2015).

As a part of feeling empathy, participants also discussed the importance of acknowledging the perspective of their affiliated family members. While a different construct than empathy, perspective taking contributes to empathy and aids in improving relationships overall (Matera et al., 2020). Having once been affiliated themselves, disaffiliated family members are better equipped to perspective take with their affiliated family members than if they had never experienced the religion first-hand. Researchers have shown that perspective taking, especially when in the presence of the person whose perspective you are trying to take, increases empathy (Matera et al., 2020). This is consistent with the experience of participants. When discussing the importance of empathy, participants discussed how their previous experiences within the religion greatly increased their ability to recognize their affiliated family members' perspectives and their emotions surrounding their choice to disaffiliate. Having felt what their affiliated family members were feeling, they did not have to guess what their perspective was; rather, they had first-hand knowledge and experience that contributed to their understanding. This unique insight greatly aids in the perspective taking process which, in turn, increases empathy and improves relationships.

The final disaffiliated individual action is being flexible around participating in religious practices. This is a unique finding given the importance of beliefs and practices to formal religion (Walsh, 2009). Waldner and Magruder (1999), in their study of gay

and lesbian adolescents coming out to their parents, found that when there was a lack of resources or support for their identity, adolescents were more likely to conform to behaviors expected of them instead of living in ways aligned with their identity. While participants in this study did conform to the behaviors of their affiliated family members and what was expected of them in context (i.e., at church, during a holiday celebration, during a family prayer, etc.), their motivation appears to be different than that of participants in the Waldner and Magruder (1999) study. In the present study, participants described their motivation as respecting their affiliated family members' beliefs and taking a simple action, that they viewed as unharmed to them, that they knew would be meaningful to their family members.

These motivations appear to be in line with the idea of “comfort work”. Comfort work is defined as “labor to assuage others and increase their comfort levels” (Stone, 2021, p. 1120). Comfort work has been studied extensively in the field of nursing and, more recently, was studied with LGBTQIA+ adults and their parents (Stone, 2021). Stone (2021) studied comfort work in the context of LGBTQIA+ adults and their parents attending events in the LGBTQIA+ community together. In this population, comfort work included actions such as preparing family members for what would occur at events, providing education, and protecting parents from things that may make them uncomfortable. Stone (2021) suggests that comfort work is not unique to members of the LGBTQIA+ population, but that all families with diverse identities are likely to engage in forms of comfort work.

While the concept of comfort work has not been studied with interfaith families, it is possible that participants being flexible in how they engage in religious practices with

their affiliated family members is a form of comfort work in that it is an intentional action disaffiliated individuals are taking to put their affiliated family members at ease and help them feel comfortable. Engaging in this type of comfort work is likely of huge benefit in maintaining family relationships as researchers have shown that engaging in religious practices together is a strength to family relationships and helps to unify family members (Kelley et al., 2020; 2022). Stone (2021) found that engaging in comfort work often becomes a reciprocal process. In this way, comfort work would also contribute to strengthening family relationships as each person is working with the comfort and wellbeing of the other in mind and making choices accordingly. The use of comfort work in interfaith families is an important area for future research.

The second process, actions experienced as a family, includes actions that the disaffiliated individual is taking and perceives their affiliated family members doing reciprocally, to benefit the familial relationship. These actions include setting and respecting boundaries, communicating about religion by either being receptive to conversations or avoiding conversations, and respecting differing beliefs. An interesting finding is that families work towards preserving family relationships by communicating about religion and adjacent topics in different ways. In some families, they are receptive to having conversations around these topics, while in other families they avoid these topics. This finding is consistent with other studies on interfaith families (Morgan et al., 2020; Zimmerman et al., 2015) and has been found as a communication strategy with other topics, such as LGBTQ identity (Reczek & Bosley-Smith, 2021) and politics (Davies, 2022). Morgan and colleagues (2020) found that interfaith families used accommodative communication strategies to communicate about religious differences,

which included, at times, not discussing differences openly. Similar to the present study, Zimmerman and colleagues (2015) found their participants were split in speaking openly about religion or limiting or avoiding the topic. Reczek and Bosley-Smith (2021) studied how LGBTQ adults maintain ties with family members who are not affirming of their identity. They also found that some participants actively avoided LGBTQ topics or that they discussed them while also accepting that their family would never approve of their identity. Lastly, Davies (2022) wrote on a timely political topic, studying how families in Great Britain communicate about Brexit when they hold differing views. Some participants reported that it was important to them to discuss Brexit openly, while others felt it best to avoid the topic.

While it is common to find this divide within families around avoiding or openly conversing about controversial topics, the literature is more divided about if avoidance is the most effective strategy to maintaining family relationships. For instance, Davies (2022) conceptualizes “silence as care” (p. 106). Their participants reported that they avoided the topic of Brexit not because they were nervous to disclose their opinion, in fact many of them had been open in the past about their views, but because they did not perceive the conversation as beneficial or worth risking conflict. Davies (2022) conceptualized this choice as “an act of care” that participants took to protect the relationship (p. 107, 110). Similarly, Zimmerman and colleagues (2015) regarded families who avoided the topic of religion as maintaining healthy communication. On the contrary, Soliz and colleagues (2010), who studied communication of gay and lesbian adults within their families, found that avoidance impacted levels of anxiety within the relationship and decreased overall relationship satisfaction. They found that avoiding

topics of conversation left participants feeling inauthentic in their relationships and worried about saying the wrong thing or starting a potentially challenging conversation.

Many studies advocate for the use of open conversations when trying to maintain or improve relationships. Colaner and colleagues (2014) found that when parent-child dyads used accommodative communication strategies to discuss religious differences, they were able to find common ground, allowing them to maintain strong relationships. They also found that communicating about religious topics in interfaith families was important because leaning into those conversations helped communicate acceptance and a shared desire for a continued relationship. Brooks and colleagues (2021) studied interracial conversations and found that open conversations, especially where emotions were expressed, improved interracial relationships and increased empathy. This is similar to Matera and colleagues (2020) who studied perspective taking between able bodied and disabled individuals. As mentioned above, they found that perspective taking in the presence of someone different than you increases empathy and a desire for connection. De Vos and colleagues (2013) studied the experience of sharing anger in intergroup settings. They found that communicating pure anger decreases intergroup conflict and increases empathy for outgroup members. These studies suggest that having effective, open conversations with those who are different than you improves relationships. Constraining what can and cannot be discussed may, inadvertently, deny families these experiences of finding common ground, communicating love and acceptance, increasing empathy, decreasing conflict, and improving relationships overall.

While both avoiding conversations and having open conversations were perceived as effective by participants in their unique context, looking at *how* conversations are

being avoided is likely important to ascertain if it is a strategy that serves families in the long term. For instance, Zimmerman and colleagues (2015) who viewed avoidance as a healthy communication strategy in interfaith families noted that participants who experienced unhealthy communication were characterized by dishonesty and tension in their interactions. Therefore, if avoidance of religion and adjacent topics results in tension or dishonesty, it is no longer healthy. Davies (2022) referred to silence or avoidance as a caring act when participants were intentionally holding back their opinions as a means of showing respect or protecting the relationship. This is very different than the experience of feeling inauthentic or walking on eggshells in relationships, as described by Soliz and colleagues (2010).

All of the above perspectives were shared by participants in the current study. There were participants who spoke openly with their families and others who avoided conversations who felt their relationships were authentic and full. There were participants using both strategies who wished they could communicate differently. There were participants conversing openly with their families who recognized these conversations were problematic and desired to set boundaries in the future. Others were actively avoiding conversations with their family and wanted to be more open and find ways to be more authentic. These varied perspectives speak to the complexity of communication and how each family's unique context shifts how communication is experienced and perceived. More research into the long-term impacts of these communication strategies and how they change over time is needed before making any definitive statements on what is best in the context of religious disaffiliation.

Another action that participants in this study used to dictate how and when communication about religion occurred was setting and respecting boundaries. In the present study, participants did not only set boundaries around topics of conversation. They also set boundaries around not sending each other religious materials in an effort to change each other's opinions and setting boundaries around how affiliated family members could interact with disaffiliated family member's children. Participants described this as a reciprocal action within their families, meaning that they were setting and respecting boundaries and that they perceived their family members doing the same. Similar to how participants discussed being flexible in engaging in religious practices, they noted how respecting their affiliated family members and protecting their relationships were the motivation behind setting boundaries. In this way, it is similar to the act of caring described by Davies (2022) in their findings on avoiding political conversations. Another interesting finding from the Davies (2022) study was that participants drew upon their intimate knowledge of their families to decide if they would converse about Brexit or not. A similar dynamic was discussed by participants around setting boundaries. Pulling on knowledge about themselves ("I need to protect my peace") or their affiliated family members ("I'm not going to change their mind"), they were able to decide if a formal boundary needed to be set.

While there is a surprising lack of empirical research on the impact of setting boundaries on family relationships, the importance of setting boundaries has been a finding in similar studies about maintaining family relationships. Worwood and colleagues (2020) studied the relationship trajectories in parent-child relationships where the child disaffiliated from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In their study,

they found that both parents and children set boundaries around communication. Their participants reported that they felt close to their parents as a result of setting boundaries; however, they still felt distant and not as close as they had been pre-disaffiliation. It is possible that these boundaries had a similar impact on relationship satisfaction as avoidance did for participants in the Soliz and colleagues (2010) study referenced above. Similarly, Reczek and Bosley-Smith (2021) found that their participants set boundaries with their non-affirming parents as a way to maintain the relationship and protect themselves from further hurt or conflict. This is similar to how participants in the present study conceptualized boundaries and their function in their relationships.

The final aspect of the actions experienced as a family process is respecting different beliefs. Showing respect is a communication strategy discussed frequently in intergroup contact literature, particularly within the context of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT; Gallois et al., 2005). CAT is a dynamic theory of communication that has been studied in various intergroup contexts (Gallois et al., 2005). CAT is built upon three primary assumptions: (1) “communicative interactions are embedded in a sociohistorical context” (p.136), (2) “communication is about both exchanges of referential meaning and negotiation of personal and social identities (p. 136), and (3) “interactants achieve the informational and relational functions of communication by accommodating their communicative behavior...to their interlocutor’s perceived individual and group characteristics” (p. 137). The third assumption references accommodations that individuals make to aid their communication efforts. These accommodations are commonly studied in intergroup communication scenarios. One of the commonly studied accommodations is showing respect for differing beliefs.

For instance, in their study of parent-child dyads who had different religious identities, Colaner and colleagues (2014) studied the accommodative behaviors of religious-specific supportive communication and respecting divergent values. Questions such as “my parent(s) are respectful of my religious opinions in our conversations” and “my parent(s) are tolerant of my religious beliefs when we disagree” (p. 318) were used to measure this construct in the context of religious difference. In their study, respecting divergent values was associated with overall relationship satisfaction and having a shared family identity, despite differences. Morgan and colleagues (2020) used the same questions as Colaner and colleagues (2014) and found that the use of accommodative communication, including respecting divergent beliefs, helped to bridge differences in interfaith families and increase a sense of shared family identity. Though not studying CAT specifically, Davies (2022) found that for those families who spoke openly about Brexit, showing respect for each other and their views was essential to having productive conversations. It is important to note that these conversations continued to be challenging, but having a foundation of respect helped families to engage with each other. Barrow and colleagues (2021) studied how parents navigate respecting their children’s autonomy with their desire for their children to remain affiliated with the family’s religious tradition. Having interviewed parents and children about this process, both groups noted that parents showing respect for their children’s beliefs, whether they were similar or different, was important. Specifically, respect was shown by parents taking a non-judgmental stance, expressing trust in their child, and making intentional efforts to maintain a strong relationship.

These findings are in line with the results from the present study as disaffiliated individuals attempted to respect the differing opinions of their affiliated family members and perceived their affiliated family members doing the same. In the current study, showing respect was commonly defined as not attacking each other's opinions, not oversharing or dumping information on each other, and approaching conversations from a place of wanting to understand, as opposed to wanting to change each other's minds. Interestingly, oversharing or the inappropriate use of self-disclosure is a commonly studied example of non-accommodative communication in interfaith families (Colaner et al., 2014; Morgan et al., 2020) which has been shown to decrease relationship satisfaction and shared family identity.

Both processes depicted in the model rest upon the foundation of families loving each other and desiring a meaningful relationship post-disclosure of religious disaffiliation. Love and the desire for a continued relationship were integral to each of the processes and positioned as a motivation to engage in the hard work it often took to navigate differing beliefs and family changes post-disaffiliation. Expressing love and the desire for meaningful relationships is depicted as the foundation of the model because, without this desire, it is unlikely that disaffiliated individuals and their families would go through the challenging steps depicted in the two processes. Valentine and colleagues (2015) discuss the importance of love in family relationships at length in their study about how families navigate differences within the family unit. They note that individual differences within the family unit are taking place in a very unique context. Differences within a family unit are embedded in a context where support, love, and acceptance are expected. This is not always the case, but there are societal expectations that these

feelings are present within a family unit. Within highly religious families, these expectations may be even more emphasized as most major religions espouse the importance of love, commitment, and good treatment of one another within the family unit (Mahoney, 2010; Onedera, 2008). Glasser (1998) expressed that because human beings are social creatures, when meaningful relationships shift in painful ways, we begin to take action to stop the pain. In the context of this study, participants began to take action by forming a supportive community, shifting how they communicated about religion and adjacent topics, setting boundaries, and other actions that would help relationships to be less painful and more loving. Valentine and colleagues (2015) suggest that the experience of love within a family is critical to “creating an emotional connectivity that brings the distant closer” (p. 289). This suggests that the presence of love within a family unit can help to bridge differences and minimize the felt distance that differences can introduce in a family unit.

Additionally, there is some evidence to suggest that the presence of love within a family aids in the other aspects of the model. For instance, Batson and colleagues (2007) explain that without love and/or concern for others, you cannot feel empathy towards them. In terms of communication, Davies (2022) noted throughout their paper that conversations about Brexit and how they went mattered because families cared for one another and wanted to feel understood and respected by one another. Without love and concern for their relationship, it is likely that participants would not have taken as much care and consideration as they did to communicate respectfully. Similarly, Faw and colleagues (2019) who studied the concept of tough love in parent-adult children relationships found that without the knowledge that their parents loved them

unconditionally, the young adult children were unable to engage with challenging feedback or conversations. Participants in the current study noted similar feelings. Knowing that their family was united in making their relationship work and that their love for each other remained aided families in putting in the emotional labor of maintaining relationships.

As depicted in the model, these actions are dynamic in nature, meaning they change as individuals and families change. This finding is supported by the work of Mahoney (2010) who posited that religion has the potential to impact the way family relationships are created, maintained, and transformed throughout the lifespan. In the same way that religion impacts these factors throughout the lifespan, so too do shifts to religious identity and the processes families use to attend to these changes. Participants in this study had to consistently think about and adjust the ways they maintained family relationships. Special considerations also had to be taken or were anticipated when changes in family creation and other transformations occurred, such as the birth of a new child, marriage, or other family transformation such as someone coming out, moving away from the family, or additional family members disaffiliating from the religion. Families are not static. They are constantly changing in various ways. Given this dynamic, it makes sense that the ways in which families navigate religious disaffiliation would also need to shift and change over time to better fit the needs of the family system and the individuals therein.

Although not the focus of this study, it is important to note that every participant openly discussed the challenges they encountered with their affiliated family members regarding disaffiliation. Though not an exhaustive list, participants discussed feeling

misunderstood, judged and shamed by their affiliated family members for their choice to disaffiliate, family members making intentional efforts to re-convert them to their faith, and family members expressing a loss of trust in them and/or their relationship. The relational consequences described by participants are consistent with those found in previous research about religious disaffiliation (Bjorkmark et al., 2021; Jindra & Lee, 2021; Knight et al., 2019; Mahoney, 2010; Zimmerman et al., 2015). This highlights that maintaining family relationships post-religious disaffiliation does not mean there is an absence of challenges. Like any family, interfaith families experience challenges that necessitate the use of skills, effective communication, repair, and change over time. These actions are represented in the model derived from the participants of this study.

The McMaster Approach to Families

As outlined previously in the paper, The McMaster Approach to Families was used as a sensitizing concept in this study. The McMaster Approach was primarily used to formulate the initial interview guide; however, as data collection began and interview responses and participant feedback were noted, the interview guide was adjusted, moving it further from some of the domains of the McMaster Approach. The domains of communication, problem-solving, affective responsiveness, and affective involvement proved to be important to participant experiences of religious disaffiliation; however, behavior control and roles, though they came up occasionally, did not seem to play as significant of a role.

The domains of communication and problem-solving were the most relevant of the six domains to families experiencing religious disaffiliation. Participants consistently had rich responses to the questions regarding communication and problem-solving and

reported that shifting communication was the most common way they approached solving problems that came from differing religious beliefs. The themes and subthemes of setting and respecting boundaries, being receptive to conversations, avoiding conversations, communicating love and a desire for relationships to continue, and respecting differing beliefs all fall underneath the domain of communication and, in turn, problem-solving as these were seen as viable solutions to the problems participants commonly faced.

Affective responsiveness, defined as how families emotionally respond to different experiences, was also highly relevant to participants. Religious disaffiliation tends to be a highly emotional experience for those disaffiliating, as well as those in their family and larger community. Therefore, families being able to productively express their emotions to each other *or* find another community in which they can safely express those emotions became particularly important. Feeling empathy and respecting differing beliefs both fall under the domain of affective responsiveness. Additionally, forming a supportive community is also associated with affective responsiveness as it helped disaffiliated individuals to express their emotions openly in a safe, supportive space and have their emotional needs met in another setting. Some participants noted that they were aware of their family members forming similar communities and consulting others who had experienced disaffiliation in their families. Within these spaces, they could more openly express their emotions and experiences without worrying about offending anyone or harming relationships.

Lastly, affective involvement, defined as how families relate via values and shared time, was also consistent with participant accounts. Many participants discussed

how differences in beliefs and losing the unifying force of religious traditions, rituals, and holidays felt like a drastic change in their relationships and one of the more challenging aspects of disaffiliation to navigate. The theme of being flexible in how the disaffiliated individual chooses to interact with religious practices is consistent with this domain. For many participants, they chose to continue connecting with their families in the ways they had when they were religiously affiliated because it felt unifying, even if it held different meaning than it had in the past. This provided additional spaces to connect with their affiliated family members and participants felt positive about participating in practices and rituals that they knew were meaningful for their affiliated family members.

While communication, problem-solving, affective responsiveness, and affective involvement were consistent with participant accounts, roles and behavior control were less applicable. In large part, because participants were all over the age of 18, behavior control was less of an aspect of family interactions in general, not just within the realm of religion. The one area where behavior control did come up was in discussing respecting differing beliefs and boundaries. For example, Participant 21 shared that when she visits the homes of affiliated family members, she will not share a bedroom with her partner since they are not married. Similarly, Participant 19 noted that when she is with her affiliated family members, she chooses to abide by the modesty standards of her previous religion and not wear clothing that could be offensive to her affiliated family members. Examples like these seldom came up in data analysis and, like these examples, were more an internal decision to respect differing beliefs and boundaries, as opposed to affiliated family members forcing disaffiliated individuals to do something they did not want to do.

An interesting finding about family roles is that, when asked, participants could seldom think of ways that their role or the roles of others in their family changed; however, it was more common for participants to discuss how disaffiliation shifted the way they and their affiliated family members viewed or perceived their family roles. For instance, many of the female participants still held the roles of wife and mother in their family, but they viewed their roles differently than they had before because of their shifting beliefs and worldviews.

Clinical Implications

Regardless of who is attending treatment – the disaffiliated individual, affiliated family members, or a combination – therapists can provide an important space of healing, learning, and growth for families experiencing religious disaffiliation. A therapist may be an important part of a supportive community, especially as clients take steps to form a supportive community of their own. As with any client, it would be prudent for therapists to begin by assessing how disaffiliation has impacted the family and what goals clients have for their family relationships. Some of the assessment and goal creation process will look similar to general family therapy. Therapists will want to begin by learning about the family, the desired focus of therapy, and how clients want their family relationships to look moving forward. Therapists can inquire about what current interactions look like and how clients would like to see interactions change, if at all. As we know from the literature, in families where disaffiliation has taken place, there are times where family relationships dissolve and times where families want to maintain relationships. After the disclosure of religious disaffiliation, it will be important to understand the goal of the family, meaning, do they want to stay connected, do they need some time/space apart, or

do they want to end their relationship. In some cases, formal religious actions, such as shunning, may come into play and will be important for therapists to be aware of and understand.

Along these same lines, after the disclosure of religious disaffiliation, therapists will need to gather some contextual information around the impact of religious disaffiliation on their client and their family. While not reported in the results, participants did answer questions about how their religious tradition views disaffiliation, what their disaffiliation process looked like, how they disclosed their disaffiliated status, how open they had been during the decision-making process, and their affiliated family members' initial reactions to the disclosure. All of these responses provided important context for the remainder of the interview. Likewise, responses to these questions would provide important context for therapists and may be important points to focus on in therapy. The therapist may ask questions such as: *How important is religion to your family currently? Are there any other family members who have disaffiliated or are you the first? How is disaffiliation viewed within your previous religious identity? Are there any formal consequences to your disaffiliation that impact your relationship with your family? How did you decide that you wanted to disaffiliate? How open had you been with your family/friends about your thoughts/feelings/doubts? How did you disclose to your family that you had disaffiliated? and How did they respond to your disclosure?*

As part of the assessment and information gathering process, it may be helpful for therapists to complete a spiritual genogram with their clients (Frame, 2000). Much like a more general genogram, this intervention allows therapists to gather information about family members across generations, demographic information, and important timeline

information. The spiritually focused questions would include gathering information about religious identities throughout the family, relationships between individuals and their religious organization(s), important timeline information (i.e., baptism, Bar/Bat Mitzvah, marriages, etc.) and spiritual changes (i.e., deconversion, conversion, etc.), and how religion has harmed and helped family members. Having a clear picture of the family will give the therapist insight into the developmental stages of family members, which may guide questions later in treatment.

As therapists gather information about the client and their family members, therapists should ensure that they are listening for developmental information and important contextual pieces that may need to be attended to in session. Participants discussed how developmental events, such as moving out of the family home as a young adult, getting married, and having children impacted their relationships with their affiliated family members and how they maintained their relationships to one another. Therapists should be prepared to inquire about how developmental milestones may impact or have impacted family relationships. For instance, a client may mention that they are engaged to be married and choosing not to have a religious marriage ceremony. Therapists could inquire about what their secular ceremony will look like, how they plan, if at all, to involve affiliated family members, and if there are any feelings of grief/loss around their wedding looking different than they may have previously planned. Additionally, therapists would want to inquire about relational aspects, such as how this decision was disclosed to family members, what their initial reactions were, and if affiliated family members are participating in the ceremony and how.

The actions referenced in the model, both disaffiliated individual actions and those experienced as a family, can be worked on in therapy. An important part of both processes were the actions of feeling empathy and showing respect for different beliefs. As discussed previously, perspective taking can help contribute to empathy and can improve intergroup relationships. In session, therapists can invite clients to take the perspective of those in their family and process what experiences may be like from their perspective. Providing opportunities for perspective taking in joint sessions may be especially helpful as research has shown that perspective taking is particularly powerful when done in the physical presence of those you are trying to better understand (Matera et al., 2020).

Researchers also suggests that mindfulness meditation can help cultivate empathy and improve intergroup relationships (Behler & Berry, 2021). Therapists can introduce the concepts of mindfulness and meditation in session. Therapists may consider leading clients through a mindfulness meditation practice in session and spending time reviewing the experience with their client afterwards. Meditation exercises, such as loving kindness meditations, may be particularly helpful as they are intended to help people give love and kindness to themselves and others (Chopra, 2018). If clients find it helpful, therapists can help them create a mindfulness practice to engage in outside of session and provide resources to utilize in their home practice.

As outlined in the results, participants noted that being flexible in how they engage in religious practices helped them to maintain their relationships with affiliated family members. Again, this was not consistent amongst participants and three participants reported they had drawn firm boundaries with their families and participated

in no religious practices. For those who continued to engage in religious practices, they made choices based on context, their emotions/feelings, and their current belief systems. Therapists can work through some of these questions with their disaffiliated clients. *Are you open to praying with your family members, celebrating religious holidays, or attending church services? If so, how will you engage? How will you take care of yourself if the experience is challenging? If the experience becomes intolerable, how can you cease participation? If you are not interested in participating, how do you want to set that boundary or express this choice to your affiliated family members?* It may be helpful to remind clients that they can always renegotiate the decisions they are making for themselves. For instance, at first they may feel that they want to attend religious services for the holidays; however, as time moves forward, they may form new traditions that are better aligned with their belief system. Therapists can validate this shift and help clients process how they can communicate this shift to their family members, if needed.

Whether clients are receptive to conversations about religion or are choosing to avoid the topic, communication skills will be important to attend to in therapy. During the assessment process, therapists can use the Religious Specific Supportive Communication measure (Colaner et al., 2014) to assess how clients perceive their communication about religion. This measure is specifically written for parent-child dyads; however, questions could be reworded to reflect other family dynamics. After reviewing the measure, therapists could provide psychoeducation and research about accommodative communication practices and their benefits in intergroup relationships. Therapists could also use this measure as an opportunity to share how nonaccommodative practices, such as inappropriate self-disclosure and giving unwanted advice, have been shown to harm

intergroup relationships. If these are practices clients engage in regularly, therapists can explore their impact, the function they serve, and how they can change moving forward.

Participants discussed how learning and utilizing communication skills was helpful to maintaining family relationships. Specifically, participants mentioned active listening, validation, emotional regulation during challenging conversations, utilizing negotiated time outs, and attending to nonverbal cues. Participants also expressed the importance of learning how to repair family relationships when there are ruptures and how to communicate that they feel a rupture in their relationship to their family members. These skills can be discussed, taught, and practiced in session.

If disaffiliated and affiliated family members are attending sessions together, therapists may elicit enactments in session to help clients utilize these skills. Morgan and colleagues (2020) noted in their study that teaching families skills, such as those outlined above, and providing opportunities to practice through enactments is beneficial to minimizing the felt impact of identity difference in the family unit. If choosing to engage clients in an enactment, therapists can utilize the steps of the EFT Tango, taken from Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT; Johnson, 2019) to guide the intervention. To prepare for the enactment, the therapist will need to reflect to the clients what is happening in their relationship (i.e., It appears that when you discuss religion, mom becomes really defensive and daughter starts to shut down). After reflecting what the therapist sees, they will deepen emotion and help the clients recognize how they feel in these encounters. Once clients are connected to their emotions, the therapist can begin to set up the enactment. Especially if clients are new to therapy, the therapist will need to provide specific questions for the enactment to help clients stay focused (i.e., Can you tell

your mom how you feel attacked when you have conversations about your decision to leave the church?). Once the enactment has occurred, the therapist will want to process the experience, starting with the client who took the risk, in this case the daughter, and then with the client who received the risk, in our example, the mother. After the enactment has been thoroughly processed, the therapist can highlight what they saw in the enactment, client strengths, and progress made in session.

Participants who tended to avoid conversations about religion did note that it was important for them to have coping skills to take care of themselves when they had not been able to be authentic or open. Therapists can teach coping skills in session and help clients create a toolbox of skills they can utilize when needed. Specific coping skills mentioned by participants included individual therapy, listening to music, utilizing fidgets or stress balls, meditation, journaling, and speaking openly with their supportive community. Therapists can help clients to identify their triggers and practice using these skills so that it is easier for them to use in the moment. These skills may also be helpful to clients when they are engaging in religious practices, setting boundaries, or authentically communicating with their affiliated family members.

Additionally, it is important to note that many participants were hoping to see a change in how they communicated with their family members about religion and adjacent topics. As discussed above, it is important to analyze *why* families are choosing to engage in conversations about religion or avoiding them all together. Therapists can have direct conversations with their clients about how they chose to openly converse or avoid religion with their family, how it is helping and/or hurting their family members to interact in this way, and how, if at all, they would like things to change. It is likely that, in

many families, how they are choosing to engage around religion is part of a larger pattern. For instance, some families may always engage in lively conversations around challenging subjects. This family may have no problem talking to each other or challenging each other's religious views. Others may avoid controversy or the potential for conflict by not bringing up anything that is challenging. This family will likely avoid all conversations about religion or adjacent topics. While these patterns may feel comfortable or effective, it may be helpful within therapy to look at these patterns more closely, recognize their function, and adjust, as needed, for the benefit of family relationships.

As discussed throughout the paper, forming a supportive community is an important part of navigating family relationships after religious disaffiliation. Therapists can help clients navigate what kind of community they need and what they are hoping to gain from their community. Therapists can also help clients brainstorm if there are people already in their sphere of influence who could be a part of this community. Participants reported that disaffiliated family members and friends who had disaffiliated or who had never been affiliated with their religion became key parts of their supportive community. At times, participants also had affiliated family members who were non-judgmental and open to having conversations who could be part of their supportive community. Therapists may also need to help clients brainstorm how to meet new people if they do not have any people in their lives currently who could be part of their supportive community.

As discussed previously, online communities have been shown to be of benefit to individuals experiencing religious disaffiliation (Nica, 2019; Starr et al., 2019). Online

communities, such as Facebook, Discord, and Reddit groups, as well as content creators on Instagram, Twitter, and Tik Tok may be a good place to start, as they helped participants to feel less alone and find and build community. Therapists should consider reviewing online support groups and learning some about how they function (i.e., are they private vs. public, are there religion specific groups, are there community rules/guidelines, etc.) before making recommendations. Therapists can also help their clients to weigh the pros and cons of engaging with an online community as opposed to finding in-person community for social support.

Lastly, as depicted in the model, sharing a sense of love and desire for continued relationships is essential to maintaining relationships. In session, therapists can and should create a space for clients to acknowledge and honor the pain that has come from disaffiliation while also creating a space for love and caring feelings to be acknowledged. Research has shown that emphasizing differences harms intergroup relationships (Colaner et al., 2014). Therefore, while these differences need to be acknowledged, similarities should also be attended to. Therapists can overtly ask clients about how they continue to be similar to their affiliated family members, values they continue to share, and family activities/practices that continue to be meaningful. Highlighting the love and concern that is still present can help clients feel motivated and hopeful about treatment and their ability to maintain and improve relationships moving forward.

Limitations & Future Directions

There are some limitations to the data set that should be noted. First, the sample lacks racial diversity with 90% of the sample identifying as White. The importance of community for people of color is a unique and important consideration in disaffiliation

studies. White people, as members of the majority, may have an easier time disaffiliating and, potentially, losing their social network and support system. Previous studies have found that for people of color who are contemplating disaffiliation, this potential loss is viewed as too much of a risk, leading many to remain affiliated (Manalang, 2021).

Further research should be done to address the unique consequences and barriers of disaffiliation for people of color and other minoritized groups. Additionally, the majority of participants (90%) had left Christian religions, with 70% of those participants having left the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, limiting the religious diversity of the sample. Future studies should be conducted with more religiously diverse samples. For instance, it would be important to learn how families belonging to religious and spiritual traditions outside of Christianity or from a more diverse pool of Christian denominations navigate disaffiliation. Lastly, there is a lack of gender diversity with 90% of the sample identifying as female. Men and women are socialized to interact within family relationships differently, therefore this sample characteristic may have skewed the data. Future research should focus on recruiting a more diverse sample with wider gender representation.

There is also limited age diversity in the sample with 100% of participants being over the age of 18. There was a wide range of ages in participants (min = 19; max = 46); however, the majority of participants (65%) would be considered emerging adults with an average age of 28.15 years. This is important to note because, as described above, developmental stages and milestones naturally shift how families function, relate to each other, and shift with disaffiliation. A thirteen-year-old living with their family and designated as a minor is likely to have an extremely different experience disaffiliating

from their religion than a 34 year-old who is living on their own and can legally make their own decisions. As such, future research should focus on different age groups, including, but not limited to minors. Additionally, age group focused research (i.e., emerging adults, middle adulthood, etc.) or research focused on how families maintain relationships during or after developmental milestones (i.e., marriage, children, etc.) could provide further insight into the ways that developmental stages/milestones impact how interfaith families maintain relationships.

The vast majority of participants noted that their families had been highly religious growing up and in the period of time before they chose to leave their religion. Ninety-five percent of participants marked between 7 and 10 ($M = 9.89$) when asked to rate how important religion was in their family on a scale from one to ten. As such, the majority of participants were situated in families where religion played a large role in family interactions and belief systems, leading to a larger impact when disaffiliation occurred. Therefore, the present study largely represents the perspective of individuals who disaffiliated from religions that were highly influential and important in their family systems. It is likely that families who regard religion as less important experience disaffiliation differently and may navigate religious differences differently. It would be interesting, in the future, to study how less-religious families navigate disaffiliation and how, if at all, disaffiliation impacts family relationships and interactions.

Another limitation that should be noted is that in data collection, interviews were only conducted with individuals who had disaffiliated from their religion. The perspectives of affiliated family members are not represented in this study. Even the “Actions Experienced as a Family” section is only from the perspective of the

disaffiliated family members who shared what they were doing and what they felt or perceived their affiliated family members doing. It is likely that in the same way that the disaffiliated individual takes actions on their own to preserve family relationships, so too do affiliated family members; however, we do not have access to that information to include in this study's report.

In the future, efforts should be made to better understand the perspectives of affiliated family members. Studies can focus on what affiliated family members do to navigate and preserve family relationships, as well as how they experience the disaffiliation of their family members more generally. The perspective of affiliated family members on disaffiliation is largely missing from the literature at this time and would provide important insight into family changes and challenges experienced when religious disaffiliation occurs.

Conclusion

The religious landscape in the USA is drastically changing, with religious nones currently growing faster than any other religious group. The individual and relational consequences of religious disaffiliation are well documented, particularly for families where disaffiliation results in cut off or the dissolving of relationships. This study begins to fill the gap in the literature around how families are able to maintain family relationships after the disclosure of religious disaffiliation. This information is timely and essential for family therapists and family scientists to understand as hundreds of thousands of families are expected to become interfaith over the next 50 years. The results suggest that primary to any efforts to maintain relationships is a continued love for each other and the desire to continue family relationships. Upon this foundation,

disaffiliated individuals make efforts to form a supportive community, feel empathy for their affiliated family members, and be flexible around engaging in religious practices. As a family, setting and respecting boundaries, respecting differing beliefs, and communicating about religion and adjacent topics through being receptive to conversations or avoiding them are important actions. This model is dynamic and changes as families change. This study offers a practical model of interaction that families experiencing religious disaffiliation or therapists working with these families can use to begin making efforts to maintain and preserve family relationships.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Eligibility Screening Survey

1. Do you consider yourself to be disaffiliated from your family's religious tradition?
2. Do you have at least one immediate family member (i.e., parent, sibling, spouse, mother-in-law, father-in-law, child, etc.) who remains affiliated with your family's religious tradition?
3. Have you disclosed your disaffiliated status to your family within the past 5 years?

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form



TEXAS TECH
UNIVERSITY.

Informed Consent

TITLE OF STUDY: Families Navigating Religious Disaffiliation

INVESTIGATORS: Emily Janes and Dr. Jaclyn Cravens

For questions or concerns about the study, you may contact Emily Janes, MS at ejanes@ttu.edu or Dr. Jaclyn Cravens at jaclyn.cravens@ttu.edu or (806) 834-2705.

For questions regarding the rights of research subjects, any complaints or comments regarding the manner in which the study is being conducted, contact **the Texas Tech Human Research Protection Program at 806-742-2064, or via email at hrpp@ttu.edu.**

Purpose of the Study

This research study is called “Families Navigating Religious Disaffiliation”. The purpose of this study is to understand how families are able to maintain family relationships and functioning after a member discloses disaffiliating from their religious tradition.

Participants

The participants in the study are individuals who are 18 years of age or older, have disaffiliated from their family’s religious tradition, have at least one immediate family member who is still affiliated with their family’s religious tradition, maintain some connection with their family, and have disclosed their disaffiliated religious status to their family within the past 5 years.

What would I do if I participate?

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will complete two brief online questionnaires – a demographics questionnaire and the Family Assessment Device (FAD) - and participate in an interview. The demographic questionnaire will take 10-15 minutes to complete, the FAD will take approximately 15-20 minutes, and the interview will be between 45-60 minutes. Your total participation time is estimated to be between 70-95 minutes. You will be interviewed in the format of your choice – via phone or Zoom. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed so it can be used for analysis following the study. You will be given a \$25 digital Amazon Gift Card as compensation for participating in the interview.

The purpose of the interview is to learn about your experience of disaffiliation, how you disclosed it to your family, and how you have navigated family relationships post-disclosure of your disaffiliated status. The interview will include questions such as: *How was your choice to disaffiliate disclosed to your family? Did you choose to share it or did they find out in another way?; Have any problems emerged in your family around your choice to disaffiliate? If so, how have you navigated them? When you navigate these problems well, what helps?; What are positive consequences of your disaffiliation that you've seen in your family? Negative consequences?*, and others. You may end the interview at any time for any reason. You may also refuse to answer any of the interview questions, with no penalty.

If you choose to participate in the study, the lead researcher will ask permission to keep your contact information and contact you in the future to help with additional research projects. You can refuse to grant permission for future contact with no penalty.

May we contact you again to request your participation in a follow up study?

Δ Yes

Δ No

How we will protect your privacy

Your name will not be linked to any material in reports, publications, or presentations. No one other than the researchers associated with this project will have access to the raw data. All recordings and related documentation will be stored on a password protected computer. If contact information is saved for future research opportunities, the lead researcher will keep the information in a password protected file on their password protected computer.

Confidentiality rules prevent anyone from the research team sharing information about you with anyone outside of the research team without your permission. There are some very rare exceptions to this that you should know about. For example, if you tell us about a child or an elderly adult who is being abused, we are required to report that to the appropriate authorities. Also, if we believe that you or someone else are in imminent danger of serious physical harm, we may need to contact someone to make sure you're safe. This would only happen if we were not able to work with you directly to come up with a plan to keep you, or someone else, safe.

What will happen to my data?

All identifying information will be removed from the interview transcript. After such removal, the transcript may be used for future research studies or distributed to other investigators for future research studies without additional informed consent from you or your legally authorized representative. Results from this study will be presented at conferences and appear in academic journals that will help researchers and therapists better understand how families navigate relationships and family functioning after a member of the family discloses their religiously disaffiliated status.

Benefits of Participation

While there are no direct benefits of participating in this study, this study will provide participants with a retrospective look at how they navigated family relationships and functioning after disclosing their decision to disaffiliate from their family’s religious tradition. Potential benefits include the opportunity of having your experience heard and possible increased understanding and insight into your experience.

Risks of Participation

There are minimal risks associated with participation in this study. Risks include potential emotional discomfort. After their interview, all participants will be provided with a list of resources via email to utilize if they need additional support.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate in this study or in any part of this study. You may withdraw at any time without consequence to your relations with the university or the researchers involved. You may also elect to withdraw any part of the interview data from the study. You are encouraged to ask questions about this study at the beginning or any time during the research study.

Participant Consent:

I have read the above information and agree to participate in this study. I am at least 18 years of age. A copy of this form has been given to me.

_____ (Signature)

_____ (Date)

Appendix C

Demographic Survey

1. Please provide the participant ID given to you via email (i.e., participant 1). If you are having trouble locating your participant ID, please reach out to the research team via email. (text box entry)
2. Age in Years (text box entry)
3. Gender (select one)
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Transgender Male
 - d. Transgender Female
 - e. Non-Binary
 - f. Not Listed (text box entry)
4. Race (select all that apply)
 - a. American Indian or Alaska Native
 - b. Asian
 - c. Black or African American
 - d. Latino/a
 - e. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
 - f. White
 - g. Not Listed (text box entry)
5. Ethnicity (select one)
 - a. Hispanic
 - b. Non-Hispanic
6. Sexual Orientation (select one)
 - a. Heterosexual
 - b. Homosexual
 - c. Bisexual
 - d. Pansexual
 - e. Asexual
 - f. Not Listed (text box entry)
7. Relationship Status (select all that apply)
 - a. Single
 - b. Dating
 - c. Engaged
 - d. Married
 - e. Cohabiting
 - f. Divorced/Separated
 - g. Not Listed (text box entry)
8. Annual Household Income (select one)
 - a. 0-\$15,000
 - b. \$16,000 - \$30,000

- c. \$31,000 - \$45,000
 - d. \$46,000 - \$60,000
 - e. \$61,000 - \$75,000
 - f. \$76,000 - \$100,000
 - g. \$100,000+
9. Education Status (select one)
- a. Completed 8th Grade
 - b. Completed Some High School
 - c. High School Diploma
 - d. Associate's Degree
 - e. Bachelor's Degree
 - f. Master's Degree
 - g. Ph.D.
 - h. Not Listed (text box entry)
10. Employment Status (select one)
- a. Employed for Wages
 - b. Self-Employed
 - c. Out of Work and Searching for a Job
 - d. Out of Work and not Searching for a Job
 - e. Part-Time Employment
 - f. Homemaker
 - g. Student
 - h. Military
 - i. Retired
 - j. Unable to Work
 - k. Not Listed (text box entry)
11. Occupation (text box entry)
12. Participant's Current Religious Status (select all that apply)
- a. Christian (Catholic, Protestant, or other Christian denomination)
 - i. Please specify which Christian denomination you identify with in the text box below. (text box entry)
 - b. Buddhist
 - c. Hindu
 - d. Muslim
 - e. Jewish
 - f. Sikh
 - g. Spiritual, not Religious
 - h. No Religion
 - i. Not Listed (text box entry)
13. The Family's Religious Tradition(s) (i.e., the tradition you have left)
- a. Christian (Catholic, Protestant, or other Christian denomination)
 - i. Please specify which Christian denomination you identify with in the text box below. (text box entry)

- b. Buddhist
 - c. Hindu
 - d. Muslim
 - e. Jewish
 - f. Sikh
 - g. Spiritual, not Religious
 - h. No Religion
 - i. Not Listed (text box entry)
14. Importance of religious to your family pre-disaffiliation.
- a. Likert Scale (1 = not at all important; 10 = extremely important)
15. How long since the disclosure of disaffiliation to family members? (text box entry)
16. Number of people in your immediate family (text box entry)
17. Affiliation status of immediate family members (i.e., mom – affiliated; dad – affiliated; older brother – disaffiliated, etc.) (text box entry)
18. Personal reasons for disaffiliation (select all that apply)
- a. Disagreement with Beliefs/Doctrines
 - i. Please explain (text box entry)
 - b. Social/Political Issues (i.e., abortion, divorce, LGBTQIA+ rights, gender equality, etc.)
 - i. Please explain (text box entry)
 - c. Challenges with Religion’s History
 - i. Please explain (text box entry)
 - d. Challenges with Religious Leadership
 - i. Please explain (text box entry)
 - e. Family Challenges
 - i. Please explain (text box entry)
 - f. Identity Challenges (felt marginalized within religion due to gender, sexual orientation, marital status, etc.)
 - i. Please explain (text box entry)
 - g. Not Listed (text box entry)

Appendix D

Interview Guide

Introductory Questions

1. From the perspective of your previous religious identity, how is disaffiliation viewed? Were there any formal consequences, set by the religious organization, for your decision to disaffiliate? Informal or cultural consequences?
2. How was your choice to disaffiliate disclosed to your family? Did you choose to share it or did they find out in another way?
3. How did your family initially react to your decision to disaffiliate? Did they anticipate your decision to disaffiliate or was it a surprise to them?
 - a. How open had you been with your family about your thoughts/feelings leading up to your choice to disaffiliate?
4. What does the choice to disaffiliate mean to you?
5. When deciding to disaffiliate, did you interact with any media that influenced your decision (i.e., documentaries, social media groups or content, blogs, support groups, TV shows, music, books, etc.)? If so, what was the influence of these materials?

Domains of Functioning Questions

The interviewer may use participant specific lead ins to the following questions based on their scores on the FAD.

Problem Solving

1. Have any problems emerged in your family around your choice to disaffiliate? If so, how have you navigated them? When you navigate these problems well, what helps?
2. When there are ruptures between you and your family around disaffiliation, how do you repair these ruptures?

Communication

1. How, if at all, did communication shift with your family post-disclosure?
2. How were you able to maintain healthy communication with each other? OR How did the shift to communication impact your interactions? Relationships?
 - a. Were you able to repair your communication with each other? If so, how?
3. Were you able to talk openly about disaffiliating and its consequences with your family?

Roles

3. Do you feel your role in the family changed post-disaffiliation? If so, how? If not, why not?

4. Did the roles of any other family members change post-disclosure of your choice to disaffiliate?

Affective Responsiveness

1. Disaffiliation often brings up a range of emotions in individuals and families. Have you been able to communicate your emotions with your family? If so, how do they respond? If not, why not? How does this impact family interactions? Relationships?
2. Do you feel your family members have been able to express their emotions about your disaffiliation with you? How do these conversations impact you? When they go well, what helps? When they go poorly, what hinders effective communication?

Affective Involvement

1. How does your family navigate religious activities, traditions, holidays, etc.?
2. How do you and your family navigate differing values, morals, worldviews, etc.?

Behavior Control

1. In some families, family members take an active stance in trying to reconvert their family member. Has this happened in your family? If so, what has this looked like?

General Functioning Questions

1. How were family relationships impacted by your choice to disaffiliate? How close were your family relationship prior to the disclosure?
2. Did you feel closer to your family during this time or more distant?
 - a. What contributed to that feeling?
3. What are positive consequences of your disaffiliation that you've seen in your family? Negative consequences?
4. How has your family changed post-disaffiliation?
5. Have you set any boundaries with your family around your disaffiliation? If so, what are they? How were you able to set these boundaries?
6. Did you attend therapy to help you navigate family dynamics post-disaffiliation? If so, what was helpful? What was unhelpful? If not, why not?

Appendix E
Participant Resources

National Resources

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline – 1-800-273-8255

<https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/chat/>

Crisis Text Line – Text “HELLO” to 741741

Find a Therapist – Psychology Today

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapists>

Lubbock Resources

Texas Tech University Student Counseling Center – (806) 742-3674

Walk-In Clinic Hours: Monday-Friday 12:30pm-3:30pm

Texas Tech Family Therapy Clinic – (806) 742-3074

Texas Tech University Psychology Clinic – (806) 742-3737

Texas Tech Crisis HelpLine – (803) 742-5555