

BECOMING “SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS”: NARRATIVES ON FAMILY OF
ORIGIN, CONVERSION, AND COMMITMENT

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative narrative study explored how individuals raised within organized religion(s) came to associate with the orientation of “Spiritual but Not Religious” (i.e., SBNR). Ten semi-structured interviews delved into topics such as family upbringing, religious environment, spiritual development, cognitive dissonance, and resolutions. Notable parental relationship qualities within categories of being positive, distant, strict, and/or abusive emerged. Parental conflict with at least one parent was a shared experience across the sample. It was more common for conflict with fathers to exist as previous literature has suggested. Compared to those raised in more severely religious environments, those raised within less religious environments were more prone to feeling confident and committed with their present spiritual beliefs. This work contributes to further understanding the various developmental pathways and influences on spiritual identity exploration and commitment. Further considerations and implications of the study are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, psychologists have become increasingly interested in how religion is related to a wide range of developmental outcomes and processes. The bulk of this research, however, has been focused on organized, group-based religion as opposed to spirituality. The present study seeks to understand the personal narratives of individuals who have shifted from an organized religion to an orientation focused on spirituality.

Previous research has shown that religious identity often arises from family and community socialization (Zehnder, 2011). As part of identity development, however, some individuals choose to explore religions or spiritual practices that differ from those in which they were raised. Cognitive dissonance, or experiencing stress as a result of holding incompatible beliefs, may occur if individuals engage in certain behaviors or beliefs which do not align with the demands or expectations of the religion in which they were socialized (Mahaffy, 1996). Stress or internal conflict may also occur in individuals who choose to affiliate with an alternate religion or spirituality which is different from their cultural upbringing. Furthermore, an attempt to resolve cognitive dissonance is likely, which can take many forms. These issues have not been extensively explored in the psychological literature, despite being important aspects of development. This study will begin to fill this gap by employing a qualitative study that will allow participants to explain and interpret their pathway from an organized religion to a personally conceptualized spirituality.

The Study of Religion and Spirituality in Psychology

History of Research on Religion in Psychology

Psychologists have been intrigued by religious experiences for quite some time. The classic theorists, Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, approached the human psyche in vastly different ways. Sigmund Freud viewed religious propensities and neuroses to arise from the same underlying unconscious motives. He even “compared the core of religious rituals to obsessive–compulsive practices, essentially linking religious rituals with pathology” (LaMothe, 2003, p. 293). On the other hand, the psychoanalyst Carl Jung believed that a decline of religious life has led to an increased frequency of neuroses in society (Cho, 2009). Such discrepancies in thought have led to continual questioning and investigation into the psychology of religious phenomena.

Research on Conversion

William James observed many psychological elements associated with religious experiences. Through his research, he crafted a framework for categorizing religious conversions which are defined as follows. The *volitional type* was categorized as a freely chosen conversion experience and was often indicated by a gradual process (Prince, 1906, p. 42). The *type by surrender* was categorized as an unconscious and involuntary conversion experience, and often occurred suddenly or spontaneously (Prince, 1906, p. 42).

Modern day psychologist and personality theorist, Seymour Epstein, believed there to be four motivations for conversion, “the need to acquire pleasure and avoid pain, to possess a conceptual system, to enhance self-esteem, and to establish and maintain relationships” (Rambo & Bauman, 2011, p. 885). He found individuals’ motivations to be prone to change depending on life’s circumstances.

Current Research on Religion and Spirituality in Psychology

Historically speaking, religious shifts have occurred for ages. Today, the concept of spirituality is gaining momentum and attention in everyday life. Many factors have been identified as potential contributors to the increase of spirituality as an orientation. The modern world is “freer to mix and match fragments of thought and practice, religious and otherwise” resulting in the secularization of tradition (Bregman, 2006, p. 15). Houtman and Mascini (2002) theorized the growth of today’s secularized society as a result of the growth in moral individualism. The thesis of individualization suggests that newer generations are more individualistic than previous generations, resulting in the gradual diminishment of certain collectivist traditions such as traditional organized religion.

It is important to view the changes in society through a historical lens as developmental processes are embedded within historical context. Certain stages of life, for example, encourage more individualistic behaviors (e.g., identity exploration vs. finding generative outlets). Schwartz et al. (2013) found that “young people are less likely to participate in organized faith activities, such as attending church”, but are “more likely to engage in individualized spiritual activities such as praying or meditating” (p. 100). The rise in “Spiritual but Not Religious” affiliation is multifaceted, and may best be explained by considering a wide range of factors. The development of spiritual beliefs cannot be generalized through causal means, but nevertheless should still be explored for further understanding and associations.

Research on Spirituality

Spirituality as an isolated construct is not easy to operationalize. “‘Spirituality’ is both a vaguer, murkier variant of ‘religion’ and a way to label universal, essential capacities for freedom and transcendence” (Bregman, 2006, p. 6). Definitions of religion can also be

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very similar to how one might describe spirituality. It is possible, in many contexts, for spirituality and religion to not be distinct entities at all. Religion is often associated with a public institution. But on a deeper level, religious individuals may surpass associations with religious membership for a greater personal meaning, akin to the many descriptions of spirituality.

Bregman (2006) posits that mysticism was a term to describe a more private spiritual reality and practices arose in the late 19th century, but the term has faded out since then (p. 6). 'Spirituality' seems to have superseded the term 'mysticism' in modern day sociology and colloquialism. To the dismay of social scientists, one study by Unruh, Versnel, and Kerr (2002) found 92 different definitions for the word spirituality (as cited in Bregman, 2006, 9). Graci and Mahoney's (1999) survey on spirituality also uncovered how the constructs of forgiveness and compassion can often be conflated with the term and used with synonymous meaning (as cited in Bregman, 2006, 11).

Gaining in popularity, are those who identify as "Spiritual but Not Religious" (i.e., SBNR). Those who identify as SBNR can become at risk for trivialization and exclusion. "Courts and scholars recognize that nonbelievers, people who reject a religious or spiritual worldview altogether are alienated and stigmatized by society and experience a kind of 'social subordination'" (Miller, 2016, p. 839). With certain religions still dominating culture and society, those who do not affiliate within a majority religion are at risk for both personal and societal conflict.

For the purpose of this study, spirituality will be used in the broad sense of "Spiritual but Not Religious". As per Lunn's (2009) definitions of religion and spirituality, attention will be given to ensuring participants have previously experienced participation in religion,

“an institutionalised system of beliefs and practices concerning the supernatural realm” (p. 937), but are now engaging in spirituality instead, “the personal beliefs by which an individual relates to and experiences the supernatural realm” (p. 937).

Developmental Processes Related to Religious Conversion

Family Processes

Mary Ainsworth viewed attachment as “an enduring affectional tie that unites one person to another”, (Thompson, 2013, p. 193) and one’s attachment style to be based on the degree to which a young child’s security needs are met by his or primary caregiver. A securely attached child will explore with confidence, whereas an insecurely attached child will not. As an object relations theorist, John Bowlby believed the “internal conscious and unconscious representations that develop in early childhood have enduring influences on subsequent relationships and self awareness” (Thompson, 2013, pp. 193-194).

Attachment with caregivers is shown to be correlated to an individual’s understanding of God. Strong support has been displayed in terms of the relationship between spirituality and attachment such that, “people experience God as an attachment figure” (Hall, 2007, p. 20). “Images of God usually develop in childhood and are closely related to parental image” (Berrett et al., 2007, p. 380). Loving parents seem to influence a loving image of God, whereas parental rejection seems to relate to a concept of God as punishing, or unobtainable in which can result in a struggle and search for a connection with a greater spiritual power.

Annette Mahoney in *Religion and Conflict in Marital and Parent-Child Relationships* (2005) discusses the amplification of conflict which can ensue from a discordance of spiritual or religious beliefs. Family dynamics have been shown to greatly influence a

child's socioemotional development. Conflict has been shown to manifest in households in which a child does not align with the parents' or family's expectations, especially if the expectations are more religiously imbued with meaning than that of the child's (Stokes & Regnerus, 2008). Religious parents are more likely to feel frustrated with their child who disagrees with or does not care about their family's religion, resulting in increased conflict, and negative feelings from the child towards their parents (Stokes & Regnerus, 2008). An individual may hold negative associations towards a particular religion if having experienced an inadequate or tumultuous relationship with their parents who belonged to such religion.

Spilka et al. (2003) observed how favorable child/parent relations resulted in a similarity between the parents' religion and the child's religion (Granqvist Hagekull, Ivarsson, & Broberg, 2007, p. 591). When parental attachment is insecure, or unstable, people develop a need for security. "Followers of a religion can ascribe to an ideology because of the psychological benefits it can afford them in dealing with issues of insecurity in real life" (Counted, 2017, p. 79.) Granqvst et al. (2007) found that a New Age spiritual orientation, related to parental rejection, role reversal, and sudden-intense religious changes. Individuals turning to New Age practices may be attempting to emotionally compensate for a parental scarcity.

Individuals may supplement the lack of closeness to their caregivers with emotional closeness to a group or spiritual ideas and rituals. Paloutzian, Richardson, & Rambo (1999) explain how people who have gone through difficult upbringings are more predisposed to conversion because their personal or behavioral needs may have not been met (p. 1060).

As a result of problematic childhoods or relationships with fathers, Ullman (as cited in

Zehnder, 2011, p. 566) found a significant theme of searching for emotional stability through religion. Another study by Joel Allison (as cited in Rambo & Bauman, 2011, p. 884) noticed how an overwhelming amount of converted Protestant participants had troubling relationships with their fathers growing up.

Due to upsetting familial experiences, self-esteem or self-image can be affected. Someone may turn to an alternative religion from the one they were raised in, a form of conversion called 'affiliation', to reinvent their identity to one no longer associated with the negative experiences and environment (Paloutzian et al., 1999, p. 1053). Someone may also over-identify or intensify the religion of their upbringing for similar reasons, which is another form of conversion called 'intensification' (Paloutzian et al., 1999, p. 1053). People who seek out new religious or spiritual communities can also be attempting to create an ideal environment. Idealism is often seen in religious converts, which can be explained by the less than ideal world many converts lived in while growing up.

The correspondence and compensation hypotheses have been created to categorize the specific occurrences of spiritually based attachment (Augustyn, 2017). Individuals can potentially either correspond to the attachment style developed from one's caregiver to their spiritual beliefs, or compensate for a lack of a secure attachment through spirituality. For example, an individual who has a "preoccupied attachment filter" likely "expects others to be unreliable", resulting in questioning of the presence of a higher power, feeling anxious in their relationship with spirituality, or perhaps feeling abandoned by God (Hall, 2007, p. 25). "From an object relations perspective, clients' spirituality is a manifestation of their deep structure of internalized relationships with emotionally significant others." (Hall, 2007, p. 27). But most times, the effects on spirituality are implicit, or not directly aware in

one's immediate consciousness. There is strong support for the usage of implicit measures in indicating attachment to God (Maltby & Hall, 2012, p. 304).

Identity

Ainsworth et al. (1978) and Campbell, Adams, and Dobson (1984) proposed, "Basic attachment needs contribute to the development of identity" (as cited in Counted, 2017, p. 79). The developmental psychologist, Erik Erikson, believed identity was explored in late adolescence, particularly in relation to specific ideologies and occupations (Marcia, 1966, p. 551). As adolescents mature and cognitively develop, questions about existence and one's meaning in the world begin to emerge and evolve as well. Different aspects of one's identity become questioned and are highly malleable. Crises will likely occur if confusion about identity and one's roles in life persist.

James Marcia (1966) observed four different types of ego identity, which can occur during this period of life (p. 552). An adolescent within the process of *identity-diffusion* will not necessarily be in a crisis, but will be experiencing a lack of commitment to an occupation or ideology. An adolescent experiencing *identity achievement* has gone through a crisis, but has then consequently made a commitment. An adolescent within the *foreclosure* stage will not have experienced a crisis, but nevertheless is committed to something, for example following in the career expectations of their parents. And an adolescent within the *moratorium* status cannot commit, and is going through a crisis as well. Someone within a moratorium phase may be attempting to find a resolution between their parent's expectations and their own desires and abilities. Due to changing societal norms, expectations, and accessibility of resources, individuals in modern times are more likely to engage with an extended period of identity formation (Arnett, 2000). Emerging

adulthood has become a new term to demarcate the period of transition many individuals experience prior to achieving full adulthood, around the ages of 18-25.

Cognitive Dissonance

Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance described how an individual will likely experience stress when holding thoughts, which are not consistent with one another (as cited in Mahaffy, 1996, p. 393). For example, dissonant thoughts would be believing it is okay to be gay, but also holding someone in high regard that is openly homophobic. Inner turmoil is likely to result when someone engages or identifies with a lifestyle that is looked down upon by his or her religion. Cultures and religions typically have a set of rules and expectations for members of the group. When someone behaves in certain ways, or makes choices that go against certain beliefs, both external and internal turmoil can occur. For example, when someone identifies with homosexuality, and the religion of their family does not accept such a lifestyle, the individual is at risk for feelings of shame and conflict. There are different mental processes and actions someone may take if experiencing incongruence in identity from that of the larger social group. In order to alleviate the stress, someone may change environments, change the way one thinks, or disengage in certain behaviors.

The likelihood of experiencing cognitive dissonance can also depend on a number of factors. For example, if someone does not completely identify with a certain religion to begin with, the turmoil they experience will probably be much less than someone who strongly identifies as religious. Festinger proposed, "if two elements are dissonant with one another, the magnitude of the dissonance will be a function of the importance of the elements." (as cited in Mahaffy, 1996, p. 393) The more meaningful an identity is to someone, the likelihood of dissonance when engaging in opposing behaviors or thoughts

increases, though Goodrich et al. (2007) warn against the assumption many counselors can make about spirituality and sexual orientation being problematic for everyone (pp. 784-785). For some, no tensions between different identities are experienced. But for others, differing identities require much work to navigate through, explore, and process.

Why We Need Research on Spirituality

Addressing the concept of spirituality is necessary in research as many people grapple with their own concept of God and how to integrate their own spiritual identities and experiences in a safe and agentic way. Continuing to research this incredibly multifaceted and multilayered aspect of humanity will continue to inform and evolve counseling practices and ways to optimize a person's capacity for achieving his or her full potential and well-being.

Understanding how and when to approach spiritual concepts is a question which needs continued support through research. Barton et al.'s (2018) interviews of teens and young adults with cancer show how nuanced the concept of spirituality can be in such a population. Many patients encounter existential questioning, and wonder why cancer is "happening to them". Most patients mentioned a search for meaning and purpose in their lives. When spirituality is a part of a patient's life, or his or her family's life, addressing spirituality is often a fundamental component of palliative care. Understanding the ways spirituality is grappled with during different stages of life can more clearly direct health practitioners in meeting the spiritual needs of a wider range of patients, as adolescents and young adults are often developing spiritual identities differently than older adults. Patients in the study, regardless of religious or spiritual orientation, all addressed a shared theme of hope (p. 1603).

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The present research takes into account the development of identity formation at varying stages of life and seeks to examine how emerging adults and older adults tell the story of their spiritual journey. The intention is to shed light on the developmental and cognitive processes of identity formation in spiritual individuals. Emerging adults may express a different kind of commitment period and resolutions to cognitive dissonance compared with older adults. It is suspected that older adults will have grappled with spirituality for a longer period of time than emerging adults, and will reflect upon their experiences in different ways. The circumstances and periods of life, which correspond to spiritual changes throughout the participants' lives, are of great interest.

Taking a narrative approach to discovering the personal experiences of each participant will allow for an in-depth look at individuals' spiritual journeys. Narrative stories are important to hear, as the ways in which one tells a story gives the researcher insight into an individual's psychological processes. The way one describes their story often reveals the way a person thinks about their own identity, roles, and goals in the world. "Narrative identity is a special kind of story—a story about how I came to be the person I am becoming", "It is the function of integration" (McAdams, 2018, p. 364).

Allowing participants to reflect upon experiences in a supportive and trustworthy manner will help researchers and clinicians better understand the psychological processes associated with spirituality and conversion. While some researchers have noted the importance of understanding spirituality and the psychological processes associated with it, research has not yet explored how individuals themselves understand their own developmental transitions from organized religions to spiritual practices and beliefs. This

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research will begin to address this gap by allowing participants to explain the role that spirituality plays in their lives.

The following questions will drive this inquiry:

1. *How do those who identify as “spiritual but not religious” describe their family upbringing and religious background?*
2. *How do those who identify as “spiritual but not religious” perceive their spiritual and identity conflicts? How do they attempt to resolve them?*
3. *How committed are those who identify as “spiritual but not religious” to their present beliefs and practices?*

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Ten participants were recruited through word of mouth and the internet platform reddit (on various ex-religious subgroups). Participants were at least 18 years of age and identified as “Spiritual but Not Religious” prior to engaging in the interviews. The participants also indicated prior to the interviews that they had been raised within an organized religion(s). As shown in Table 1, theoretical sampling was done to ensure that participants were from distinct developmental groups: emerging adulthood (18-29), early adulthood to early middle adulthood (30-40) and later middle adulthood (50-64).

Table 1

Demographics

Participant	Anthony	Rayn	George	Maeve	Theresa	Kassidy	Samuel	Michael	Liana	Xavier
Age	23	40	25	23	50	33	50s	29	30s	26
Gender	M	F	M	F	F	F	M	M	F	M
Sexuality	Bi	Straight		Bi	Straight	Straight	Straight	Bi	Straig	

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									ht	
Trans Status			Previous Trans Woman							Trans Man
Family Structure	N	N + C	N	N	ND	ND	N	ND	ND	N
Mother Religion	Secular Jewish	Mormon	Pent.	Cath.	Luth.	Mod. Jewish	Mormon	-	Christ.	JW
Father Religion	Trad. Jewish	Mormon	Pent.	JW	Christ.	Orth. Jewish	Mormon	-	Christ.	JW

**N = nuclear family (mother, father, and children) primarily in household.*

**N + C = nuclear family home plus a compound community of extended family surrounding.*

**ND = nuclear family but experienced parental divorce or separation during upbringing.*

**Pent. = Pentecostal*

**Cath. = Catholic*

**JW = Jehovah's Witnesses*

**Luth. = Lutheran*

**Christ. = Christian*

**Mod. Jewish = Moderate Jewish*

**Orth. Jewish = Orthodox Jewish*

Procedure

Semi-structured Interviews were conducted through the online video call platform, Zoom. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews began with demographic questions, then moved on to topics about family and religious background. Participants were then asked to describe their spiritual development and beliefs. Next, participants were asked to reflect upon how their current spiritual beliefs compared to the religious beliefs they were raised with, as well as elaborating on any identity and spiritual conflicts. The next section inquired about their family's attitudes toward their current beliefs, and family conflicts or resolutions they may have experienced throughout their life. The last section assessed if spirituality has contributed to their wellbeing or overall quality

of life. Participants ended the interview with sharing a final story of their choosing, and including any additional remarks if applicable.

Analysis

The transcribed interviews were read through multiple times by the primary researcher, who then engaged in multiple iterations of open-coding. Open coding is a process of noting concepts which seem particularly meaningful within a particular response. The primary researcher worked closely alongside an experienced qualitative researcher to develop a list of axial codes, a hierarchy of the open codes, through independent coding and extensive discussions. Secondary coders were brought in to confirm that the list of emergent themes reached a point of saturation in which additional themes could not be identified.

Results

Parental Relationship Change Over Time

Participants were asked to describe how the type and quality of their relationship with each of their parents has changed throughout their lifetime. As shown in Table 2, analyses revealed that parental relationships were primarily described as positive, distant, abusive, and/or strict/controlling. Parental estrangements, defined in this study as a significant period of time in which there is minimal or no contact in the relationship, were common among the participants ($n = 7$). At the same time, participants also described reconnecting with their parent(s) after an estrangement ($n = 5$), or that their relationships became “better but not great”. Many of the participants expressed a comparatively better relationship with one parent over the other during childhood, adulthood, or both.

Table 2

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Type of Relationship

Interview	1		2		3		4		5		6		7		8		9		10		%
Relationship	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	
Positive in Childhood					+	+	+				+	+	+			+		+	+	+	50
Change when adolescent/teenager	-	-				-	-	+				-	-	-		-		-	-	-	60
Positive in Adulthood					+	+		+	+		+				+		+		+		80
Distant																					
Childhood			X	X				X	X	X					X		X			X	40
Adulthood	X	X	X	X			X			X	X	X	X	X		X				X	60
Abusive																					
Childhood	X	X												X			X	X			25
Adulthood																					
Strict/Controlling																					
Childhood						X								X				X	X	X	25
Adulthood							X														5

- Indicates the relationship worsened

+ Indicates a positive relationship

X indicates presence of the concept in the parental relationship (Distant, Abusive, Strict/Controlling)

M = Mother

F = Father

Type of Relationship

Maternal Positive Relationship

In general, positive maternal relationships were characterized by feelings of warmth, love, and connection. Patterns varied as a function of different developmental periods (i.e., childhood, adolescence, and adulthood) and the timing and directionality of change (i.e., relationship as improving or worsening). For example, five individuals described positive maternal relationships during childhood, while six individuals described positive maternal relationships in adulthood. Of these six, three maintained consistently positive relationships from childhood through adulthood, and three developed a positive relationship only after entering adulthood. Two people described their maternal relationships as never being positive.

To illustrate how participants made meaning out of their maternal relationship, George described his relationship with his mother as positively stable throughout his life. However, he felt that her love and affection was likely in part due to a poorer relationship with his older sister. He said,

“My sister developed a really unhealthy relationship with her but I didn’t get that, I think it’s just because she had that relationship with her that I was able to, I guess.” His relationship with his mom did not undergo any significant changes throughout his life, except for a period of time when he emotionally distanced himself from both of his parents while he was identifying as a trans woman. His relationship with his mom strengthened again alongside his transition back to identifying as a male. He reflected on how they have maintained a positive relationship; he attributed this to his developing ability to set boundaries and her personal striving for growth. Despite some “bumps in the road,” George is an example of someone with an positive narrative of his maternal relationship

Maternal Positive Relationship Change as a Teenager & in Adulthood

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Three participants experienced a positive relationship with their mother during childhood, but when becoming a teenager experienced a shift in the relationship to becoming negative or distant. For example, Maeve recalled having a good relationship with her mother when she was young and feeling as though she was her best friend. Her mom understood her and empathized with her having a “messed up childhood” because she experienced one herself as well. But in her late teens Maeve began to view her mom as a “sick individual” who was manipulative and controlling of her. She described her mom as still viewing her “as a kid who she can control and not an adult”. Maeve, in turn, developed a strong relationship with her father, who is now her confidant.

Xavier illustrates a relationship with his mom, which was depicted as having positive beginnings in childhood, becoming negative as a teenager, but then shifting back to becoming positive after a period of separation. Xavier, the youngest child of his family, said he had a “very strong relationship throughout childhood” with his mom, but she was also strict. In his teenage years, and still identifying as a female, he was in a relationship with another female. His family found out, and he was kicked out of their church. His mother also stopped talking to him for a year, but they reconnected due to his mother’s inability to stay distanced from him. He said they now currently have a strong relationship.

Three additional participants did not experience a positive relationship with their mothers while growing up, but did develop one at some point in their adulthood, due to a significant milestone or situation arising. To illustrate this, Liana’s mother gave up custody of her when she was very young due to mental illness and drug use. Later in her adult life, Liana’s mom was diagnosed with breast cancer. Liana decided to take care of her, which she described as a personally healing experience having been in a caregiving role for her

previously absent mom. Their relationship also grew much better as Liana learned how to cope with her mom's mental health issues. She now feels as though the relationship is healthier, and describes her mom as "crazy, but charming and lovable".

Paternal Relationship Change When Becoming an Adolescent/Teenager

A common occurrence for participants was recognizing a shift in their relationship with their father when becoming an adolescent or teenager. Five participants experienced a positive relationship with their father during their childhood. All five of these individuals experienced a shift, such that the relationship was no longer positive when becoming a teenager.

George expressed his relationship with his dad as becoming more turbulent when he became a teenager. He said although his parents got along with him fine as a kid, they "have trouble accepting what happens when they start to grow up". His parents served in the children's ministry of their church, and George was involved in many church activities growing up. But he described his father as becoming legalistic, stubborn, invasive, and hovering. Liana experienced being raised by her father and stepmom, which she recalled as being positive in her younger years, until they became emotionally abusive when she started to go through puberty. Her parents started to inflict religious based rules of sexual conduct and purity upon her.

Three participants who did not experience a positive relationship with their father while growing up experienced a qualitative change in the relationship during their teenage years. Two of those participants experienced a worsening of an already difficult relationship with their father, as they became a teenager. In contrast, Maeve experienced a shift from a negative experience with her father during childhood, to a positive one in her

teenage years. Growing up she said her father was “sick” and dealt with anger issues, but later when he discovered religion, he “chilled out”. When she came out as bisexual to her father he did not reject her, though he didn’t necessarily agree with her choice; their relationship grew much closer regardless. This move from a primarily negative parental relationship to one that is positive was rare in this study.

Distant Paternal Relationships

Rayn felt as though she was not close with either of her parents. She described how her and her parents had a “lack of goodness of fit,” and she didn’t go to either of her parents for answers because she had religion to go to instead. Later experiencing an estrangement with her parents, the distance was amplified. They reconnected after she engaged in the process of therapy, though she still identified a feeling of distance in her relationship with her parents. She mentioned being a bit closer to her dad because he can “handle her questioning better than her mom can,” but is still “not super close” with him.

Distant Maternal Relationships

Theresa’s relationship with her mother was distant, but she considered her mother to be the “default parent,, possibly as a result of her father’s alcoholism. Neither of her parents was present during her childhood. She also mentioned how “she struggled to find things in common” with her mom. Rayn was not close with her mother due to personality differences, and remained distant with her throughout her life thus far, though they are not as distant as they were during their period of estrangement.

Abusive Relationships

Two participants experienced abuse from both their mother and father. Liana’s father and stepmom were both emotionally abusive to her, and her biological mother was

neglectful while she was growing up . Anthony described his mother as an emotionally abusive person. He also said his father has emotionally abusive tendencies, but overall is not an emotionally abusive person.

Samuel described his mother as “loving, but always pregnant”, and his father as physically abusive, harsh and tough. Rayn mentioned having childhood trauma to which she attended therapy for, but did not specify what the trauma was exactly, or who or what perpetrated it. It is also possible other participants experienced abuse in their childhood by their parent(s), but no other participants directly labeled their experiences as such, or directly disclosed abuse. Maeve experienced emotional abuse from a sibling, and possibly from her parents as well, as she described her childhood as “messy.” She mentioned scenarios, which could possibly have been neglectful or abusive due to her parents’ mental health related issues, but she did not directly label them as such.

Strict/Controlling Relationships

Three participants described their father as being strict or controlling in their upbringing. Xavier also experienced a strict mom but specified that his father was even stricter. George described his father as controlling. Liana described her father as strict, and many of his rules were religiously driven. Maeve’s mom was the only mother in the sample who became controlling in the participants’ adulthood.

Estrangements & Reunification

Table 3

Estrangements & Reunification

Interview	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	%
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BECOMING SBNR: NARRATIVES ON FAMILY, CONVERSION, AND COMMITMENT

Mom/Dad	M	D	M	D	M	D	M	D	M	D	M	D	M	D	M	D	M	D	M	D	
Estranged			X	X						X		X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	55
Reunification			X	X					X			X	X		*	X	*	X	X		40

Interview 8* Reconciled internally but did not reengage in communication.

Interview 9* Plans for reconciliation in the future after a period of healing.

Estrangements

For the purpose of this paper, we defined an estrangement as a significant period of time in which the relationship had very minimal or no contact between parties. Four out of the ten participants experienced estrangements with both of their parents at some point in their lives. An additional three participants experienced an estrangement with their father only. Of the seven interviewees in total who experienced some form of parental estrangement, three participants were still experiencing an estrangement at the time of the interview.

Although the reasons for estrangement seemed to be quite diverse, most participants mentioned their motivations to reunite, or to not reunite, with the parent(s) absent in their lives. For example, Cassidy, who described being currently estranged from her father, expressed immense disappointment in her father and a feeling of betrayal, which she perceived as beyond repair. She expressed having no intentions to re-engage in communication with her father. Conversely, Liana is currently estranged from her father, but mentioned intentions to reunite with him after she goes through a period of healing. She explained how there were emotional, political, and spiritual reasons for which she needed to place the boundary of temporary separation in order to heal. She expressed love for her father regardless of the hurt she felt in the relationship.

Reunification of Estrangements

Of the seven total participants with parental estrangements at some point in their lives, five participants experienced a reunification with one or both of their parents. Four of those participants experienced estrangement with both parents, and of those four, three participants reconnected with both parents. The fourth participant, Liana, has reconnected with her mom, but plans to reconnect with her dad in the future. Theresa, who was only estranged from her father, reconnected with him after he was able to attain sobriety.

Quality Themes

Table 4

Quality Themes

Interview	1		2		3		4		5		6		7		8		9		10		%
Mom/Dad	M	D	M	D	M	D	M	D	M	D	M	D	M	D	M	D	M	D	M	D	
Currently Better but not great	X	X	X	X						X			X	X			X			X	45
Currently Worse than during upbringing							X					X				X				X	20
Currently the “better of the two parents” in comparison		X		X	X		X	X		X		X		X		X		X		X	70 % Mom 30 % Dad

Becoming “Better but Not Great”

Six out of the ten participants described either one or both of their relationships with their parents as improving with time, but still “not great.” These relationships were described as strained, but not as strained as they had once been when at their worst. These participants experienced feelings of having to hold back or distance themselves in order to have a better relationship with their parent(s). For many, putting distance in the

relationship through moving out or moving far away helped the participant become better able to express themselves and communicate within the strained relationship. These relationships are likely less than ideal to the participant, but in comparison to what they once were, they were described as more bearable. Those who experienced a reunification after an estrangement said that they were able to reach an “accommodation” with their parent(s) so that everyone could move on from the conflicts of the past.

Religious Severity

All of the participants experienced a religious environment during their upbringing. The religious environments, or cultures, differed as a function of how stringent the religious-based rules, expectations, and norms were within the families. To capture this, we coded participants into one of three types of religious environments: low, moderate, and high (see Table 5). Across the sample, three individuals were coded as low, two were moderate, and five were severe.

Table 5

Religious Severity

Interview	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	%
High		X	X				X		X	X	50
Moderate	X					X					20
Low				X	X			X			30

Highly Religious Upbringing

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A high religious cultural upbringing was evident in five out of the ten participants, all of which happened to be Christianity-based religions. A high religious upbringing was determined based on elements such as church attendance every week, additional church activities throughout the week, a strong presence of religious devotion and education within the home and daily life, and parent involvement in ministry or leadership positions at the church.

Samuel, for example, described his religious upbringing with Mormonism as extremely prevalent throughout daily life, saying, “It just permeated our entire family life”. Mormonism was the most valued thing within his family. When asked about how he resolved the fears he experienced from the intensity of the religious rules he experienced, he initially referred to Mormonism as a cult, but then made an interesting note to instead call it a “high demand religion”. He said,

“I mean some people call them cults. Maybe a better word is high demand religions, sort of, there's this process where kids are sort of filled with this belief system that says if you don't, that we have the only truth, that the other sources of truth, or the other sorts of you know you're supposed to distrust anything that will tell you that we're wrong, and if you leave something bad will happen.”

He described how within the culture of Mormonism, members must accept the idea that Mormonism is the truth, and all other religions are untrue. Mormonism was explained as having many rules, and involving many stories, which must be believed, or else there would be consequences.

Moderate Religious Upbringing

Two participants were characterized as having a moderate religious upbringing, and both of these participants happened to be the only individuals in the sample who were raised within Judaism. A moderate religious upbringing was characterized by weekly synagogue attendance, celebrating religious holidays, and importance placed in the culture on upholding the ethnic lineage. To illustrate, Cassidy said,

“We were I guess what you would call modern orthodox now, when I was growing up it was initially called traditional – so there’s sort of like a you know spectrum of sects of Judaism. So we were fairly modern orthodox so that meant that we you know went to synagogue every Saturday morning and we kept kosher.”

Her father also was raised orthodox, and her mom was not. But after her parents married, she said her mom adopted more religious ways of being. When her mom got remarried after their divorce, she said the family became less religious. She mentioned how she still made her bat mitzvah, but the demand for religion was not as high as it was when she was younger.

Low Religious Upbringing

Three participants experienced a low presence of religion in their upbringing. A low presence of a religious environment was characterized by more freedom to choose their religious affiliation, and weekly attendance at a place of worship not stressed. The participants in the low religious environment category all experienced Christian based religions in their upbringing.

Participants in the low religious category experienced differing religious contexts throughout their upbringing. For example, Maeve’s mother was raised Catholic, but her father converted to becoming a Jehovah’s Witness later on in life. Theresa’s mother came

from a Lutheran family, and her father's family's denomination was unknown, though it was Christianity based. Michael's parents' religion was not discussed, but he discussed going out on his own into his community and discovering multiple kinds of religions while growing up, all mainly Christian denominations. To illustrate how a moderately religious household was described, Theresa said of her religious upbringing,

"It was like the obedient Christian – you do what God says and then you'll be rewarded and there's no emotion there it was just don't do that that's bad because God doesn't like it sort of thing. And so I think that my mom probably brought that into her household it was just very be obedient. We didn't go to church a lot. Mostly we did with my grandparents."

For her, the religious aspect of church attendance and religious activities didn't take precedence, but the environment and subliminal message of religious obedience was still underlying. She explained how her dad's parents didn't go to church either, but many of their views were formulated from Christian stories, such as the rapture. She felt as though her parents attempted to please their own parents in terms of maintaining some religious beliefs and practices.

Identity Conflicts

Participants were asked to reflect on the internal tensions they have felt or feel about their spirituality, identity, and the possible dissonance, which might exist between their past and present beliefs. Many participants also mentioned how their spirituality, beliefs, or identity has caused conflict with others. Resolutions, or ways they have attempted to resolve the tensions they feel, or have felt, were also discussed.

Table 6

Conflicts

Interview	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	%
Spiritual Conflict	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	80
Identity Conflict	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	70
Internal Tension w/ Belief Dissonance	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	70
External Conflict	Yes	Maybe	Yes	Yes	90						

Spiritual Conflict

Spiritual conflict is defined in the study as an internal struggle with one’s spiritual beliefs. Spiritual conflict could exist within the context of being conflicted with the beliefs they were raised with from their religious upbringing or with their present spiritual beliefs. Spiritual conflicts such as doubting the existence of God or struggling with other spiritual or religious beliefs were common among the participants. Three participants said they have experienced spiritual conflict, but only when they were younger. Five participants have experienced spiritual conflict, and are still grappling with spiritual conflict in some way currently. Two participants said they have never experienced internal spiritual conflict.

Spiritual Conflict Currently

Eight participants experienced some form of a spiritual conflict in their lives. Out of the eight, five participants were still experiencing spiritual conflict. Liana, like many of the

others, still struggles with the fears her religious upbringing had brought upon her. She said,

“There are real moments of fear of what all of that is right. But then there are moments of peace, of, I don't, I don't have to be enough. Like I am enough. And so it's definitely been kind of a war, back and forth...”

For her, the feelings of fear arise, but she also experiences feelings of peace and wholeness.

Spiritual Conflict When Younger

Three participants clarified that the spiritual conflict they experienced was only in their younger years, and not presently.

Anthony said he experienced spiritual conflict, but only when he was struggling with this faith at age 13 after making his bar mitzvah. Cassidy also experienced spiritual conflict when she was younger and trying to figure out what she believes in and “what is out there.” She said, “but I think I'm more okay with not knowing than I was when I was younger.”

And, she went on to elaborate saying,

“I would say that I'm not I wouldn't say that I'm conflicted now but I think there's always going to be like a sort of question out there but definitely when I was younger there was definitely a much more of like a push and a pull between what is religion, what is spirituality, and are the two connected and what is that connection if there is one.”

Both Anthony and Cassidy were raised with Judaism and are both presently secure in their present spiritual orientation, which they described as including acceptance of uncertainty.

No Spiritual Conflict

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Theresa only ever experienced fears about other people finding out about her religious deviations, but never experienced inner conflict as a result of her religious upbringing. She said,

“I don’t think I ever had any conflict in terms of ‘hey the bible says that the occult is bad’, that never bothered me. I never had any conflict with you know Jesus or God would be really angry with me for doing tarot cards. Yea I never had a problem with that either.”

Although she explored different mythologies and practices outside of Christianity, her belief of why she did not have a conflict with it was, as she said,

“The whole idea of God to me was, hey you know maybe it’s all the same thing and the Christians call it one thing, and they call it the trinity, and a Buddhist would call it something else, and a native American would call it the great spirit, but it’s all part of the same thing right, it’s like a gem, you look at a different faucet and it’s named something else but it’s all still the same thing.”

For her, learning about other belief systems actually buffered her against cognitive dissonance. She was able to make connections between different cultures and use that to formulate her understanding. She viewed certain groups as taking their beliefs to an extreme, which she did not believe to be the truth. To her, Jesus is a forgiving God; therefore, it seems she took the positives from the culture of her upbringing, and left the rest, which did not serve her.

Identity Conflict

The two participants currently experiencing an identity conflict were Maeve and George. Five other participants said they have experienced an identity conflict, but it has

since been resolved. Three participants said they have never experienced a conflict with their identity.

Current Identity Conflict

Maeve felt she is currently experiencing an identity conflict pertaining to self-expression. She said,

“There’s constant conflict in my life where I feel like I let people kind of walk all over me, and then when I stand up for myself I do it in the wrong way because I don’t know how to. So there’s this struggle between wanting to have my own voice, be outspoken, you know kind of have my own autonomy, you know be able to support myself, but people in my life either don’t see me as having my own autonomy...”

She mentions how she is having a difficult time with expressing herself, expressing anger, standing up for herself, and managing conflict with others. She is conflicted with the way others see her versus the way she wishes to be. She believes she is capable, but struggles with the narratives from the past which others have formed about her.

Resolved Identity Conflict

Anthony experienced an identity conflict with his sexuality. He said he is bisexual but was having a difficult time with accepting it at one point as a teenager. He also struggled with having ADHD. He said,

“For years during adolescence I was really insecure about my personality just because I felt, because I was very hyperactive as a kid, I have ADHD, just being seen as ditsy and just attention seeking and not that serious as a person, so I was insecure about that and kind of tried way too hard to put an image to the contrary for a few years, but I’ve stopped doing that.”

Therefore, both of the identity conflicts he encountered seem to have been resolved.

External Conflict

As seen throughout the study, most of the participants experienced some sort of external tension as a result of expressing themselves in some way, which was not accepted by their parents and/or religious culture. Michael was the only participant who did not go in depth about conflict he experienced with his parents, which also coincides with how he was the only participant who did not mention his parents' religion.

Resolutions

All of the participants mentioned some kind of attempt at resolution for their internal struggles. Each participant described different ways of coping with the individual tensions they have experienced. Common themes in the participants' resolutions were finding an accepting community and tapping into the abilities of self-reassurance and gaining confidence.

For Xavier, he said it has taken a long time to work on resolving his fears, which arise from his strict religious upbringing. When participating in activities, which were not acceptable in the religion of his upbringing, he said he needed to constantly reassure himself that he was "not going to immediately get possessed by demons somehow". He said he "took it slowly at first, doing small little things", working his way through the fears and guilt. Now, although he believes things will inevitably occur which will likely bring up those feelings again, he feels confident he can work through them.

Identity Exploration

All participants expressed experiencing some kind of process of searching for alternative religions, philosophies, and spiritual practices. Common methods of identity

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exploration were through activities such as meditation, journaling, taking mind-altering substances, therapy, Buddhism, and New Age practices. Half of the sample also mentioned either past or present experience with labeling himself or herself as an atheist or an agnostic.

Table 7

Identity Exploration

Interview	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	%
Meditation	X		*	X		X	X	X			60
Journaling			X					X			20
Mind-Altering Substances	X			X			X	X			40
Therapy	X	X	X	X		X	X	*	X		80
Buddhist Practices/Philosophy	X	X	X		X	X	X				60
New Age/Occult			*		X		X	X	X	X	60
Atheism/Agnosticism	X				X	X	X			X	50

**Indicates mention of possibly or tentatively exploring the method*

Committed		*			X	*		X			40
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**Reluctantly or partially committed*

New Age & Occult Practices

Mention of New Age and occult practices showed up within six of the participants' interviews. New Age and occult associated practices or beliefs such as Reiki, tarot cards, horoscopes, crystals "channeling sessions", visiting psychics, or accessing personal psychic or intuitive powers were brought up, although the ways in which such practices were discussed varied. An additional participant mentioned fears surrounding being perceived as someone interested in these kinds of practices when she mentions she is spiritual to others. She said,

“There’s conflict in people around me due to that spirituality, of like when I say like oh I believe in God but I’m not religious – there’s conflict there of them assuming that I have never been religious and I’m that stereotypical kind of white privileged witch type girl trying to look into crystals.”

Some participants were more inclined to partake in New Age or occult activities, whereas others were interested in them more for entertainment purposes, and one participant George was hesitant to delve into such practices due to his perception of their lack of a defined community or purpose. In contrast, Michael, was very involved in such spiritual practices, and read extensively about Freudian and Jungian psychology. He was very interested in different forms of self-healing methods, which were New Age and metaphysically related.

Atheism & Agnosticism

Half of the sample mentioned labeling themselves at some point in their lives, either presently, or in the past, as an atheist or an agnostic. Interestingly, the process of exploring the identification was similar for some participants, but the “achievement” or end result of the label looked very different for them. Below are two illustrations of participants with similar labels of agnosticism, but who have vastly different beliefs about the existence of God.

Theresa for example, concurrently feels as though she is spiritual, but also identifies as an agnostic-atheist. Therefore, she said she leans “more towards a disbelief rather than a belief in God”. To further clarify, she said,

“Well, I think that I mean I consider myself an agnostic-atheist. *I definitely lean more toward a disbelief than a belief in God*, and I think one reason is that I’m

uncomfortable with the idea that I can say for certain one way or another, but spiritually I do feel connected to something larger at times like this vastness of what's unknown, but I also wrestle with that – like my logical side says that's just wishful thinking or that's how humans brains have evolved, but hey it kind of feels good sometimes to have that kind of connection..."

Whereas Kassidy, although identifying as an agnostic Jew, feels she "definitely believes in a higher being". She elaborates,

"I guess I would say that I identify now as an agnostic Jew. Mainly because I still identify with the cultural end of my religion but I don't necessarily feel like the religion is part of it, you know *I definitively believe in like a higher being*, I sort of believe you know in the idea of signs. I don't know, I would say I don't necessarily have any like specific practices, I think trying to be sort of like an innate potentially good person."

For her, she associated her spirituality with morality in that a majority of her spiritual practice was simply to be a good person, for example to not stand idly by when someone is in need of help, as she elaborated on later in her interview.

Mind-Altering Substances

Four of the participants mentioned the influence of the usage of mind-altering substances on their "spiritual awakening" path. Anthony, for example, mentioned previously identifying as an atheist, but when he had a particular experience with psilocybin, he could not help but feel a deeper connection with the universe. He said,

"But so anyway – with time I matured and I grew past a lot of the anger and pain that I associated with religion, and I had become more accepting of who I am as a

person, and everything that resides within me – and that includes feelings of transcendence, a longing to move beyond this plane of existence. And so I would say that was about three years ago that I stopped calling myself an atheist. And in that time I’ve also had psychedelic experiences – which have really been quite spiritual – and brought me into that world again, and have just challenged a lot of my preconceptions about consciousness and reality, and I’ve also taken up meditation in that time. So that’s what has led me to call myself spiritual again, to be spiritual, to live that way, and to not call myself an atheist.”

Anthony felt as though his experiences with psilocybin mushrooms allowed him to see the world with a “pure perception”, and helped him to release his resentments against religion.

Meditation

Intriguingly, all of the participants who have had experiences with mind-altering substances also mentioned exploring practices of meditation. An additional two participants also have found benefits of practicing meditation. Maeve’s experience with meditation was profound for her personal healing and sobriety. She said,

“I went to this meditation seminar and it was very open ended. The meditation was very kind of like ‘you’re floating through the sky’. And like everything like that. It was very like you know whatever... and I had this overwhelming sensation that I was warm, that I was loved, that I was you know, I wasn’t in my own body... I was part of like, I don’t know how to describe it, but I was part of this greater consciousness. I was part of this greater self that wasn’t me. Like, I was no longer Maeve. And I’ve been searching for that feeling ever since through meditation, through prayer. That’s the best high that I could ever get, you know, like that’s it,

that's it. And I think that that's why I keep searching. That's why I keep praying.
That's why I keep meditating."

Buddhism

Although six participants found interest in or benefits from Buddhism, none of them actually considered themselves to be a Buddhist.

Commitment to Current Belief System

High Level of Commitment

Two participants said they were definitely committed to their current belief system. These participants, Theresa and Michael, were raised within a low religious upbringing. Theresa said she was "very comfortable" with her ideology of being an atheist-agnostic. Although she has not revealed to everyone in her life that this is how she views herself, she had spent a long time searching for the term, and feels it fits her beliefs well. When Michael was asked if he is committed to his currently belief system, he said,

"Yes. Well, it's not merely a belief system; it's just a knowing system. Like, I know that I, myself, me, myself and I basically, that's how you'd put it. But yes I for the sake of the study yes I believe that there's, that there is a self, that the self is in control of the ego, in a way and, and behind this self you have another one. The spiritual teachings mention a lot is the higher Self. And yes, I do believe in these spiritual guides."

For him, he is completely sure of his belief system, so much so that he believes it is a "knowing system". He experiences no doubt that his beliefs and practices are true, potentially because they have benefited him so much in his own healing journey.

Reluctantly or Partially Committed

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Two participants felt that their present orientation, or way of thinking about their spirituality, is accurate, but still hesitated to fully commit. Rayn felt uncomfortable with fully embracing herself as “Spiritual but Not Religious,” because of her lament over the loss of her community in Mormonism. She said,

“The thing is I still like love religion, like I am saying like oh yea I am spiritual but not religious, but I’m still like oh I so wish that I could like engage with this community but they just don’t want me, like they just don’t want what I’ve experienced. They don’t want my spirituality; they don’t want my spiritual gifts.”

She feels as though there is no way to integrate her beliefs into the Mormon Church, and unfortunately has had repeatedly negative experiences in trying to do so.

Kassidy is also another participant who expressed still holding on to the religious identity from her upbringing. When asked if she is committed to her present belief system, she said,

“I guess yea I mean I do still very much hold my Jewish identity I think because of my family’s history. I think it’s important to continue certain traditions but I would say that I’m very open when it comes to hearing other people’s ideas and thoughts, I mean I will say anything that I learn about or read about or talk to someone about I do sort of have the want or the desire to have like a scientific grounding in it and so that’s sort of why I do identify as agnostic because I think there’s just a lot of things that we don’t know about the universe.”

For Kassidy, similar to Rayn, she is not fully willing to part ways with her religious identity because it has been passed down through generations within her family, as well as for

other historical reasons. She is still open to hearing about new spiritual ideas, though she hopes they are scientifically grounded.

Not Committed, Still Searching

The remaining six participants were all still engaged in the processes of exploration, and not officially committed to a belief system or label for themselves. The reasons the participants gave as to why they are not committed varied. Anthony, for example, is not committed to agnosticism because he said,

“Its kind of a contradiction to say committed to agnostic because it means non-committal, that we don’t know for certain. So it would be ironic. Well I think it is just the best position to take. Because the existence of a God, of spiritual beings, or of a soul, or something, is something we can’t test, and is just so far outside the scope of human knowledge...so I just think it is the most rational position to take. To not claim knowledge we don’t have, to not make assumptions we can’t prove. “

Many of the ‘not committed’ participants, similar to Anthony, also described the same sort of sentiment of committing to non-commitment. Many of the participants were committed to growth and possibility of change. Some of the participants welcomed growth and change with open arms such as Maeve who said,

“I definitely think that they are going to change, and how I feel changes, I don’t think that if I continue how I practice now and how I feel now I will grow, I think that I will stay stagnant if I continue doing exactly what I’m doing right at this moment you know I don’t think that I’ll ever get to a point of being truly connected with my higher power, I think that I need to change and grow.”

For her, she is hoping to find a deeper connection with her higher power and find more solid ground in her beliefs about what her higher power actually is to begin with. By engaging in spiritual practices, she hopes to attain a further level of understanding, and is open to new ways of achieving this connection.

Connections Across Themes

Estrangement & Rekindling in Those With a High Religious Upbringing

All of the participants who experienced estrangements and rekindling with both parents (four participants – one of who, plans to reconnect with her father in the future) were raised within a high religious upbringing. George was the only participant who had a high religious upbringing without an official estrangement, though he did mention a period of emotional distance with his parents while he was living as a trans woman, which was remedied when he transitioned back to being a male. Common themes across the severely religious category also included: mentioning of a growing understanding, unconditional love, forgiveness, and more compassion for their parents over time or in retrospect.

Resentments against Parents in Those with Moderate/Low Religious Upbringing

Sixty percent of participants within the combined moderate/low religious upbringing seemed to hold resentments against one of their parents. Anthony did not discuss forgiving his mother for her continued emotional abusiveness, Maeve has not reconnected with her mother because of her mother's manipulative nature, and Cassidy expressed having no intentions of reuniting with her estranged father or forgiving him for his lies and betrayal.

The remaining two participants found a way to release resentments against their parent. Michael experienced healing from his estrangement with his father through his

spirituality; he also was able to cultivate compassion and understanding. Theresa also seemed to have let go of her resentments of her father's alcoholism over time, possibly in part due to his sobriety, as well as her own personal growth.

Parental Unit in Connection with Religious Upbringing

All of the participants who experienced a high religious upbringing also experienced their parents as a strong cohesive unit. Parental units were characterized as parents who made or enforced decisions together, as well as when participants discussed their parents as a unit, the parents were mentioned alongside each other within the same contexts or memories.

Within the moderate and light religious categories, three participants expressed an emotional distance between them and their parents, as well as between the two of their parents, as was suggested by their descriptions. When discussing their parents, a sense of their parents as a unit was not exuded. Three participants within the moderate and low religious categories experienced divorce between their parents as well.

Divorce & Togetherness Connections With Estrangement

Seventy five percent of those estranged from both parents, experienced their parents as continuing to be a parental unit in their lifetime (never separating or going through a divorce). Seventy five percent of those in the sample who experienced their parents' separation or divorce, estranged from one of their parents only (all of which specifically estranged from the dad).

Age, Estrangement, and Reunification

All of the participants in the early middle adulthood (30-40) to later middle adulthood (50-64) experienced estrangements as a result of interpersonal conflict. Eighty

percent of them also experienced reunification with both parents (with the exception of one participant who plans to reconnect with her dad, though she did reconnect with her mom). Sixty percent of the emerging adults (ages 18-29) did not experience an estrangement with either of their parents. Rather, it was more common for the emerging adults to express being emotionally distant to one or both parents, but not specifically indicating an estrangement transpiring. Within the remaining forty percent of emerging adults, or two participants, one participant was estranged with his father as a result of external circumstances, and the other experienced a brief estrangement (the shortest estrangement in the sample at a period of one year) with his mom, and then reconnected afterwards.

Commitment, Religious Upbringing, and Sexuality

Both of the participants who are currently committed to their spiritual beliefs were also raised within a low religious upbringing. Seventy five percent of participants who were either partially or fully committed identified as straight.

Gender Identity/Sexuality in Connection with Identity Exploration

Eighty percent of those who have identified as atheist also mentioned having explored Buddhist practices. Sixty seven percent of those who explored Buddhist practices identified as straight. Seventy five percent of those who discussed psychedelics were males. Seventy five percent of those who discussed mind-altering substances did not identify as straight.

Parental Relationships and Other Associations

The participants reported feeling as though there was a lack in their needs adequately being met by one of their parents at some point in their lives, during childhood

or in their adult life. A significant turning point in parental relationships becoming negative occurred prominently during late adolescence or during the teenage years. Eighty percent of participants experienced the shift of parental relationship(s) worsening during this developmental stage. Although both mothers and fathers were reported as being positive in childhood (n=5 for both), the positive father relationships category decreased in adulthood (n=2), whereas positive mother relationships slightly increased in adulthood (n=6). Four participants also felt distant towards both of their parents in their adult life, an additional three participants felt distant towards father during this time, and one additional participant felt distant towards her mother in her adulthood. The two remaining participants who did not express feeling distant from either of their parents in their adult life were the only individuals in the sample raised within multiple non-denominational Christian churches, as well as indicating a severely religious upbringing. All of the strict fathers in the sample (n=4) were concurrently severely religious.

DISCUSSION

This study sought to explore topics such as family relationships, identity development, and cognitive dissonance as related to the journeys of individuals moving from a religious upbringing to becoming “Spiritual but Not Religious”. The complex and diverse pathways and experiences of such individuals were observed and documented through an inductive qualitative approach. Both commonalities and individual differences emerged within the sample.

Growing Up in a Religious Family: Upbringing and Background

Attachment

Attachment theory suggests those who are securely attached will explore their surroundings with confidence and ease (Thompson, 2013). Although attachment was not directly tested utilizing an empirically based assessment, many of the narratives on parental relationships indicated insecure attachments. This observation is based on the discovery that at least one parent for each participant was described as distant, strict, or abusive. This supports the literature that has found connections between negative parental relationships and spiritual struggles. According to object relations theory, those searching for God may be searching for a way to connect to an insecurely attached parental relationship (Hall, 2007). Many of the participants with strict and very religious upbringings discussed experiencing distress and fears relating to religious beliefs. The lack in parental security to address and help resolve such fears, may have led participants to other spiritual concepts for comfort, similar to Granqvist et al's (2007) findings that New Age spirituality is associated with parental rejection and emotional compensation.

Conflicts/Estrangements

All of the participants experienced some form of parental conflict with at least one of their parents. Stokes & Regenerus (2008) found that religious parents are more likely to have conflict with a child who does not share the same predilection for religion as they do. Many of the conflicts arose for participants due to a discrepancy in religious affiliation with their parents, and some discussed feeling as though they had incongruent personalities with their parents as well. Many of the participants also compared their relationship with their parent to their siblings' relationships with their parents. It was common for participants to mention how a sibling or siblings who followed their religious expectations were closer to their parents.

Although some participants still held a fondness of their religious origins and kept some of the traditions and practices for themselves alive, there was a sense of not belonging and an inability to go back to organized religion, especially for fear of judgment by others. This fear of judgment potentially arises alongside feeling as though previous conflicts with parents in the past were not fully resolved. Many of the participants reconnected with their parents in some way after conflict, but the conflict was typically described as being suppressed rather than addressed and resolved. Many of the participants who reconnected with their parents felt the relationship was still less than ideal. The shame and guilt for many was possibly still underlying from the feelings of rejection by their parents.

Parental estrangements were also a common experience among the participants. The finding is important to note because parental estrangements are a highly stigmatized phenomenon, underreported, and not extensively studied (Agllias, 2018). The study showed how it was common for participants to refer to an estrangement, as well as the estrangement being reconciled in some way. Parental estrangements were experienced more so in response to the father's behavior, which supports the findings of Ullman (as cited in Zehnder, 2011), who observed greater spiritual difficulties among individuals with negative relationships with their father. Age seemed to play a role in the amount of parental estrangements experienced as well, such that older individuals experienced estrangements more so than the younger individuals in the sample. These findings possibly indicate the influence of historical and developmental context in association with this phenomenon. It is also important to make the distinction between participants feeling distant in their parental relationship versus experiencing an estrangement. Some of the

participants referred to a parental relationship as feeling distant, but did not experience an estrangement. The emerging adults in the study were more likely to express distancing themselves from their parents in some way, such as through moving out or emotionally distancing themselves, but did not refer to the distancing specifically as an estrangement.

Identity: Moving from Religious to Spiritual

Crisis/Exploration

In accordance with the literature on identity, many of the participants indicated going through a crisis situation at some point in their lives. All of the participants also mentioned engaging in multiple identity exploration processes, including ways in which they've attempted to resolve both inner and outer conflicts. Due to upbringings in families with a lack of closeness or positivity from one or both parents, many of the participants seemed to turn inwards and become self-reflective, searching for a higher purpose and power within the universe. Due to a lack of freedom in self-expression, or powerlessness in the ability to control the environment in the way they might have liked or needed, the individuals searched for alternative explanations and resolutions. The narratives in this study reflect findings on the development of an external locus of control, such that childhood maltreatment is correlated to beliefs that an outside force is intervening in life's circumstances (Roazzi, 2016). Many of the participants were highly intellectual and rational, and therefore struggled with the idea that a God existed, as can be seen in the high rate of atheism and agnosticism, but nevertheless they entertained the possibility, perhaps as a result of their unmanageable or unpredictable upbringings.

The participants seemed to have experienced James Marcia's (1966) conceptualizations of either *moratorium*, a lack in ability to commit while undergoing a

crisis, or *achievement*, the resolution of crisis and the making of a commitment. Many of the participants experienced such stages beginning in adolescence as Marcia theorized. But the difference between *moratorium* and *achievement* was not so clearly distinct within the interviews, and many continued to grapple with their spiritual identities well into their adulthood. Some of the participants may have reached *achievement*, but still experienced after effects of doubt and questioning throughout their lives. It was common for participants to seem very sure of themselves in their choice to not associate with their religious upbringing, but still experience lingering waves of guilt, shame, or fear, and concerns over accepting uncertainty. None of the participants seemed to have experienced *foreclosure*, or having not experienced a crisis at all, while committing nevertheless.

Although Marcia's identity stages originally pertained to adolescence, Arnett (2000) suggested that in modern times people are grappling with an extended period of identity formation and continuing to explore during the period of emerging adulthood. Age did not appear to be highly influential on identity exploration, as all of the individuals expressed embarking on identity exploration both past and presently. It seems identity exploration of religion might not be connected with a specific developmental stage as Arnett or Marcia's research suggested. Crocetti's (2017) research found evidence, which showed, "systematic maturation of identity across adolescence" and suggested that, "the task of forming identity is not over by the end of adolescence but continues into emerging adulthood and adulthood," as well as that "a stable sense of identity is strongly intertwined with their psychosocial functioning and well-being" (p. 148). It is therefore possible that the motivations behind identity exploration, or the answers which one might be seeking, might correlate with other aspects of life beyond age. All of the participants were exploring

identity, but perhaps were exploring for different reasons. The ages of the individuals who were more accepting of their spiritual orientation varied as well, suggesting that the amount of time that has passed since moving away from one's religious origins may not be correlated with spiritual acceptance.

Conversion & Commitment

All of the participants' pathways included questioning and a turning point of some sort during the process of conversion, or more accurately in these cases, de-conversion. Most of the interviews aligned with James' (Prince, 1906) category of the *volitional type* of conversion, or exemplified a gradual process of converting away from one's religious upbringing to exploring alternative spiritual beliefs and practices. At the same time, some participants may have also experienced elements of the *type by surrender* conversion in that mind-altering substances, for example, propelled a more rapid shift in participants' adoption of a spiritual lens.

In accordance with previous literature on explanations for spirituality's rise in today's world, the participants mentioned transitioning away from their religion towards other religions and spiritualities after meeting people outside of their homogenous communities. When participants experienced moving to another country, or attending a college or workplace with individuals engaging in other lifestyles, it was influential on their path to awakening to the reality of other truths existing and being plausible despite the fact that their religious origins often discredited those other beliefs as false. Such encounters seemed to impact many of the journeys in moving away from their religious conditioning. As the literature suggests, it is likely that historical context plays a role in the phenomenon in which spirituality is becoming more acceptable (Bregman, 2006). It may have been more

common for individuals who grew up in older generations to conform to their parents' culture and standards, whereas society is continually shifting towards individualism, which potentially encourages younger adults to discover their own spiritualities.

Paloutzian et al. (1999) found that individuals seeking out new religious or spiritual communities can be attempting to recreate an ideal environment. It was clear in some of the interviews that the participants were attempting to find solace and safety in a system outside of their family. One participant attempted to articulate his longing to belong to a system akin to a utopia. Many of the participant's lack of commitment to their present spirituality can potentially reflect their desire to find a perfect fit or answer. One of the participant's who was committed to his spirituality expressed having found the correct knowing system. Although we thought it was possible that age would greatly influence levels of commitment to spirituality, our findings suggest that age did not seem to have much of a relationship to commitment level.

Cognitive Dissonance

Most of the participants, regardless of their resolution status with their parents, expressed some form of inner conflict with their identity or spirituality. All of the participants engaged in some form of resolution for their inner conflicts as well, regardless of their relationship status with their parents. Those who were raised in more strongly devout environments were more likely to experience lament, loss, and distress over disengaging with their religion. The level of one's religious upbringing therefore seemed to potentially be connected with the level of commitment to the new belief system the individuals adopted later in life. The individuals who were confident in their present belief systems tended to be raised within homes without a concrete and consistent religion. This

finding fits with cognitive dissonance theory, which suggests that dissonance occurs when the initial belief system is strongly rooted. For these individuals, the beliefs of their upbringing were not as engrained into their identities as other participants in the study.

Limitations

Although this study adds to our understanding of those who identify as “Spiritual but Not Religious,” it still had its limitations. The greatest limitation is the small and select sample size of 10 individuals. The sample size was intentionally small though, due to the rich data that was warranted for such an exploratory study. It was necessary to ask in depth questions in order to find relevant themes among the participants in order to propel future research. Although it was not feasible for such a study to include a larger sample, with a larger research team, such questions should be probed in a more diverse sample of participants. All of the participants in this study, for example, were raised with some form of Judeo-Christian religion during their upbringing, and therefore experienced similar socialization practices and images of God. Participants with more diverse backgrounds are likely to provide a greater scope of understanding of developmental pathways and associated experiences.

The sample was also not generalizable, as most of the participants were respondents to advertisements for the study on the Internet platform reddit. Reddit is a website which only a subset of the population at large uses, and an even exceptionally smaller group visits its ex-religious subgroups. The participants were very introspective and reflective individuals, who were driven to share and explore their experiences with the topics discussed. People who are less open to sharing their stories might have very different experiences. It therefore would be beneficial to sample individuals who are in

broader stages of navigating their religious upbringing in relation to their present spirituality, as well as individuals with different motivations and personalities.

This study was also done with English speakers who currently live in the United States. The growing individualism in the United States may have played a significant role in the development of their spiritual identities and practices. Although many of the religious environments the participants experienced were likely more collectivistic, the influence of the American culture at large might have played a significant role in how they coped with leaving their religions behind. Individuals within even more collectivist cultures may have a fundamentally different experience with leaving their religious upbringing, as there may be expectations to conform from greater levels of ecological systems.

Implications & Future research

Further understanding the process of leaving one's family religion and developing and accepting a newfound spirituality would be beneficial for therapeutic work and interventions, particularly on associated family conflicts which were identified in this study. Religion and spirituality are difficult topics to discuss. The study is not intended to vilify religious beliefs, rather to shed light on ways in which spiritual people come to dissociate themselves from religion and why. Numerous individuals in the study expressed feeling distant from their religious parents or they experienced parental conflict. Although most people individuate and become distant from their parents to some extent, as they grow older, the added influence of religious indoctrination seemed to exacerbate problems when doubts or deviance from parental and religious expectations occurred. When children do not uphold family traditions or beliefs, conflict is likely exacerbated within

families (Mahoney, 2005). This is also most likely true for other cultural aspects; therefore future research should look into other kinds of cultural conflict within families as well.

Of great importance is how stigma in society towards alternative spiritualities still exists. It is common in modern day society and psychology to frown upon magical thinking or irrationality, rightfully so in certain contexts. New Age Spirituality is also criticized for stealing ideas and practices from other cultures, which is also a valid concern. But those who do not conform to their cultural origins are clearly at risk for isolation and rejection as evidenced by the interviews. Many of the participants were excommunicated from their family and religion altogether. As Amarasingam (2009) suggested, there can be benefits to New Age Spirituality as it can provide one with ways of healing from mental health issues. We see the healing propensity of such kinds of spirituality in some of the participant's testimonies with meditation and other forms of alternative spiritual practices and beliefs. For individuals who were not accepted by their religious culture, alternatives like New Age Spirituality can help them find a place where they belong. Having the ability to self heal can also be beneficial for those without access to other means of therapeutic resources. Although many of the participants began shifting away from their religion in their adolescence or early adult years, many of the participants maintained their distance from religion and continued with exploring their spirituality. It is important to recognize that many older individuals engage in individualistic spirituality, so as to not perpetuate or reinforce negative associations such as immaturity with those who gravitate towards such beliefs and practices.

Future research should explore ways in which conflict arising from cultural differences between parents and children can be remedied, or even prevented.

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Organizational research for religious institutions can look into ways in which religious beliefs can be taught without instilling fear or shame in followers who do not or cannot fully follow the religious dogmas. Educational research and programs for parents can be further developed, especially to help prepare them for the changes adolescents experience cognitively and emotionally as they explore their believe systems. Identifying ways to develop compassion and understanding for teenagers who are questioning their faith is also critical as it could help protect against future negative outcomes such as estrangement, anxiety, and confusion. Overall, further understanding of how spirituality develops across a wide range of cultures, personalities, and backgrounds can be beneficial for organizations, clinicians, educators, parents, and individuals themselves.

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Appendices

Recruitment Script

I am seeking a volunteer who is willing to be interviewed about his/her experiences with spirituality. Volunteers must identify as “spiritual but not religious”, and have been raised within and participated in an organized religion(s) at some point in their lives. Specifically, I am interested in talking **about topics related to religious upbringing, family dynamics, the conversion experience, and your spiritual beliefs.** This interview is for partial fulfillment of a Masters of Psychological Science thesis, and your interview will be one of around 10 that will be analyzed.

The interview audio will be recorded and transcribed, and should take about 1 to 1 ½ hours to complete, at a time and place convenient to you (most likely through a video communication platform). You will not be asked for your name or any other identifying information.

If you are interested in sharing your experiences, please contact me at
marksk1@hawkmail.newpaltz.edu

Semi-Structured Interview

Interview Introduction
<i>Thank you for agreeing to volunteer to be part of this study. This interview is designed to aid in the understanding of how people experience an upbringing within organized religion to becoming “spiritual but not religious”. I am only interested in understanding individuals’ perceptions and experiences, therefore, there are no right or wrong answers. Please make an attempt to be as detailed and specific as you can be throughout the interview, but of course do not answer anything, which will be uncomfortable or upsetting for you.</i>
<i>If at any time there is a question you do not wish to answer, feel free to say “pass” and I will</i>

move on. Also, if at any time you wish to stop the interview, please do not hesitate to say so.

Before we begin, I would like to go over a few more things.

The interview will be recorded so that I can review our conversation at a later date. The recording will be saved to a secure password protected device, which only I will have access to. When I am finished transcribing the recording, the audio file will be completely deleted.

A pseudonym will then be created for the transcribed interview, and I will never disclose any identifying information to anyone.

The data I am collecting will be for the thesis requirement of the Masters of Psychological Science at SUNY New Paltz, and your interview will be one of around 10 that will be analyzed.

Before we start, can I answer any additional questions you may have?

First, I will ask you a few basic demographic questions.

- How old are you?
- What gender do you identify with? Do you have a preferred pronoun you would like me to use?
- What race and/or ethnicity do you identify with?

In this next section I am going to ask you some questions about your upbringing.

- Tell me about your family
- Describe your relationship with your primary caregivers beginning from childhood to now. (Separately for each caregiver if multiple)
- What was the religion of your parents when you were growing up, and what religion(s) did you participate in?

Now I am going to ask you some questions about your personal spiritual experiences.

- Tell me the story of your spiritual development, journey, or process beginning from your earliest memories.
 - Tell me about the exploration process?
 - At what point did you make a commitment to your current spirituality?

- Tell me more about your specific beliefs and practices.
- How do you think about, or view God?
- Do you think your concept of God or spirituality will ever change in your lifetime?
- Explain how your spirituality is a part of your identity.
- How is your spiritual identity related to other aspects of your identity?
- What are your motivations for your spiritual journey?
- What are your goals for your spiritual journey?

In this next section, I am going to focus on how you think about your religious upbringing compared to your current beliefs.

- Have you ever felt conflicted about your spirituality? Have you ever felt conflicted about any aspects of your identity?
- To what extent do you accept yourself? Tell me about your experiences/process with self-acceptance, and how spirituality has played a role in that process?
- Are there aspects of the religion/practices you are currently identifying with that are different from the religion(s) you were raised in?
 - Are there ways you incorporate the beliefs/practices of your upbringing with your current beliefs/practices? How?
- Do the differences (if any) bother you at all or cause any tension?
- If so, have you resolved the discrepancies internally? How?

Now I am going to ask you some more questions about your family.

- How does your family feel about you exploring other religions?
- How does your family feel about other aspects of your identity/lifestyle?
- How much do you think your relationship with your parents has impacted your

spirituality?

- If you have had conflicts with your parents, have they been resolved? How?

Lastly, in this final section I would like to ask you

- Do you feel spirituality has helped with your wellbeing/overall quality of life?
- Please elaborate on how your spirituality helps you in your daily life.

Those are all the questions I have for you today. Is there anything else you would like to share with me related to your upbringing, experiences, and thoughts about spirituality?