Original Article

Suffering of Life after Religious Disaffiliation:
A Caring Science Study

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Abstract

Background and aim: There are many circumstances where an individual, either voluntarily or involuntarily, may leave part of their life behind. Religious disaffiliation, the focus in this study, has become increasingly common and may under certain circumstances have a profound impact on a human being's life, health and well-being. The aim of this caring science study was to gain a deeper understanding of the suffering that human beings may endure after religious disaffiliation.
Participants and methods: In-depth interviews were conducted with 18 participants who had left various religious communities in Finland. The data material was analyzed through a qualitative thematic analysis according to Clarke and Braun.
Results and conclusion: The results show that life after religious disaffiliation entails different forms of suffering of life. Suffering of life was expressed as: Pain and sorrow over being rejected, Overwhelmed by guilt and shame, Living in constant fear of both life and death and Humiliated as a human being. Eriksson's concept suffering of life is relevant and valuable in understanding the results of this study. Ultimately, suffering of life refers to the violation of a human being's dignity. Further research is needed on what constitutes caring and how suffering can be alleviated in this context.

Keywords: religious disaffiliation, caring science, suffering of life, in-depth interviews, qualitative thematic analysis

Introduction

There are many circumstances in life where individuals, either voluntarily or involuntarily, may leave part of their life behind. Migration, marital separation, domestic violence and religious disaffiliation are just a few examples of situations where one faces transition and significant changes in life. Life changes often make it possible for an individual to find a new context and understanding in life (cf. Eriksson, 2006; Råholm, Arman & Rehnsfeldt, 2008), but life changes may also affect health and well-being negatively. Life changes may lead to stress, health problems and suffering, due to separation from family and/or traumatic events (Bhugra & Jones, 2001; Anderson, Renner & Danis, 2012; Sbarra, Hasselmo & Bourassa, 2015).

The focus in this study is on the life change religious disaffiliation, where disaffiliation is defined as "the process by which individuals lose or change their organizational identification" (Albrecht, Cornwall & Cunningham, 1988, p. 70). Religious disaffiliation has become

increasingly common and may under certain circumstances lead to significant changes in an individual's life, in terms of identity, social networks, health and well-being (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010). Not all who leave a religious community encounter hardships or difficult life changes. Some disaffiliates describe experiences of happiness, independence, truth and honesty (Ronimus, 2011) as well as newfound freedom and greater well-being (Winell, 2007).

Religious disaffiliation has mostly been studied from the perspectives of sociology and the study of religions. Religious studies show that disaffiliation often is a complex and long process (Albrecht, Cornwall & Cunningham, 1988; Zuckerman, 2012; Nica, 2019). Individuals who are born into a religious community incorporate its worldview into their own (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016) and the religion may become deeply internalized and constitute their entire life (Timonen, 2013). Reasons why individuals leave their religion are, for instance, intellectual disagreements with the religion (Thiessen & Wilkins-Laflamme, 2017), lifestyle restrictions of the community in conflict with attractions of the secular world (Hookway & Habibis, 2015) as well as generational differences in culture and habits (Mantsinen, 2020). Individuals considering disaffiliation are faced with a difficult choice and may try to leave in a way that causes little harm to themselves and their loved ones (Ronimus, 2011). Sociological studies show that it is common to lose social relationships and social support when one leaves a religious community (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016; Knight et al., 2019) and this often leads to negative effects on health (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010). Individuals can experience feelings of anxiety, frustration, loneliness, sadness and anger, as creating a new intellectual framework of personal responsibility, critical thinking and decision making may be challenging (Berger, 2015). Individuals may also experience grief, emotional distress and even symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (Winell, 2016). Religious disaffiliation is still an unexplored area of research from a caring science perspective.

Aim: The aim of this caring science study was to gain a deeper understanding of the suffering that human beings may endure after religious disaffiliation.

Theoretical framework: This study is based on caring science and Eriksson's theory of caritative caring (Lindström, Lindholm Nyström & Zetterlund, 2018), where suffering is described as suffering of illness, suffering of care and suffering of life. The theoretical framework in our study focuses on suffering of life, which means suffering that encompasses a human being's total life situation, everything included in what it means to live and to be a human being among others (Eriksson, 2006). A person's total life situation can be changed in many ways and life one is accustomed to can be disturbed and suddenly more or less taken away. According to Eriksson (2006), suffering of life can include everything from an existential threat to the lack of love, which is one of the deepest forms of suffering.

Participants and method: Recruitment of participants was done with individuals who had left a religious community, mainly through the organisation Support for Victims of Religions (2020) in Finland. The data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews with 18 participants, 13 women and 5 men, ranging in ages from 26 to 65. 14 participants had been members of the religious community since birth, while four participants had affiliated as adults. The participants' disaffiliation had been voluntary (14 participants) or involuntary (4 participants) and had occurred during a wide time span, from 1 to 35 years ago. The in-depth interviews, which were conducted by the first author, lasted 1-2 hours with each participant. The interviews were recorded and transcribed into written form.

Thematic analysis according to Clarke & Braun (2013 & 2017) was chosen as the analysis method, since it is a method for identifying, analysing and interpreting patterns of meaning and themes within qualitative data. An inductive analysis was conducted through the six phases of this method. The first phase was carried out by listening to the recordings and reading through the interviews several times. During the next phase, codes for important features of the data in relation to the research question were created. The material was coded both semantically and conceptually with the help of the qualitative data analysis program Nvivo (version 12). An initial 61 codes were created and then categorized to find similarities and variations. During the fourth

phase, a new reading of the material was conducted and themes in relation to the whole material were checked. Several thematic maps were created to assist in understanding relationships between codes and themes. The fifth phase was done by organizing and identifying the core ideas of the themes. Four themes were chosen to portray the answers to the research question, and these themes were verified by the group of co-authors. In the final phase, the results of the analysis were written down.

A limitation in this study is the recruitment of participants through the organization Support for Victims of Religions, which may be reflected in the results. All steps of the analysis process were therfore discussed and reviewed with the group of authors in an attempt to strengthen the reliability and quality of the interpretations.

Ethical considerations: This study received approval from the Board for Research Ethics at Åbo Akademi University on May 30, 2018.and has been carried out in accordance with the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (2019). The study can be considered sensitive research with vulnerable participants (Liamputtong, 2007), so the interviews were carried out with sensitivity to the participants' vulnerability and well-being. Concealing the identity of the participants is essential in research with vulnerable groups (King, Horrocks & Brooks, 2019), so special attention was paid to protecting the participants' integrity and anonymity. The participants were informed about the study in advance, about their right to anonymity and to withdraw from the study at any time. Written consent was obtained from all participants and after the interviews, they were provided with information about where to find support (peer support and helplines). Anonymizing the participants was done by numbering the interviews and only the first author knows their identity.

Results

Four themes, which were found through the analysis, are presented below. The reliability of the themes is confirmed by quotes from the participants. The quotes are followed by a number which refers to the interview from which the quote is taken.

Pain and sorrow over being rejected

Suffering that appears in the interviews is pain and sorrow over having been rejected. For some,

leaving the community means losing all of one's family members and friends and ending up in total social isolation. The loss of important social relationships is experienced as the most difficult loss to endure. The participants share their pain and agony over feeling rejected and excluded in terms of living with a feeling of no longer existing in the eyes of people who once were important. When meeting family members, they look away and walk down the other side of the street. Other people change in their way of relating, which makes one feel less worthy and unwelcome.

> *A person who has been close to you, a friend and all your loved ones, all of a sudden that person changes, and shows a different face (2).*

 Living in a strange situation, where one cannot stay in touch with people, even if they are alive. The loneliness is painful when one is not welcome in the family, no longer belongs to a group or has a place to go. Even if able to stay in touch with family and friends, there is now an invisible wall in between. Pain and sorrow also come from experiencing outsidership, a feeling of not belonging anywhere. Outsidership is described as feeling like being on the outside of both worlds. Feeling like an outsider in relation to the community that has been left, and at the same time feeling like an outsider in relation to the new world in which one now lives.

Overwhelmed by guilt and shame

The suffering that emerges is about living with overwhelming feelings of guilt and shame. Life within the community was experienced by many as revolving around making a person feel guilty. Many had lived with feelings of guilt and being sinful through their entire upbringing or for many years, and these feelings are difficult to part with. Religious disaffiliation may lead to experiences of being unworthy in the eyes of God. One participant described that in her world, God was the same as the group, so when she left the group she felt all alone, for now God was no longer on her side. Disaffiliates feel guilty for many things, including not being active anymore and for leaving the community. At the same time, they struggle with insecurity over who is right and who is wrong.

> *I felt terribly sinful and unworthy... like a really bad person, who has chosen, specifically chosen, this way of life... and*

that choice is completely wrong (5)

Living with guilt is also about blaming oneself and feeling that everything that happens is one's own fault.

> *I blamed myself a lot, that I was a bad person... and my self-confidence started getting really bad and I thought that everything was my fault, after all... And how could I do something so awful to my parents (14).*

Experiences of not measuring up or being good enough continue after leaving the community. Blaming oneself for wrong choices in life and experiencing self-blame is also about the consequences one's choices have for family members. Parents feel pain over what their children had to go through, as they experience that the environment was not safe and sound to grow up in. Others want to respect their parents and their faith, but still want to live their own life of freedom. By leaving the community, they have caused their family pain and sorrow.

The participants express shame as part of their suffering, a shame that mainly is a result of disapproval and condemnation from others. Either the entire religious community or individual members express their condemnation and disapproval of the individual as a person and the choices this person has made. Living with these feelings of guilt and shame is suffering that affects a human being's life and well-being.

Living in constant fear of both life and death

Living in constant fear of both life and death is about living with fear as an ever-present part of life. Fear is described as being felt in one's body and in some cases, it never leaves the body.

> *To live with that fear for so many years, fear of losing everything... not just family, relatives and friends, but a God who wanted me dead.... led to that many years after I had left... I noticed that I didn't know how it felt to not be afraid, because I was afraid all the time... (18).*

Living in fear of life is about being afraid of having all important things in life taken away, fear of losing friends and family members, and fear of ending up lonely or being completely alone. Living in fear of having to meet and be confronted by those who still are members, or being pressured by them to return. Life, with all the freedom and responsibility that it entails, feels frightening.

The fears are not only in relation to this life, but extend to life after death. The participants describe a fear of God and of being punished by God for many different things. Being punished for by leaving the community one has made the wrong decision, and therefore is going to perish and go to hell. Living in fear and apprehension deeply affects the well-being and health of a human being. The participants describe how their physical health is affected, for instance experiencing sleeping difficulties, pain and physical illness, which in some cases became chronic. Some participants had suicidal thoughts, during periods when they experienced a bottomless pain and life felt too difficult to endure.

Humiliated as a human being

Being humiliated as a human being is also a form of suffering that the participants describe. They experienced that they were treated poorly in the community and feel pain and agony over having been controlled and manipulated. Leaving the community, in some cases involuntarily, leads to experiences of life as being broken.

> *I trusted that organization so totally, it was my entire life....and then suddenly it was like the rug was pulled out from underneath me....and my whole life was shattered... (11).*

Feelings of inadequacy and worthlessness continue after disaffiliation and affect one's dignity as a human being. One feels violated as a human being and worthless, both in one's own and others' eyes.

The participants experienced earlier, that most decisions had been made for them and they had few possibilities to make their own choices. Life was described as being easy in a way, when all choices were made through faith or by the community. After leaving the community, they experience it difficult to make their own choices and know what direction to take in life. Independent decisions are difficult to make, when one is insecure about and not used to expressing own wishes or needs.

The participants describe how they felt lost and empty as a human being in the beginning. Feeling an emotional numbness, where one is unable to cry, despite suffering and pain.

Humiliation also comes from no longer being accepted as the same person after leaving the group. From once being accepted and valuable in others' eyes, one is now transformed into a human being without value. The humiliation leads to feelings of self-doubt and difficulties in seeing one's own worth and dignity. The struggle to try to defend oneself and restore human dignity is painful and lonely.

Discussion

The results of our study show that life after religious disaffiliation may entail different forms of suffering of life, such as living with pain, sorrow, guilt and shame, as well as living with constant fear and humiliation as a human being. Eriksson's (2006) concept suffering of life is relevant and valuable in understanding the results of this study. Suffering of life that emerges is about living with pain and agony. Life has changed in a profound way and no longer exists in the form one was accustomed to. Losing one's social relationships, one's family members and friends leads to pain that is the most difficult to endure. Feeling forsaken and abandoned by important people who used to be close, and not welcome among them anymore. During periods when life is experienced as too difficult to endure and is threatened by being destroyed, one may experience suicidal thoughts. These results are consistent with previous research, which show that religious disaffiliation may lead to the lack of social support which negatively affects an individual's health (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010) and leads to sorrow, anxiety, loneliness and anger (Berger, 2015; Knight et al., 2019). According to Eriksson (Lindström, Lindholm Nyström & Zetterlund, 2018), communion is fundamental for all human life. For many human beings, fellowship or a sense of community with others, is a source of strength and is important for health and well-being (Björkmark & Koskinen, 2016). The experience of not being welcome either in regards to an individual situation or a communion produces suffering and deprives a human being of hope and the joy of living. To not being taken seriously or being seen can cause unendurable suffering as it gives a feeling that one does not exist for others (Eriksson, 2006).

Suffering of life is also expressed by living with overwhelming feelings of guilt and shame. To have lived with guilt for many years as well as feelings of being unworthy and sinful have long-term effects on a human being. This study shows that constant feelings of guilt come from experiences of having done wrong in the eyes of God, as well as others condemning and making one feel guilty. Individuals who become accused and condemned begin to doubt themselves and are not able to see their own value. According to Eriksson (2006), to condemn is to declare the other invalidated and to obliterate her as a human being.

On the other hand, a person experiences shame, dishonour and disgrace, something that needs to be hidden from others and is experienced deep inside (Werkander et al., 2012). The shame that emerged in this study was mainly a result of the accusations and condemnation of others. Wiklund (2000) points out that the experience of shame is fundamental in the suffering human being. Suffering in the form of violated dignity and a pervasive experience of shame is a threat to the "true" human being, as it prevents the human being from being whom and what this human being was meant to be. Feelings of shame are the consequences of one's dignity being violated, and can be caused by both oneself and fellow human beings.

Suffering of life, specific for this context, is expressed as living with fear. These fears concern both this life and life after death. For instance, one may become so paralyzed by fear that one avoids going out and meeting other people. Fears related to death entail being afraid of God's punishment, of life after death and going to hell. These fears are manifested in the body through symptoms such as physical pain and sleep difficulties. According to Lindström (1994), fear is one of a human being's defences as it protects the self-esteem from feelings of inferiority and shame. Fear may nourish illusions and drive the human being farther away from her true self. Fear in this study is part of the suffering of life, and it makes life difficult to endure.

Living in a religious community, especially from childhood, may lead to that a person's whole identity is made up of the identity of being a member. Losing this identity leads to feelings of losing one's "self" and feeling totally lost. At first life is about living in uncertainty and insecurity, not knowing who one is and where one belongs. These results are in line with previous research, which show that religious disaffiliation may lead to profound changes in life, such as changes in identity (Timonen, 2013),

self-concept and well-being (Nica, 2019 & 2020). According to Eriksson (2006), a person who has experienced herself as whole may suddenly feel that her identity has dissolved and her inner core has crumbled into many small parts. When a person experiences hopelessness, sorrow, guilt, loneliness and humiliation, it is difficult to experience wholeness.

Suffering of life is also about humiliation and being violated as a human being. Wiklund (2003) maintains that human beings' experience of dignity is threatened when they do not receive confirmation of who they are and their thoughts and feelings are not validated. This leads to feelings of shame and an existence characterized by chaos. The participants in this study described how feelings of humiliation led to chaos and a sense of life being meaningless. Ultimately, suffering of life in this study refers to the violation of a human being's dignity. The participants expressed how their feelings of inadequacy and worthlessness continued long after their disaffiliation and affected their dignity as human beings. They felt worthless, both in their own as well as others' eyes, and violated as human beings. Eriksson (2006) points out that it always involves a violation of dignity when something is experienced as suffering. A person can endure loneliness, lack of love and guilt, as long as it does not violate her as a human being.

Conclusion: Through caring science, especially the comprehensibility of Eriksson's concepts, we are able to identify and contribute to the understanding of suffering in the context of religious disaffiliation. The strength and courage that the participants needed to make the choices they had made clearly emerged in the interviews. Other studies have shown that there is a lack of support specifically designed for individuals who have disaffiliated (Zuckerman, 2012) and therapeutic strategies for helping individuals recover from religious groups (Jenkinson, 2016). Further research is needed on what constitutes caring and how suffering can be alleviated in this context.

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