



Leaving a covenantal religion: Orthodox Jewish disaffiliation from an immigration psychology perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study explored psychological variables associated with disaffiliation from Orthodox Judaism (a covenantal community), and subsequent wellness. A web-based survey ($N = 206$) assessed factors previously used to study immigrants: push (distress within origin community), pull (toward destination community), and goal attainment. Psychological wellness, perceived stress, overall health, and loneliness were also assessed. Findings included: (1) strong pull toward opportunities for physical and ideological autonomy; (2) those who experienced more push toward disaffiliation, reported decreased current wellness; (3) goal attainment was associated with increased wellbeing; (4) significant differences in the experiences of disaffiliation between men and women; (5) most who disaffiliated left religion altogether; those who remained religious decreased their participation, and few joined non-Jewish faith communities. Results demonstrate that this immigration paradigm can be adapted to advance research on individuals who disaffiliate from covenantal religious communities.

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The frequency with which individuals leave religious denominations has consistently risen in the United States over recent decades (Twenge et al., 2016). According to Pew's American Religious Landscape Survey, a record high 16% of Americans identify as unaffiliated (Pew Research Center, 2015), and according to the American Religious Identification Survey, the number of "nones," – those who do not identify with any religion – nearly doubled between their 1990 survey and their 2008 survey, from 8.1% to 15% respectively (Kosmin et al., 2009).

Research that has examined the psychological experience of those leaving religions, especially those leaving insular religions, has been sparse. In particular, there is a subgroup that has scarcely been researched at all: persons who leave, what we term, covenantal religious communities.¹ For the present work, we have adopted an operational definition of a covenantal community as one built upon theological foundations regarding social expectations of personal beliefs and public comportment. These expectations include ways of dressing, eating, speaking, gender roles, and family hierarchies. A large part of the life of covenantal communities is conducted separately from the larger society and from other religious groups. The behaviour restrictions of covenantal communities are mostly absent in the larger society and community members may speak a language different

from the majority culture. Examples of covenantal traditions may include some Latter-day Saints, Amish, Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslim, Sikh, and Orthodox Jews.

We posit that covenantal communities institute formal and informal barriers to keep community members from integrating into the society at large. If a community member does not behave within the permissible bounds and rules of that community, that person may be shunned and ostracised. What would influence persons to disaffiliate from covenantal religious life when the loss of community could be so complete? What are the psychological sequelae of this disaffiliation? We suggest that to disaffiliate from a covenantal community is analogous to leaving one nation for another (Milstein & Manierre, 2012). It is therefore the purpose of this study to apply theories derived from immigration psychology to help understand the psychological precursors and subsequent effects of disaffiliation from one's covenantal religious community. Disaffiliates from Orthodox Judaism are the focus of this research.

Religious disaffiliation research

Whereas research on the experience and expression of religious belief has proliferated in recent decades (For a review, see: Pargament et al., 2013), scant research has examined the resulting psychological effects of losing community through religious disaffiliation. A handful of studies have examined psychological effects of religious disaffiliation. Scheitle and Adamczyk (2010) found that persons within exclusive and demanding "high-cost" religions have better self-reported health than those within less demanding religious traditions; however, those who left exclusive religions reported worse health than those who left less demanding religious traditions. Fenelon and Danielsen (2016), using the General Social Survey, compared the health and subjective wellbeing of disaffiliates from several religious denominations. Like Scheitle and Adamczyk (2010), they found that those leaving exclusive religious groups reported the worst health. Further, they found that the reduced subjective wellbeing initially present within disaffiliate groups improved over time. In a three-year prospective study on Chinese Protestant Christians, Hui et al. (2018) found that poor quality of life at baseline was a risk factor for decreased psychological functioning post-disaffiliation.

An immigration framework for disaffiliation

Diverse theoretical frameworks have, over the years, been employed in studies of religious exit. Disengagement theory (Bahr, 1970), labelling theory (Brinkerhoff & Burke, 1980), social learning theory (Hunsberger, 1983), role theory (Ebaugh, 1988), organisational exit theory (Bromley, 1988), and cognitive dissonance theory (Anderton et al., 2011) have all been used to categorise and understand religious disaffiliates and/or their process of disaffiliation. However, in comparison to immigration theories, the above theories lack in their empirical applicability to the psychology of religious disaffiliation. Immigration psychology has an established framework to study the processes that compel the would-be migrants to leave their origin community and the individual psychological sequelae of this migration (Berry, 2001; Portes & Borocz, 1989). Immigration psychology may offer valuable insight into the motivations to disaffiliate, the processes of disaffiliation itself, and the acculturation and integration of the incipient disaffiliate into other parts of society.

Disaffiliates have reported that their experiences of leaving religious groups have felt like the experience of immigration (Berger, 2014; Davidman, 2014). For those disaffiliating from groups that may be considered covenantal religious communities, disaffiliation may be especially experienced as a migration, since the disaffiliate may have only been enculturated within the group's milieu and may need to then acculturate to a different culture with disparate values and beliefs in wider society (Berger, 2015; Myers, 2017). Even if disaffiliates remain within the same geographic area, the process of leaving and transitioning to secular society can feel much like immigrating to an unfamiliar culture (Rothbaum, 1988) as the individual must acculturate to new behaviours, customs, and, sometimes, a new language (Davidman, 2014).

Push and Pull

Foundational work by Lee (1966) – based on earlier work by Ravenstein (1889) – described the psychological trajectory of immigrants as involving “a set of factors at origin and destination” (p. 52). The origin factors are those that *push* a person to leave a community. These can include physical threats, shunning, discrimination, and dysfunctional environments. The destination factors are those that *pull* a person to a new community. These conditions found in the new society that are attractive to the migrant because they include an improved quality of life and economic opportunities (Klein et al., 2009; Portes & Borocz, 1989; Rauhut, 2011).

Numerous studies (Hodge, 2014; Klein et al., 2009; Rauhut, 2011; Ryff & Essex, 1991) suggest that *push* and *pull* factors affect the migrant's wellness, acculturation, and integration into a new society. Within the immigration literature, push factors are generally found to be conditions that adversely affect life satisfaction (Amit, 2010), immigrant integration (Doerschler, 2006), and general wellbeing post-immigration. In contrast, *pull* factors have often been found to be associated with improved wellbeing.

The present work contends that the push–pull framework can be helpful in understanding why individuals switch from one religion to another or why they choose to become nonreligious altogether. Further, the push–pull paradigm may offer a predictive framework with regard to understanding psychological wellbeing post-disaffiliation. To our knowledge, none of the theoretical frameworks that have been used to study religious disaffiliation have clearly enumerated variables within the process of disaffiliation that may predict psychological wellbeing after exit.

Covenantal Jewish communities

Orthodox Judaism has several distinct denominations that could be considered covenantal communities: *Haredi Judaism*. There is an umbrella term for several Orthodox Jewish denominations: Haredim (Deutsch, 2009; Lehmann & Siebzeher, 2009). Large groups within Haredi Judaism consist of Hasidim (Fader, 2009), the Yeshivish (Helmreich, 2000), and Chabad (Dein, 2011; Fishkoff, 2005). Haredim espouse strict observance to Jewish laws and traditions, pride themselves on their insularity and self-sustenance (Fader, 2009; Finkelman, 2002), and are not exposed to other ways of life through television or movies, as these modes of communication are generally forbidden and inaccessible (Deutsch, 2009).

Covenantal aspects of Haredi Judaism. Importantly, Haredi traditions are in line with our previous operational definition of Covenantal communities. Haredim place a strong

emphasis on the attire worn by both men and women, as a way to signify whether an individual is part of that covenantal community, and the range of behaviours within which it is expected that persons conduct themselves (Fader, 2009). Haredi social life includes an intense focus on social standing, expressed most strongly in the *shidduch* (match) process in which males and females are matched for marriage by an agreement between parents (Lehmann & Siebzeher, 2009). Furthermore, Haredi societies are strongly divided by gender (Shai, 2002). Males and females are educated separately, they pray separately, and they socialise separately. Men maintain the roles as spiritual heads of the family and women take on the roles of caring for children and the home (El-Or & Watzman, 1994).

For the Haredi individuals who choose to disaffiliate from their community of upbringing, the transition to life outside their community may be extremely difficult. Not having received a formal secular education makes it difficult to find employment outside of the community (Hakak & Rapoport, 2012). Often the covenantal community is a source of employment for its members with the work group exclusively comprising community members. For many Haredim for whom Yiddish is their primary language, they additionally have to grapple with a new language. Similarly, disaffiliates may experience estrangement and shunning from all or part of their families and members of their former communities (Deen, 2015; Vincent, 2014). Finally, given the community orientation of the Haredim, newly disaffiliated members often find that for the first time they are fending for themselves without instrumental or social support (Deen, 2015; Vincent, 2014; Winston, 2006).

Modern Orthodox Judaism. Another large denomination within Orthodox Judaism is Modern Orthodox Judaism (Helmreich & Shinnar, 1998). Historically, Modern Orthodox Judaism has opposed to the insularity of Haredi Judaism, however, with the comingling of ideologies, some Modern Orthodox communities have sought to emulate aspects of Haredi Judaism (Heilman, 2005). The covenantal community rules described above about Haredim generally do not apply to the Modern Orthodox.

Reasons for religious disaffiliation from Orthodox Judaism

Several qualitative studies have examined disaffiliates from Haredi Judaism. Shaffir and Rockaway (1987) described a process of awareness, struggle, and change for the disaffiliates from Orthodox Judaism. Frankenthaler (2004) explored the narratives of Israeli Haredi disaffiliates, and identified several emergent themes, most notably that many disaffiliates described their parents as not being conventional Haredi, as they would bring censored material or ideas into the home. Some additional findings were that although many disaffiliates had actively looked for answers to their philosophical and existential questions, they were unable to find satisfactory answers within the Haredi framework, and they ultimately developed a critical view of that framework. They also found that while most Haredi disaffiliates still identified as Jews, they struggled with a Judaism that no longer included the rituals and other practices of their covenantal community.

Davidman (2014) identified three significant childhood experiences that influenced the disaffiliation of former-Hasidim: (1) Exposure to the outside world through media or secular relatives; (2) Growing up in a family which deviated from *Haredi* norms; (3) Young females' realisation that they are considered secondary to males in *Haredi* society. Davidman and Greil (2007) described the narratives of Orthodox Jewish disaffiliates who created their

own personal narratives and described themselves in terms of heroism and bravery for having left a community that governed virtually all aspects of their lives.

Psychological impact of disaffiliation from Orthodox Judaism

We are unaware of any quantitative studies examining the psychological impact of disaffiliation from Orthodox Judaism. Qualitative studies on religious disaffiliation from covenantal-like religious groups, have documented an arduous, stressful, and isolating process of disaffiliation (McSkimming, 2017; Myers, 2017; Wright et al., 2011). Limited qualitative research has also found that Orthodox Jewish disaffiliates reported heightened levels of stress, loneliness, and isolation, as a result of losing much of their support systems in the process of disaffiliation (Berger, 2014, 2015; Davidman & Greil, 2007).

Stress, loneliness, and health. Research has demonstrated that both acute and chronic stress may increase health risks (Segerstrom & Miller, 2004; Steptoe et al., 2007) and decrease cognitive functioning (Shields et al., 2016). Hammen et al. (2009) additionally have shown that increased stress is associated with a greater risk of depression. Social support, however, may serve as a mediator between the effects of stress on health (DeLongis et al., 1988). Similarly, research on loneliness has demonstrated that it is an important risk factor for reduced health and early morbidity (Valtorta et al., 2016), with some claiming that loneliness and social isolation is a greater risk than obesity in regards to mortality (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015).

Goal Accomplishment. Research on immigrants demonstrates that those who achieve personally meaningful goals showed improved adjustment (Gong & Chang, 2007; Safdar et al., 2003) and improved psychosocial well-being after immigration (Lui & Rollock, 2012). Those who undergo cultural change through disaffiliation from *covenantal* religious communities could also likely benefit from the self-efficacy of achieving personally meaningful goals.

Sexual assault. Recently, clinicians and scholars within Orthodox Judaism have reported on the impacts of child sexual abuse within Orthodox Jewish communities (Neustein, 2009; Salamon, 2011). Due to the insular nature of these communities, there have been few studies of the prevalence of sexual assault. In a recent study examining the impacts and rates of child sexual abuse within Orthodox Judaism, Rosmarin et al. (2018) found that, compared to current affiliates and those never affiliated with Orthodox Judaism, disaffiliates from Orthodox Judaism were more than four times as likely to report some forms of child sexual abuse. However, the sample of disaffiliates in the study was small ($n = 36$) compared to their overall sample ($n = 336$), and therefore subject to possible inflated comparison results. Further inquiry is therefore necessary.

Current study

In an effort to better understand the psychological experiences of disaffiliates from Orthodox Judaism we sought to explore how the experiences of disaffiliation, as reflected in the immigration psychology concepts of push, pull, and goal accomplishment are predictive of psychological and emotional wellness, perceived stress, loneliness, and overall health. Additionally, given that gender is significant in defining life within Orthodox Judaism, we posited that the gender of the disaffiliate would also be of significance in the process of disaffiliation from Orthodox Judaism.

We thus hypothesised that:

- (1) Push will be negatively associated with indicators of wellness among disaffiliates from Orthodox Judaism.
- (2) Pull will be positively associated with indicators of wellness among disaffiliates.
- (3) Meeting goals of disaffiliation will be positively associated with indicators of wellness for disaffiliates.
- (4) Push and pull will be differentially endorsed by males and females within the sample.

Method

Participants

Our study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the City University of New York. A total of 222 (48% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 31.87$, $SD = 9.72$) participants were recruited through emails to the membership lists of several organisations that provide support services to individuals who have left Orthodox Jewish communities. Recruitment messages were also posted on Facebook groups of ex-Orthodox Jewish individuals. Further, a snow-ball method was utilised to acquire additional participants. Inclusion criteria for the study were that the individual self-identified as having left a form of Orthodox Judaism and that they were over the age of 18. Demographic information is provided in [Table 1](#).

Measures

Owing to the lack of established measures to test the *push* and *pull* dimensions of religious disaffiliation, we created original measures for each dimension. A group of individuals who had disaffiliated from Orthodox Jewish communities provided feedback and input on the items. Exploratory factor analyses further guided the placement of the items into their respective scales. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients on our original measures demonstrated sufficient reliability within the sample; *pull* measure ($\alpha = .92$; 26 items), *push* measure ($\alpha = .86$; 9 items). All scale items used a five-point Likert scale (1, strongly disagree to 5, strongly agree).

The Pull Measure. ([Appendix 1](#)) was designed to assess aspects of the outside, secular world that were attractive to the participant. The items span opportunities outside of the religious community such as more autonomy, diversity of religious participation, access to the arts and education, and diverse moral attitudes.

The Push Measure. ([Appendix 2](#)) assessed aspects within their religious communities that could have motivated participants to leave. The items span conditions that were distressing to the participant, such as familial dysfunction, abuse, and shunning.

Ten Item Personality Inventory (TIPI). The participants completed the Ten Item Personality Inventory (Gosling et al., 2003), which is a brief personality measure that assesses for the Big-Five personality dimensions. We chose to employ this brief measure due to time restrictions given an already lengthy questionnaire. Cronbach's alpha coefficients on the five dimensions of the Ten Item Personality Inventory were: *emotional stability* ($\alpha = .80$), *extraversion* ($\alpha = .77$), *conscientiousness* ($\alpha = .62$), *agreeableness* ($\alpha = .44$), *openness* ($\alpha = .36$). Because each scale comprises just two items, low alphas are to be expected. The alphas are comparable to those of the original validation sample.

Table 1. Demographics of the online survey sample.

	Overall Mean (SD)	Male (<i>n</i> = 101)	Female (<i>n</i> = 99)
Age	31.87 (9.72)	31.54 (10.43)	32.48 (9.00)
Gender			
Male	49.0%		
Female	48.1%		
Another/Decline	2.9%		
Country of Birth			
United States	83.5%		
Israel	7.3%		
Canada	3.4%		
United Kingdom	2.9%		
Australia	1.0%		
Other (Europe)	2.0%		
What is your current religion			
Atheist	15.0%	19.2%	10.5%
Agnostic/None	50.5%	47.5%	52.6%
Non-Orthodox Jewish	31.5%	27.3%	36.8%
Another	3.0%	6.1%	–
Years Since Disaffiliation			
Not Yet	4.5%	4.1%	5.1%
Less than 1 year	5.4%	8.2%	3.1%
1–2 Years	17.3%	20.4%	13.3%
3–5 Years	27.2%	21.4%	32.7%
6–10 Years	24.8%	25.5%	24.5%
11–15 Years	9.4%	8.2%	11.2%
16–20 Years	5.0%	6.1%	3.1%
More than 21 years	6.4%	6.1%	7.1%
Sexual Orientation			
Heterosexual	73.1%	77.9%	72.0%
Homosexual	10.4%	9.5%	8.6%
Another (Including Bisexual)	16.6%	12.6%	19.4%
Education at Time of Disaffiliation			
Yeshiva/Girls School	37.9%	49.5%	25.3%
High School Graduate	18.4%	16.8%	19.2%
GED	2.9%	2.0%	4.0%
Some College	14.1%	14.9%	13.1%
College Graduate	18.4%	12.9%	25.3%
Advanced Degree	8.3%	4.0%	13.1%
Had Children at Disaffiliation			
Yes	23.8%	22.8%	23.2%
No	76.2%	77.2%	76.2%

Perceived Wellness Survey (PWS). Participants completed an abridged version of the Perceived Wellness Survey (Adams et al., 1998), which consists of items pertaining to six dimensions of wellness: psychological, emotional, spiritual, physical, social, and intellectual. The measure has been independently validated and has demonstrated concurrent validity with established measures of anxiety and depression (Harari et al., 2005). Due to limited relevancy to our study and in an effort to limit the length of our questionnaire to not place undue burden on participants, we administered the six items comprising the psychological wellness dimension and the six items comprising the emotional wellness items from the instrument.

Perceived Stress Scale (PSS). Participants completed the 10-item Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen et al., 1983) that has been independently tested and validated with many samples.

UCLA Loneliness Scale. Participants completed the 20-item UCLA Loneliness Scale – Version 3 (Russell, 1996), a validated measure of loneliness.

Health measure. One item assessing the participant's overall health, "In general, how would you rate your health?" was included. Idler and Benyamini (1997) have demonstrated that single-item health measures such as the above have been consistently valid and reliable.

The means and standard deviations for the PWS, PSS, Loneliness Scale, and health measure can be found in Table 2.

Timeline of disaffiliation. Participants were presented with five items adapted from the Transtheoretical Model of Behaviour Change (Prochaska & Velicer, 1997). They were asked how old they were when they: (1) first thought about leaving their religious communities; (2) were seriously considering leaving; (3) made preparations for leaving; (4) actually left their communities; (5) what prevented them from returning to their religious community when things were not going well in the secular world. The items helped us assess the stages of behaviour change, from thinking about changing a behaviour to actually changing it and resisting the temptation to revert.

Accomplishment item. Participants were presented with an item regarding the fulfilment of their goals of disaffiliation: "Have you been able to accomplish what you expected by leaving the Orthodox Jewish Community?" To which the participants were given space to insert their response in short-answer form. Qualitative answers to the item were then coded by two independent raters into three codes: (1) "goals not met," (2) "goals somewhat met," (3) "goals fully met." Inter-rater reliability was sufficient ($k = .72$).

Sexual Assault item. A single item, "I experienced an unwanted sexual encounter within the Orthodox Jewish Community" was used to assess for having experienced a sexual assault. Item choices used a five-point Likert scale (1, strongly disagree to 5, strongly agree).

Procedure

The study's data was collected through an online questionnaire. Participants ($N = 222$) accessed and responded to the questionnaire directly online using Qualtrics.

Data analysis

To compare the male-female means on measured variables, we used t -tests for independent samples. To evaluate the relationship of each dependent variable (psychological and emotional wellness, perceived stress, loneliness, and overall health) to the set of hypothesised independent variables (Pull Score, Push Score, and Goals Met) we used ordinary least squares regression. In each regression we controlled for the variables of personality dimension, Orthodox Jewish group origin, and experience of sexual assault. Based on each respondent's answer to the question regarding whether their goals of disaffiliation were

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and pearson product moment correlations of independent and dependent variables.

	Mean	SD	α	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1. Push	2.86	.91	.86	–				
2. Pull	3.34	.74	.92	.49**	–			
3. Psychological/Emotional Wellness	4.74	1.48	.88	–.35**	–.14*	–		
4. Perceived Stress	17.07	7.49	.92	.34**	.09	–.51**	–	
5. Loneliness	46.81	11.29	.95	.35**	.00	–.48**	.56**	–
6. Overall Health	3.11	.72	–	–.27**	–.04	.35**	–.47**	–.32**

met, we created two dummy variables to be used in the regression analyses: dummy1 = 1 if goals were not met, 0 = otherwise; dummy2 = 1 if goals were somewhat met, 0 = otherwise. Thus, the reference group comprised disaffiliates who reported that their goals were met. Separately, a dummy variable was created to group those who reported to be from Modern Orthodox Jewish origin ($n = 30$), with the comparison group being all those who reported to be from all other Orthodox Jewish group origin. Finally, the total number of participants varied throughout the study, as some participants chose not to respond to specific items.

Results

The social demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1. The sample was nearly evenly divided between males and females and the participants' mean age was 32. Seventy four percent of participants reported that they were raised in Haredi groups, while 14% reported to have been raised in Modern Orthodox groups. There were additionally 3% of participants who reported to have been raised in secular or otherwise non-Orthodox Jewish communities who converted to Orthodox Jewish practice as adolescents.

Overall, women had received a more secular education at the point of disaffiliation than men. Disaffiliated parents overall reported a good current relationship with their children (83%). However, while parents of both genders equally reported having negative current relationships with their children (7%), none of the female respondents reported to have no current relationship with their children, while 22% of the male parents reported no current relationship with their children, $\chi^2 (2, N = 55) = 7.07, p = .029$.

Religion. Most respondents (65.5%) reported that their current religious affiliation was non-religious (50.5%) or atheist (15.0%). However, 49.5% of overall respondents reported that they attend religious services at least once or twice per year. Respondents who reported that they currently identify with a religion overwhelmingly reported that they currently affiliated with a non-Orthodox Jewish denomination, with only 3% identifying with other faiths. Seventy percent reported that religion was of low or no importance to them, and 74% reported that religion was less important to them currently than when they were within the Orthodox Jewish community. Respondents overwhelmingly reported (87%) that they left Orthodox Judaism because they no longer believed in its teachings. There was a significant gender difference between men ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 1.30$) and women ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.24$) in the endorsement of the item "I wanted to leave the Orthodox Jewish Community because I no longer believed in God," $t (198) = 3.45, p < .001$.

Relationships with religious family members. Half of the respondents reported that they currently had either satisfactory or close relationships with religious family members. While 24.5% reported that relationships with religious family members were either only positive with some family members and negative with others, or the relationship overall was civil and superficial. About 26% of respondents reported that they either had a negative relationship with their religious family members, or no relationship at all.

Accomplishments of disaffiliation. Most participants indicated that they accomplished the goals they had expected by disaffiliating: 59% reported that they did; 30% reported that they somewhat accomplished those goals; and 11% reported that they did not accomplish those goals.

Timeline of disaffiliation. Men and women reported different trajectories for leaving their communities. Men, on average, began thinking about leaving at older ages; men, however, actually left at a younger age, suggesting a more accelerated disaffiliation process for men. Mean ages within a timeline of disaffiliation were recorded for men and women, which included: first thoughts, serious contemplation, preparation, and actual disaffiliation (Figure 1). Women reported having had first thoughts of disaffiliation at mean age that was two years younger than the mean for men. Women reported having disaffiliated, on average, a year later than men ($M_{\text{women}} = 23$, $M_{\text{men}} = 22$).

Push, pull

Participant responses to the *pull* and *push* measure items revealed patterns of how respondents perceived their life to be within Orthodox Jewish communities, as well as the expectations they had of post-disaffiliation-life prior to disaffiliating. In the aggregate, women scored significantly higher on both *pull* and *push* scales (Table 3).

Push. Some aspects of the Orthodox Jewish community were thought to help push the individual out. With 5 representing “strongly agree” and 1, “strongly disagree,” these items included a lack of happiness in daily life ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.23$), and a feeling that others within the Orthodox Jewish community were attempting to control their lives ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.23$). Although most respondents reported that they were subject to considerable control within their former Orthodox Jewish communities, compared to men ($M = 3.73$,

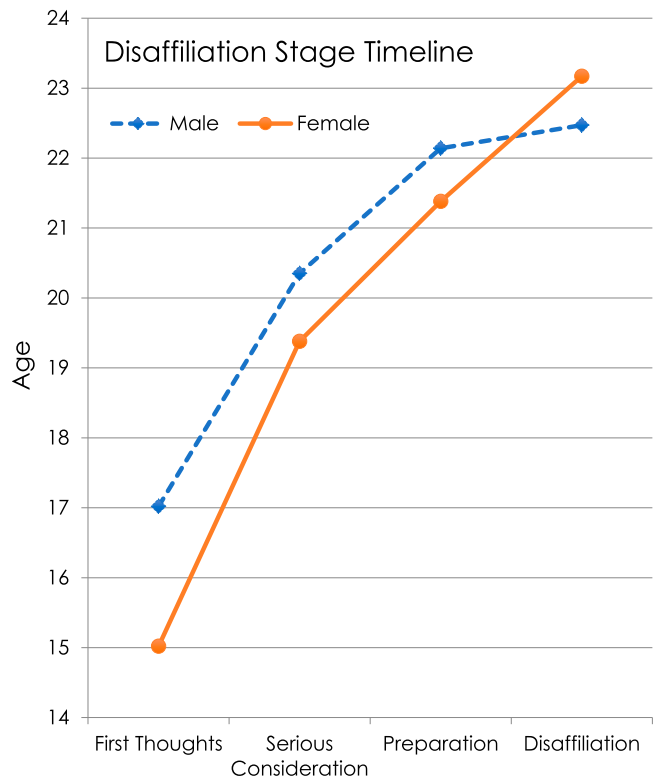


Figure 1. Disaffiliation stages.

Table 3. Scores on the independent variable scales and gender comparison.

Scale	Overall (N = 214) Mean (SD)	α	Males (n = 101) Mean (SD)	Females (n = 99) Mean (SD)	t	df
Pull	3.34 (.74)	.92	3.08 (.71)	3.62 (.67)	5.53**	198
Push	2.86 (.91)	.86	2.72 (.97)	3.01 (.82)	2.33*	198

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$.

SD = 1.36), women reported that they were subject to significantly more control ($M = 4.23$, SD = .96), $t(198) = 3.00$, $p = .003$. Similarly, although some men reported being pushed to disaffiliate to “protect [their] physical or psychological safety,” ($M = 2.93$, SD = 1.53), women affirmed this item to a significantly greater degree ($M = 3.46$, SD = 1.48), $t(198) = 2.49$, $p = .014$. Additionally, there was a significant difference regarding *Push* between those who reported to be of Modern Orthodox group origin ($M = 2.40$, SD = .79) and those who reported to be of *Haredi* origin ($M = 2.93$, SD = .91), $t(212) = 3.02$, $p = .003$.

Pull. On individual items, participants, especially women, indicated that there were opportunities outside the community for greater autonomy in making life decisions. Responses to a desire to “lead my own life” received significantly higher affirmation for women ($M = 4.64$, SD = .74) than men ($M = 4.09$, SD = 1.17), $t(198) = 3.96$, $p < .001$. Another autonomy item reflected a desire to “dress to my liking” similarly received greater affirmation by women ($M = 4.14$, SD = 1.08) than men ($M = 3.07$, SD = 1.40), $t(198) = 6.04$, $p < .001$. Participants, particularly women, tended to agree with statements that they were attracted to a more moral, tolerant, inclusive, and egalitarian worldview of the outside of the community. For example, the item “I wanted to leave the Orthodox Jewish Community because of the way it views people of different ethnicities” received greater affirmation by women ($M = 4.23$, SD = .99) than men ($M = 3.74$, SD = 1.15), $t(198) = 3.23$, $p = .002$.

Sexual assault. With regards to having experienced sexual assault, 25% of male respondents, and 30% of female respondents reported that they had experienced an unwanted sexual encounter within Orthodox Jewish communities.

Regression analyses

Pearson product moment correlations of the independent and dependent variables are available in Table 2. The results of the regression analyses are found in Table 4. The analyses indicated that having goals of disaffiliation met was associated with lower levels of perceived stress, decreased loneliness, and increased overall health. Higher levels of *Push* were associated with lower levels of psychological and emotional wellness, poorer overall health, and increased loneliness. *Pull* was not significantly related to any dependent variables. There were no effects of gender or sexual assault, and being of Modern Orthodox Jewish group origin was also not significantly related to any dependent variables within the regressions. Multicollinearity was not detected among any of the variables within the regressions, as all variable inflation factor values were below 2 (Dormann et al., 2013).

Discussion

To disaffiliate from a covenantal community is to become a psychological immigrant across cultural frontiers, with consequential difficulties and opportunities. Stressors are

inherent to the process of disaffiliation from Orthodox Jewish communities. These stressors include loss of family, loss of employment, divorce, loss of custody of children, and loss of community and social structure. Additionally, disaffiliates must adjust and acculturate to new ways of life and thinking outside of their communities of origin. We conducted the present study with an aim of understanding some of these stressors, as well as the process of disaffiliation for these people.

Consistent with our first hypothesis, our results demonstrated that reasons to initiate the process of disaffiliation predicted subsequent well-being. We found that *Push* factors (e.g., limited autonomy, family dysfunction, assault) were associated with decreased psychological and emotional wellness and health, and increased loneliness, even when controlling for personality. As most of the *push* items in the questionnaire consisted of negative experiences or circumstances, such as abuse, shaming, and dysfunction from within Orthodox Jewish communities, it is not surprising that those experiences have enduring psychological effects on those who disaffiliated from those communities.

Inconsistent with our second hypothesis, we found that *Pull* factors (e.g., increased autonomy) were not significantly associated with increased health and wellness. Women significantly affirmed both their *Pull* and *Push* motivations to a greater extent than men. The findings indicate—consistent with our third hypothesis—that having goals met was associated with reduced perceived stress, lower levels of loneliness, and better overall health and psychological and emotional wellness. Consistent with our fourth hypothesis, males and females endorsed push and pull items differentially, with females scoring higher on both push and pull. However, there were no effects of gender on psychological or health outcomes.

Consistent with Davidman's (2014) qualitative finding that women disaffiliated because they lacked gender equality, we found that disaffiliating women put a higher priority on the lack of gender equality in their former communities as a motivator for disaffiliation. We also found additional difficulty and complexity faced by women disaffiliates, which may indicate that although, on average, women begin to think about leaving at an earlier age, they actually leave at a later age (Figure 1). Additionally, our findings regarding men and women's desire for autonomy is consistent with research showing that individuals disaffiliated from Orthodox Jewish communities in pursuit of autonomy (Frankenthaler, 2004).

Religion

Most participants in our study reported that they currently do not affiliate with a religion. This result is similar to what Albrecht and Bahr (1983) found when they examined Mormon disaffiliates, and which they explained as a possible result of pre-disaffiliation beliefs regarding the inadequacy of other faiths. It is also possible that Orthodox Jewish disaffiliates are fatigued, or were traumatised by their religious experiences within Orthodox Judaism and are thus uninterested in pursuing another religion. Alternatively, Orthodox Jewish disaffiliates may have, through their process of disaffiliation, become skeptical about religion, evidenced by the large number of atheists and agnostics in the sample. Further, our finding that men in our sample endorsed more disbelief in God than women is consistent with prior research demonstrating that men are generally less religious than women (Baker & Whitehead, 2016).

Table 4. Regression results.

Predictor	Wellness			Perceived Stress			Loneliness			Overall Health		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β
Pull Score	−.09	.13	−.04	−.18	.64	−.02	−1.82	.98	−.12	.07	.07	.07
Push Score	−.38*	.13	−.24	.89	.62	.11	3.84**	.94	.31	−.18*	.07	−.23
Goals Somewhat Met	−.25	.20	−.07	1.94*	.96	.11	.50	1.47	.02	−.23*	.11	−.14
Goals Not Met	−.35	.30	−.07	8.03**	1.45	.32	8.37**	2.22	.22	−.36*	.17	−.15
Extraversion	.13*	.05	.15	−.17	.25	−.04	−2.42**	.38	−.36	.05	.03	.11
Emotional Stability	.36**	.06	.41	−1.92**	.29	−.43	−1.00*	.45	−.15	.08*	.03	.19
Agreeableness	.08	.07	.07	.29	.34	.05	−1.02	.53	−.12	−.02	.04	−.03
Conscientiousness	.02	.06	.02	−.64*	.30	−.12	−.46	.46	−.06	.05	.03	.10
Openness	.20*	.08	.14	−.21	.40	−.03	−.03	.62	−.00	−.01	.05	−.02
Modern Orthodox	−.29	.24	−.07	−.36	1.19	−.02	−1.07	1.82	−.03	−.12	.14	−.06
Sexual Assault	.03	.06	.03	.55	.30	.11	.59	.47	.08	.01	.04	.01
<i>R</i> ²		.40			.43			.41			.20	
<i>F</i>		11.70**			13.46**			12.42**			4.42**	

* $p < .05$. ** $p \leq .001$.

Note: "Goals Somewhat Met" and "Goals Not Met" are dummy variables, with "Goals Met" as the comparison variable.

Gender differences in pull and push

As mentioned earlier, given that men and women live qualitatively different lives within Orthodox Jewish communities, we expected that the process of leaving those communities would likely also be different for males and females. A plausible explanation for why women disaffiliates in our sample experienced more pull than men is because women in Haredi communities receive greater exposure to outside society both through education and through direct exposure. Haredi women generally are exposed in school to history and contemporary events education. In contrast, men, especially past the age of thirteen do not receive this kind of education. Additionally, in contrast to Haredi boys and men who seldom venture outside the confines of their communities, Haredi girls and women leave their enclaves to shop for clothing in department stores, and therefore are more exposed to elements of *pull*, such as secular dress, ideology, and behaviours forbidden to them. Men generally expressed a more positive view of quotidian life within their former communities. Given that women in Haredi communities are subject to more restrictions, less inclusion in ritual life, and often treated as secondary within a male-dominated society (Bilu, 2003; Finkelman, 2011), it is not surprising that they experienced greater *push* from their communities of origin.

Sexual assault. Thirty percent of female respondents and twenty five percent of male respondents in our study reported having been sexually assaulted within Orthodox Jewish communities. Our intention with regard to our use of the item “I experienced an unwanted sexual encounter within the Orthodox Jewish Community,” was primarily to capture the extent to which participants were exposed to unwanted sexual encounters when they were minors. In hindsight, however, we realise that the item was not specific enough. Estimations of the prevalence of child sexual abuse vary widely, and methodological issues within self-report measures drastically influence these estimations (Stoltenborgh et al., 2011). However, most studies find that females are sexually abused one and a half to three times the rate of males (Finkelhor, 1994; Pereda et al., 2009). In our study, although females reported higher rates of unwanted sexual encounters, the rates reported by both males and females are comparable.

Limitations

Because our sample was a convenience sample, the generalizability of our results is limited. Further, this study examines the characteristics of those who disaffiliated from Orthodox Jewish communities, without having a comparison sample of those who remain within these communities. Because of the formidable barriers to collecting data within insular Orthodox Jewish communities (Rier et al., 2008), particularly regarding mental well-being (Pirutinsky et al., 2009), we did not attempt to obtain a comparison sample. It is thus not possible to fully ascertain whether the wellness levels found within the disaffiliate sample are dissimilar from levels found within Orthodox Jewish communities. Further, a significant limitation of this study is that our findings rely on push–pull measures which have not previously been validated. Finally, this study was based on cross-sectional, retrospective self-report, which may not fully reflect the lived past experience of the individual. As such, we are unable to draw causal inferences. However, it has

repeatedly been demonstrated that retrospective reporting may be relied upon in diverse populations (Dohrenwend et al., 2006; Hardt & Rutter, 2004).

Further research is needed to ascertain the extent to which the wellness levels reported in this study may be attributed to the process of disaffiliation from Orthodox Judaism. It would be advantageous to compare the levels of wellness of those who have disaffiliated from Orthodox Judaism with the wellness levels of those within Orthodox Jewish communities. Additionally, further research is needed to ascertain whether the findings of this study can be generalised to those disaffiliating from other *covenantal* religious communities (e.g., Amish, LDS, Sikh, Orthodox Muslims). Such a comparison could be conducted by comparing the same variables involved in this study with samples obtained from other religious disaffiliates. Finally, future studies should seek to validate the push–pull measures with diverse samples of disaffiliates from covenantal religious communities.

Conclusion

Disaffiliation from Orthodox Judaism may be physically, psychologically, and socially difficult. To our knowledge this study is the first to describe as well as quantify disaffiliation by adults from Orthodox Jewish communities. These results provide insight to other persons who disaffiliate from covenantal communities. Our immigration-based methodology can be adapted to learn about disaffiliates from these communities in the United States and around the world.

Note

1. Not related to Christian discussions of Covenantal and Dispensational Theology.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendices

Appendix A

Pull Measure

Please make a selection according to your agreement/disagreement with each statement. Available choices: Strongly Disagree (1); Disagree (2); Neither Agree or Disagree (3); Agree (4); Strongly Agree (5)

1. When I was within the Orthodox Jewish Community it seemed that it would be an easier life to not live that way.
2. I wanted to have more contact with my secular family members when I was within the Orthodox Jewish Community.
3. I was drawn to leave the Orthodox Jewish Community so that I could work in a career unavailable or not allowed within the community.
4. I was drawn outside of the Orthodox Jewish Community so that I could lead my own life, instead of following what I was told to do.
5. I was drawn to leave the Orthodox Jewish Community so that I could date whomever I want.
6. I was drawn to leave the Orthodox Jewish Community so that I could be sexually active without any restrictions.
7. I wanted to leave the Orthodox Jewish Community so that I could get a secular education.
8. Some lifestyles outside of the Community seemed more moral to me while I was within the Orthodox Jewish Community.
9. I wanted to leave the Orthodox Jewish Community so that I could dress to my liking.
10. When I was within the Orthodox Jewish Community, I wanted to get involved in music and/or the arts.
11. I believed I could eventually make more money if I left the Orthodox Jewish Community.
12. While I was in the Orthodox Jewish Community there seemed to be more “authenticity” elsewhere outside of the community.
13. I wanted to leave the Orthodox Jewish Community so that I could eat any food that I desired.
14. I wanted to leave the Orthodox Jewish Community because I no longer wanted to accept how I was treated for my gender.
15. I wanted to leave the Orthodox Jewish Community so that I would not need to have many children.
16. I wanted to leave the Orthodox Jewish Community because I felt I could not express myself sexually in the way I wanted.

(Continued)

Continued.

Please make a selection according to your agreement/disagreement with each statement. Available choices: Strongly Disagree (1); Disagree (2); Neither Agree or Disagree (3); Agree (4); Strongly Agree (5)

17. I was turned off by the Orthodox Jewish Community because of its attitudes of being better than everyone else.
18. I was pushed to leave the Orthodox Jewish Community because I could not fit into the mold of learner or homemaker.
19. I wanted to leave the Orthodox Jewish Community because of the moral failings of some in its leadership.
20. I wanted to leave the Orthodox Jewish Community so that I would not have to get married.
21. I believed that being part of the Orthodox Jewish Community forbade my pursuit of self-fulfillment.
22. I wanted to leave the Orthodox Jewish Community because I was embarrassed by how strange we appeared to others.
23. I wanted to leave the Orthodox Jewish Community because of the way it views women.
24. I wanted to leave the Orthodox Jewish Community because of the way it views people with same-sex attractions.
25. I wanted to leave the Orthodox Jewish Community because of the way it views people of different ethnicities.
26. While growing up in the Orthodox Jewish Community I felt that I just did not "fit in".

Appendix B

Push Measure

Please make a selection according to your agreement/disagreement with each statement. Available choices: Strongly Disagree (1); Disagree (2); Neither Agree or Disagree (3); Agree (4); Strongly Agree (5)

1. I wanted to leave the Orthodox Jewish Community to hurt those who treated me wrongly.
2. I wanted to leave the Orthodox Jewish Community because of the lack of happiness in daily life.
3. I wanted to leave the Orthodox Jewish Community to get away from an abusive relationship.
4. I wanted to leave the Orthodox Jewish Community because I felt like people were trying to control my life.
5. I wanted to leave the Orthodox Jewish Community to get away from dysfunctional surroundings.
6. I thought that I needed to get away from the Orthodox Jewish Community to protect my physical or psychological safety.
7. I experienced physical harm while in the Orthodox Jewish Community.
8. I wanted to leave the Orthodox Jewish Community because I was shamed by others within the community.
9. My parents always cared about my well-being.**

** Item is reverse scored.

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