Emotion regulation strategies and future prospects among Jehovah´s Witnesses
A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF NORWEGIAN MEMBERS OF AN ENDTIME FOCUSED RELIGIOUS GROUP

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Dissertation submitted to MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society
For the Degree of Ph.D, to be defended 29 May 2020

Summary

In religious group settings and cultures there are emotional rules and ideals that members and adherents relate to. Members are offered group-based emotion regulation strategies to obtain the specific goals in the different settings. Goals varies according to culture, which is connected to the theological doctrine. The relevance of religion and spirituality to emotions within psychology of religion, has received more attention during the last years. However, there is a shortage of studies investigating the psychological implications of group-based emotions within religious settings. Especially studies investigating emotion regulation strategies and goals are limited.

To respond to this knowledge-gap the overarching aim of the current thesis was to gain more insight in the relation between dedicated memberships in an end-time oriented religious group, Jehovah’s Witnesses (JW’), and the emotion regulation strategies and goals as identified among active members in a Norwegian eschatological context. Furthermore, the current thesis also investigated the relevance of using religious groups, being meaning making and high-appraisal arenas, in psychological research on emotion regulation.

The data collection (July 2010, until in July 2012) started out with participant observation in a Norwegian congregation of Jehovah’s Witnesses, and included as well visits and interviews at the U.S. Headquarters of Jehovah’s Witnesses. The main material is interview data from 29 Norwegian active

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1 I use the abbreviation JW about the total religious group of Jehovah´s Witnesses. JWs is particular Jehovah´s Witnesses, such as the informants. Single Jehovah’s Witnesses is termed “a JW”.

and dedicated Jehovah’s Witnesses. The study design was abductive, combining an openness in the initial research process with theory-driven data-analysis.

The aim of **study 1** was to identify which group-based emotion regulation goals and strategies are offered in the group culture of Jehovah’s Witnesses. End-time expectations and the long-term goal of eternal life in Paradise, implied that future emotions were prioritized. The prospection of future is a strong regulator of the here and now, leading to define emotion forecasting as a form of cognitive reappraisal, used among the Witnesses. The group-based religiosity makes social sharing a dominating emotion regulation strategy besides cognitive reappraisal, supporting doctrine and future goals.

In study 2 the aim was to elaborate on the psychological implications of refusal of medical blood transfusions among Jehovah’s Witnesses. Strategies are used to reduce the cognitive dissonance and emotional struggles due to a doctrinal requirement of being willing to sacrifice life by religious standards which are combined with a denial of risk with the use of medical language.

The aim of study 3 was to explore the specific expectations that Jehovah’s Witnesses had of end times and paradise. Thematic analysis showed that informants expected life in paradise to be a continuation of physical life but with an overall positive emotional atmosphere, as different of today as negative emotions are expected in end-time. The strategy emotional forecasting is used on individual level, expecting and predicting which emotions would arise in the future. Emotional forecasting is an emotion regulation strategy that regulates nowadays emotions between current end times and future paradise.

Active members of Jehovah’s Witnesses uses emotion regulation strategies that are available based on active group-membership. The regulation-activity is connected to the overarching goal of surviving death and live forever on a paradise on earth. To reach this goal implies for the members to fulfill the group-standards and life-choices in a perceived end-time. It was found that for the individual JW this requires group-based emotion regulation strategies. The results of this dissertation is a contribution to research in psychology of religion, to emotion regulation theory, to JW research, and to research on religious sects, as well as to emotions in group-settings. The use of theory of emotion regulation is a promising new approach within psychology of religion, and has the potentially to be used to understand a diversity of phenomena. Results can be of relevance for psychologists and other professional helpers, to better understand clients that are JWs. Results on JW and the complex theme of denial of blood transfusion is of relevance for medical practitioners.
List of included publications

Paper 1:

Paper 2:

Paper 3:

The order of the papers is based on the order of writing, not on the year of publication. Paper 1 was submitted first, but published after paper 2.