

Distrust, fear and loneliness: Evaluating former Jehovah's Witnesses using LIWC

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INTRODUCTION

Jehovah's Witnesses (JW)

- Reported 8 million worldwide, in over 80 countries (Watchtower, 2021)
- Central doctrine states the destruction/death of all non-believers, will occur at any moment
- Individuals who leave JW are shunned, and shunning is reported to maintain the "purity" of current members, serves to control dissenting opinions and criticism (Watchtower, 2015)
- Current members are encouraged and instructed to avoid unnecessary contact with non-members, leading to ostracism (Watchtower, 2015)
- Shunning and ostracism have been shown to have negative effects on psychological functioning (Williams, 2009)
- Potential deficits in psychological health and trauma effects from shunning were examined with LIWC

Authenticity

- The level to which the sample is vulnerable, emotional and open (Pennebaker et al., 2015)
- Lower levels of authenticity in a sample is related to distrust, fear and a guarded presentation (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010)

Cognitive Processing

- Indicates active processing of an event, creation of a narrative (Pennebaker et al., 2015)
- Higher levels of cognitive processing word use has been correlated with better psychological function in the aftermath of trauma (Marshall & Venta, 2020)

Affect

- An index of emotion words used by the speaker (Pennebaker et al., 2015)
- Using more affect-related words can indicate higher levels of emotion processing and emotional intelligence (Tackman et al., 2018)

Personal Pronoun

- The amount of self-related pronouns such as I and me used in proportion to the transcript (Pennebaker et al., 2015)
- May be indicative of better psychological functioning after a stressful event, and view of the self as an independent actor with an internal locus of control. (Baddeley et al., 2011)

HYPOTHESES

Hypothesis 1: People who have left recently will have lower levels of personal pronoun use, emotional words, authenticity and cognitive processing words than those who left greater than 3 years ago.

Hypothesis 2: JW sample will have lower levels of pronoun use, emotional words, authenticity and cognitive processing words than a typical sample of emotionally expressive writing.

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METHOD

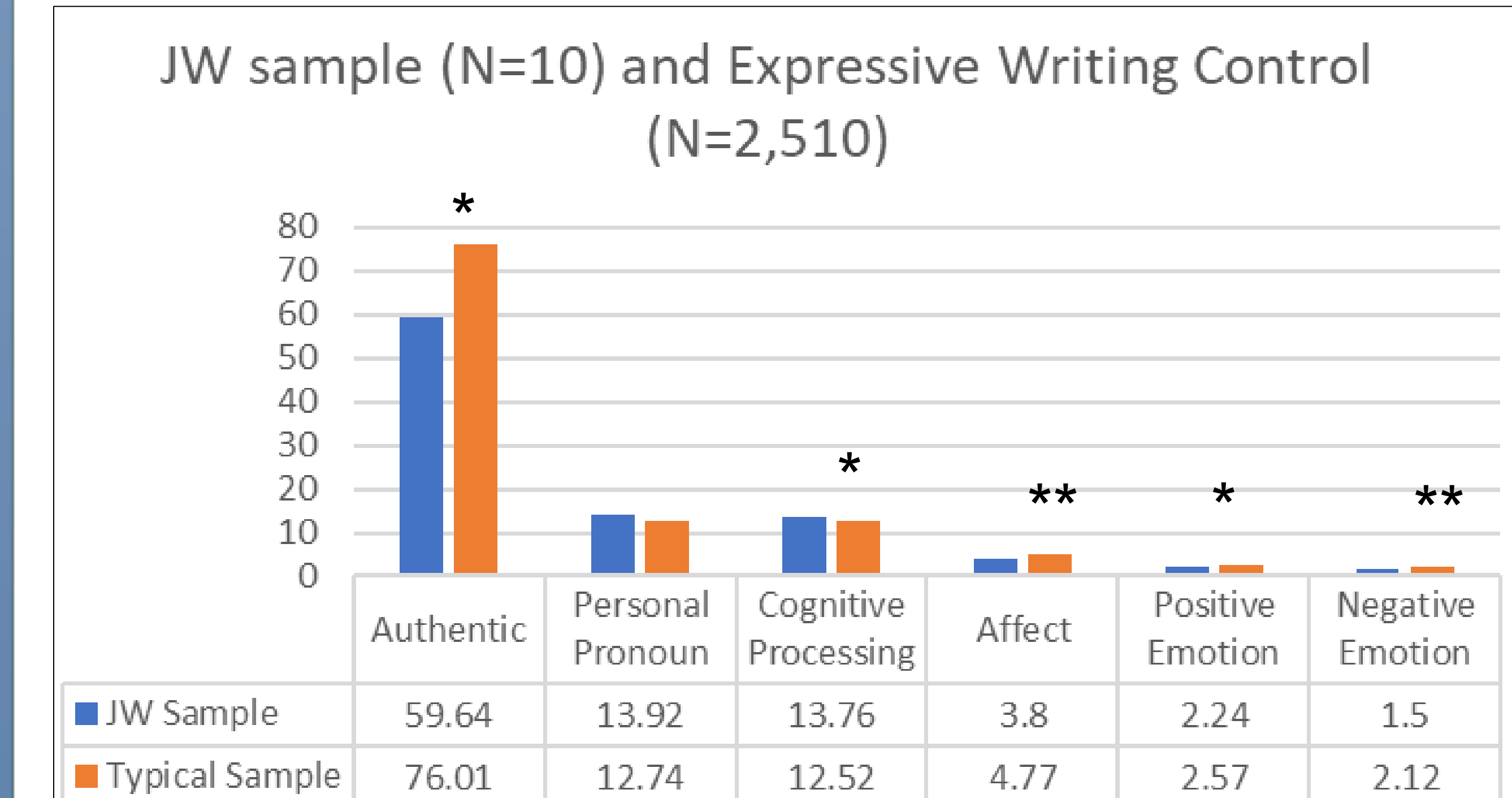
Participants: (N=10)

Age Range: 20 - 59
4 Female, 6 Male
6 White, 1 Native American, 2 Black/African American, 1 Hispanic/Latinx
9 from USA, 1 from United Kingdom

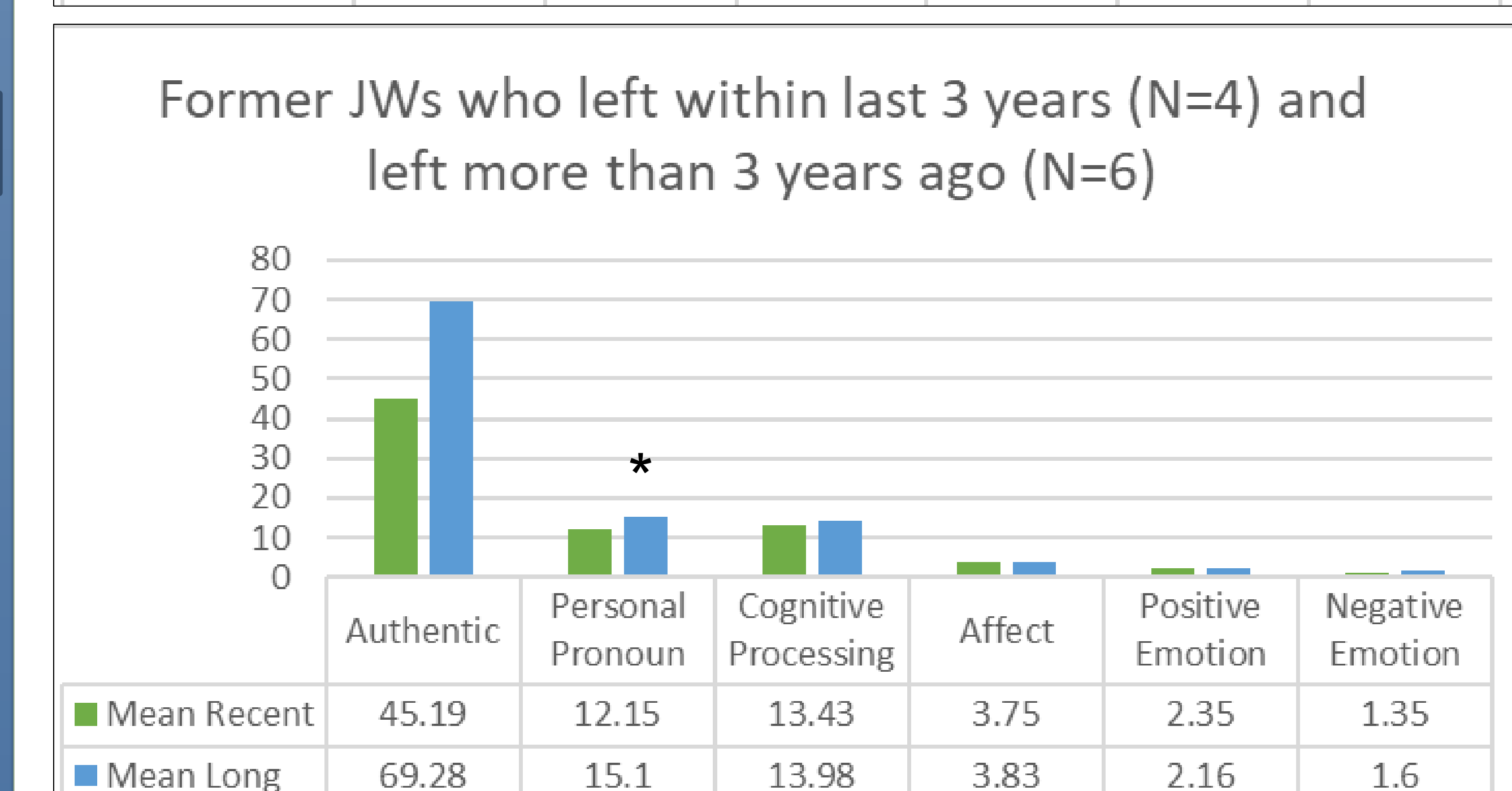
- Interviews conducted spring 2021 over WebEx
- Transcripts from interviews were analyzed using the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) (Pennebaker et al., 2015)
- LIWC variables used were: Authenticity (Auth), Personal Pronouns (Ppron), Cognitive Processing (CogProc), Affect, Positive emotions (PosEmo) and Negative Emotions (NegEmo)
- Independent t-tests used for statistical analysis
 - Between participants who had left less than 3 years prior to the interview and participants who had left greater than three years
 - Between sample of former JW members and typical control
 - Typical control was reported data from emotionally expressive writing (Pennebaker et al., 2015)

RESULTS

JW sample (N=10) and Expressive Writing Control (N=2,510)				Former JW's who left within last 3 years (N=4) and left more than 3 years ago (N=6)			
Aspect	t-value	p-value	Cohen's D	Aspect	t-value	p-value	Cohen's D
Authentic	-2.505	p=.034*	-0.792	Authentic	-2.133	p=.065	-1.377
Personal Pronoun	1.555	p=.154	0.492	Personal Pronoun	-2.325	p=.049*	-1.501
Cognitive Processing	2.503	p=.034*	0.791	Cognitive Processing	-0.527	p=.613	-0.34
Affect	-6.426	p<.001**	-2.032	Affect	-0.247	p=.811	-0.16
Positive Emotion	-3.037	p=.014*	-0.96	Positive Emotion	0.798	p=.448	0.515
Negative Emotion	-6.45	p<.001**	-2.04	Negative Emotion	-1.313	p=.225	-0.848



Key
* $p > .05$
** $p > .001$



Means for each group are listed below the graphs

DISCUSSION

Authenticity

- Former JW's use significantly less authentic language than a typical sample and recent exits may use less authentic language than those who left more than 3 years ago
- The large effect size and low p-value indicate that the sample was not large enough to reach significance, but an effect may exist given a larger sample size
- The lower levels of authenticity could impair former JW's ability or desire to access supportive services.
- Emphasis on distrust of outsiders and encouragement of binary thinking within JW may be continuously affecting former members relationship with the world around them

Cognitive Processing

- Former JW's use significantly more cognitive processing words than a typical sample
- This result is opposite of the predicted direction and could be result of intense personal processing of the loss of the belief system and support, as well as the cognitive work required to evaluate former beliefs and behaviors through introspection as reported in transcripts

Affect

- Former JW's use less affect-related words than the typical sample
- Beliefs around emotional and thought control may be impacting JW's internal emotional environment, and ability to identify emotions, even when directly asked about emotional experiences

Personal Pronoun

- Former JW's who left less than three years ago used fewer personal pronouns than those who left more than three years prior to the study
- Former JW's who are in the process of leaving or have left the religion within the last three years may be especially vulnerable and have a higher external locus of control.

Limitations

- Small, introductory sample may not have enough statistical power to reveal all linguistic effects
- Surveys of mental health or psychological functioning were not administered to this population, so any LIWC interpretations rely on previous connections between LIWC variables and psychological functioning

Future Research

- Explore pattern of mortality acceptance and foreshortened future in former JW's, and make comparisons with suicidal populations
- Replicate with larger sample, and with multinational sample
- Expand the generalizability through replication with other high control organizations: Latter Day Saints, Christadelphians, Scientology.

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