




Identifying well-being profiles and resilience characteristics in ex-members of fundamentalist Christian faith communities

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Abstract

There is a lack of empirical research on the heterogeneity in well-being of individuals who disaffiliated (i.e., left or were expelled) from an exclusionary and demanding faith community. Thus, little quantitative knowledge exists on factors related to resilience in these individuals. Therefore, the study aims were twofold: (1) to identify profiles of well-being in ex-members; and (2) to examine the characteristics of the identified profiles. A cross-sectional online survey assessed ex-members of various fundamentalist Christian faith communities. Latent profile analysis identified latent heterogeneity within the sample. Well-being profile indicators included perceived stress, psychopathological symptoms, affect, and satisfaction with life. Profile-related characteristics included socio-demographics (i.e., gender, age), membership (i.e., reason for joining, duration, extent of involvement, reasons for exit, social support during exit, and time since the exit), and resilience-supporting resources (i.e., social support, self-esteem, sense of coherence, personality, socio-economic status). In the final sample ($N = 622$, $Mage = 41.34$ years; 65.60% female), four distinct profiles were identified: *resilient* (25.70%), *normative* (36.40%), *vulnerable* (27.20%), and *adverse* (10.70%). The resilient profile was characterised by higher age, lower reporting of abuse or maltreatment as exit reason, and highest levels of resilience-supporting resources. Ex-members of fundamentalist Christian faith communities differ substantially in their well-being. Membership aspects were only weakly related to current well-being, with the exception of the exit reason of abuse or maltreatment. This study provided novel quantitative insights into the well-being profiles of individuals who disaffiliated from a fundamentalist Christian faith community in German-speaking countries.

KEYWORDS

ex-members, fundamentalist Christian faith community, latent profile analysis, profiles, resilience, well-being

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1 | INTRODUCTION

There is a large variability in how individuals respond to stressful experiences. Many individuals display 'normative' post-stress patterns, with fluctuations in well-being, minor health impairments, or transitional psychosocial maladjustment (Rutter, 2012). However, some individuals show 'vulnerable' post-stress patterns and poor well-being; and others show dynamic, 'resilient' processes of adaptation in the aftermath of stress or adversity (e.g., Chmitorz et al., 2018; Kalisch et al., 2017), with better health, well-being, and psychosocial adjustment compared to the majority of affected individuals (Masten, 2001). Given this variability, fostering a better understanding of the heterogeneity in well-being in response to major stress or adversity, as well as the identification of characteristics associated with resilience, are core tasks of contemporary stress and resilience research.

1.1 | Stress in ex-members of exclusionary and demanding faith communities

An often-neglected group in stress research is individuals who disaffiliated (i.e., who left or were expelled) from an exclusionary and demanding faith community, which can be a highly stressful life experience. Disaffiliation from such religious groups often has so-called 'exit costs' (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010, p. 325), in which exit from the group is linked to negative consequences for the individual. Such disaffiliation can not only cause major struggles with self-perception or a loss of social identity (Ransom, Monk, & Heim, 2021a; Testoni et al., 2019), but also severe stress due to acculturation to secular (i.e., mainstream) society (Engelman et al., 2020). The latter may be aggravated by a lack of knowledge or misinformation about secular society, as well as by a lack of higher education, which is often not encouraged by such religious groups (Illig & Kaufmann, 2020). In addition, leaving or being expelled from an exclusionary and demanding religious group is often associated with the (sudden) loss of a familiar environment and a supportive social community of relatives, friends, and/or partners; particularly in the case of (mandated) ostracism (Ransom et al., 2021b). Furthermore, disaffiliation may entail the loss of promised rewards or religious benefits, such as salvation (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010). Thus, disaffiliation from an exclusionary and demanding religious group has the potential to be an intensely negative and stressful experience.

1.2 | Heterogeneity in the well-being of ex-members and associated characteristics

Disaffiliation from exclusionary and demanding religious groups has been linked to various detrimental outcomes, including, but not limited to: destabilisation (Buxant & Saroglou, 2008), depressive symptomatology (Namini & Murken, 2009), guilt and anxiety (Hookway & Habibis, 2015), suicidal ideation and attempts (Illig &

Kaufmann, 2020), destructive coping strategies (Gutgsell, 2017), and poorer health (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016). In addition, lower self-esteem, feelings of loneliness, abandonment, or loss of belonging have also been observed in ex-members (Ransom et al., 2021b; Testoni et al., 2019). These latter outcomes in particular are often consequences of the (complete) loss of relationships linked to religious disaffiliation. For instance, given the exclusive nature of fundamentalist faiths, religious ostracism, such as the shunning of friends or family members, can result in the breakdown of significant family bonds. Considering the general importance of social bonds for health and well-being (e.g., Umberson & Karas Montez, 2010), these previously identified detrimental outcomes on health and well-being in ex-members are not unexpected.

Furthermore, recent studies have identified some determinants of interindividual differences in the well-being of ex-members, including: *gender* (Engelman et al., 2020), *social support* (Ransom, Monk, & Heim, 2021a), *experiences of assault* (Engelman et al., 2020), *mode of joining the religious group*, that is, having been socialised (born) within the community or having converted to the faith (Illig & Kaufmann, 2020), and *level of commitment/devotion* towards the faith (community; Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016). Determinants also included factors related to *exiting the faith community*, such as exit type, that is, voluntary or forced disassociation (Ransom et al., 2021b). Thus, previous studies have shown that various socio-demographic factors and membership-related aspects are linked to heterogeneous well-being outcomes in ex-members.

1.3 | Shortcomings of existing studies with ex-members

Despite these important contributions, the existing literature has several shortcomings that should be addressed in order to advance this particular field of research. First, the majority of existing research with ex-members is qualitative in nature (e.g., Buxant & Saroglou, 2008). While qualitative studies are essential for in-depth insights into an individual's lived experiences; they are limited regarding generalisability, as the data are not statistically representative (Miles et al., 2019). The comparatively few existing quantitative studies are often limited in their analytical strategies due to small sample sizes (e.g., Namini & Murken, 2009). A valuable exception is the recent study by Ransom et al. (2021b), which examined $N = 554$ former Jehovah's Witnesses. Second, previous studies have identified detrimental outcomes in ex-members, as well as various determinants of interindividual differences. However, it is not yet known whether distinct differential well-being profiles exist in ex-members, such as normative (i.e., values closest to the mean of the whole sample), negative (i.e., vulnerable), and particularly positive (i.e., resilient) profiles; and if so, what factors characterise these distinct profiles. Third, given the predominance of studies with ex-members in English-speaking countries (e.g., Ransom et al., 2021b), it is unclear whether the findings can also be extended to German-speaking countries.

1.4 | Aims of the current study

To address these gaps in the literature, this study has two aims: (1) to identify well-being profiles in German-speaking ex-members of exclusionary and demanding religious groups; and (2) to examine the characteristics of the identified profiles. This study focuses on (self-identified) ex-members of various fundamentalist Christian faith communities (e.g., Jehovah's Witnesses, the New Apostolic Church). Although some aspects of these faith communities differ (e.g., particular doctrine, moral codes for their members), they share many common features, including: their exclusionary characteristic (i.e., the restrictive nature cutting off member's external engagement), the scriptural inerrancy, the basic beliefs (i.e., apocalyptic prophecies, salvation narrative), the dichotomous pattern of thinking (i.e., good vs. evil), the information source (i.e., the Bible), the relatively small number of members in comparison to historically more established Christian faith communities (for an example in Switzerland see: Federal Statistical Office, 2021), and the (high levels of) distrust towards the secular society (Routledge et al., 2018). It is hypothesised that distinct differential profiles can be identified in this sample of ex-members that indicate normative, vulnerable, and resilient well-being. As individuals affected by adversity can simultaneously show differential levels of (mal-)adaptation in different well-being indicators (e.g., Hölzge et al., 2020), this study assessed a broad set of well-being outcomes to identify the latent profiles. It is further hypothesised that the identified well-being profiles will be differentially characterised by various socio-demographic factors (e.g., gender) and membership-related aspects (e.g., reason for joining or leaving). Furthermore, given the lack of resilience research in ex-members of exclusionary and demanding religious groups, this study also specifically examines factors, such as self-esteem, that have repeatedly been linked to resilient outcomes in other high-risk samples (e.g., Thoma et al., 2020). The identification of (potentially modifiable) factors linked to resilience may be helpful in assisting ex-members in their (re-) integration into the mainstream society, as well as in the therapeutic support of ex-members showing vulnerability that are seeking professional help.

2 | METHODS

2.1 | Study design

Data were collected within the international multi-study research project 'Psychological strain and resilience after leaving or exclusion by a fundamentalist Christian faith community', consisting of a qualitative and quantitative study. The current study applied a cross-sectional design and collected quantitative data using an anonymous web-based survey, accessible between February and June 2021 to individuals in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland. The study was conducted by the University of Zürich (UZH), in collaboration with the University of Vienna. The study protocol was approved by the Ethics Committees of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences in UZH

(ID: 20.12.18), the University of Vienna (ID: 00662), and the German Psychological Society [Deutsche Gesellschaft für Psychologie, DGPs] (ID: 2021-01-08VA). All participants provided informed consent before taking part in the study.

2.2 | Participants and recruitment

Inclusion criteria were (self-identified) former membership in a fundamentalist Christian faith community from which the individuals voluntarily left or were expelled, a minimum age of 18 years, German as the native language (i.e., fluent German-speaking), and residency in either Austria, Germany, or Switzerland. Participants were recruited in collaboration with specialised (psycho-)therapists, several publicly active ex-members of a fundamentalist Christian faith community, as well as organisations dedicated to informing, educating, and supporting (relatives, friends, and families of) ex-members. Study information was shared directly with individual contacts and via various social media channels within the respective communities. Participants were also recruited via snowball sampling.

2.3 | Procedure

The web-based survey was programmed online using Unipark (Unipark & QuestBack, 2016). Participants who met the inclusion criteria provided informed consent and then completed the survey. Questionnaires were presented in a randomised order. Participants could withdraw at any time by closing the survey window. A list of support options could be downloaded at several points throughout the survey in case participants dropped out of the study. Participants did not receive an incentive or financial compensation, but could provide an e-mail address in case of interest in the study results. All data were collected and stored anonymously.

2.4 | Measures

Table S1 for the correlations of the following variables. The German versions of the measures were used in the current study.

2.4.1 | Latent profile indicators

The *Perceived Stress Scale* (PSS; Cohen et al., 1983) assessed how stressful life events are perceived as in the last month. Composed of 10 items rated on a five-point Likert scale (0 = 'never' to 4 = 'very often'), scores range from 0 to 40, with higher scores indicating higher perceived stress. The German version has been validated in a representative German sample (Klein et al., 2016). Reliability in the present study was $\omega = 0.90$.

The *Brief Symptom Inventory* (BSI; Franke, 2000) assessed a range of psychological and psychosomatic symptoms via 53 items rated on

a five-point Likert scale (0 = "not at all" to 4 = 'extremely'). The Global Severity Index indicated overall symptom severity (Derogatis & Melisaratos, 1983). Scores range from 0 to 212, with higher scores indicating more psychological and psychosomatic symptoms. The German BSI has been validated in a clinical sample (Geisheim et al., 2002). Reliability in the present study was $\omega = 0.97$.

The *Positive and Negative Affect Schedule* (PANAS; Krohne et al., 1996) assessed positive and negative affect via 20 items on two subscales, rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = 'not at all' to 5 = 'extremely'). Scores range from 10 to 50 for each subscale, with higher scores indicating higher levels of positive/negative affect. The German version has been validated in a German sample (Krohne et al., 1996). Reliability in the present study was $\omega = 0.89$ for negative affect, and $\omega = 0.90$ for positive affect.

The *Satisfaction with Life Scale* (SWLS; Schumacher, 2003) assessed well-being relative to satisfaction with and quality of life, via five items rated on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = 'strongly disagree' to 7 = 'strongly agree'). Scores range from 5 to 35, with higher scores indicating more satisfaction with life. The German SWLS has been validated in a representative German sample (Glaesmer et al., 2011). Reliability in the present study was $\omega = 0.88$.

2.4.2 | Latent profile characteristics: Socio-demographics and membership-related aspects

The socio-demographics of age and gender (female, male) were assessed. To assess membership-related aspects, a questionnaire was developed on the basis of: a literature review, preliminary interview analyses from the associated qualitative study, preliminary unpublished data of a pilot study conducted by Zeugen Jehovas Help (Augsburg, Germany), and the input of experts from sectarian organisations (Questionnaire). The following variables from the questionnaire were used in the current study: *reason for joining* (born into community: no vs. yes), *membership duration* (in years), *extent of involvement* (1 = 'not at all' to 5 = 'very much'), *reasons for exit* (involuntarily by being expelled or the community disbanded vs. personal reasons; experiences of physical, psychological, and/or sexual abuse or maltreatment: no vs. yes), *social support during exit* (exit alone vs. with somebody else), and *time since exit* (in years).

2.4.3 | Latent profile characteristics: Resilience-supporting resources

The German short-form *Social Support Questionnaire* (F-SozU K-14; Fydrich et al., 2009) assessed perceived or anticipated social support via 14 items rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = 'strongly disagree' to 5 = 'strongly agree'). Scores range from 14 to 70, with higher scores indicating higher levels of perceived or anticipated social support, as well as higher levels of social integration. Fydrich et al. (2009) validated the F-SozU K-14 in a representative German sample. Reliability in the present study was $\omega = 0.95$.

The *Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale* (RSES; Collani & Herzberg, 2003) assessed self-esteem via 10 items rated on a four-point Likert scale (0 = 'strongly disagree' to 3 = 'strongly agree'). Scores range from 0 to 30, with higher scores indicating higher self-esteem. Validated in a German sample by Collani and Herzberg (2003), the present study reliability was $\omega = 0.93$.

The *Sense of Coherence Revised Scale* (SOC-R; Bachem & Maercker, 2018) assessed sense of coherence (i.e., resilience-related aspects) via its three dimensions (manageability, balance, and reflection). Consisting of 13 items rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = 'not at all true' to 5 = 'extremely true'), the total score ranges from 13 to 65, with higher scores indicating higher manageability, balance, and reflection skills. The SOC-R has been validated in a representative German sample (Thoma et al., 2018). Reliabilities in the present study were $\omega = 0.78$ for manageability, $\omega = 0.53$ for balance, $\omega = 0.77$ for reflection, and $\omega = 0.78$ for the total scale.

The *Big Five Inventory* (BFI-10; Rammstedt & John, 2007) assessed the personality characteristics 'extraversion', 'agreeableness', 'conscientiousness', 'neuroticism', and 'openness' via 10 items (two items each) rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = 'disagree strongly' to 5 = 'agree strongly'). Scores for each dimension range from 2 to 10, with higher scores indicating a higher expression of the personality trait. The German BFI-10 has been validated in multiple student samples (Rammstedt & John, 2007). Reliabilities in the present study were $r = 0.81$ for extraversion, $r = 0.17$ for agreeableness, $r = 0.47$ for conscientiousness, $r = 0.69$ for neuroticism, and $r = 0.57$ for openness.

Subjective socio-economic status (SES) was assessed with the German version of the *MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status* (Adler et al., 2000; Hoebel et al., 2015). Using a visual analogue scale, a ten-rung ladder represents the society of the respective country. By placing an X on the ladder, participants indicate their subjective SES relative to others in their country. Scores range from 1 to 10, with higher scores indicating higher perceived SES.

2.5 | Data analysis

Descriptive analyses were conducted using International Business Machines Corporation Statistical Package for the Social Sciences v.27.0.1.0 and R v.4.0.2. Participants who did not meet the inclusion criteria or who had missing values for entire questionnaires were excluded. Less than 2% of participants had between one and three missing values. Two-sided *t*-tests using model indicators suggested that these values were missing at random. Regression imputation was performed using items of the same dimensions on the respective questionnaires as independent variables.

2.5.1 | Latent profile analysis: Identifying unobserved well-being subgroups

Unobserved heterogeneity in the well-being of ex-members was analysed using latent profile analysis (LPA) in *Mplus* version 8.0 (Muthén &

Muthén, 2017). LPA assigns individuals with similar patterns in selected metric variables into one group so that the resulting groups show a lower within-than between-group variance (Geiser, 2013). LPA has two results: (1) qualitatively distinct sub-groups with a group-specific profile in the latent profile indicators; and (2) the probabilities that an individual belongs to each of the identified sub-groups. The analysis was conducted using the raw sum-scores of the five latent profile indicators (i.e., perceived stress, symptoms, positive affect, negative affect, satisfaction with life), and 500 random starts, 50 final stage optimisations, 50 iterations, 500 bootstraps, and Maximum likelihood estimator estimation (Geiser, 2013).

The following statistical indicators were used to identify the correct number of latent profiles (i.e., the best fitting model, Geiser, 2013; Nylund et al., 2007): For the bootstrap log-likelihood ratio difference test (BLRT) and the Vuong-Lo-Mendell-Rubin adjusted likelihood ratio test (VLMR), a significant result indicated better fit of the current model compared to a model with one less profile. For the Akaike Information Criterion, Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC), and sample-size adjusted Bayesian Information Criterion, lower values indicated better model fit. The BIC was focussed on to select the best fitting model, as recommend by Nylund et al. (2007).

For profile comparisons and interpretation purposes, the raw sum-scores of the profile indicators were standardised. This further served to operationalise resilience (and thereby also vulnerability) as an outcome (Kalisch et al., 2017): The level of resilience and vulnerability is relative to the normative response of individuals who have experienced the same stress or adversity. Therefore, standardisation of the indicators reveals the level to which an individual differs from the norm (i.e., level of (mal-)adaptation). The negative latent profile indicators (i.e., perceived stress, psychopathological symptoms, negative affect) were reverse scored so that higher scores indicated a better status (i.e., less stress, symptoms, and negative affect), in line with the positive latent profile indicators (i.e., satisfaction with life, positive affect). Thus, the standardisation resulted in the positive values indicating the level of resilience and the negative values indicating the level of vulnerability.

2.5.2 | Identifying characteristics of heterogenous well-being profiles

To identify similarities and differences between the latent profiles in relation to socio-demographic variables (gender, age) and membership-related aspects, the R3STEP procedure was applied as most variables were nominal or categorical (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2014). This method uses multinomial logistic regressions and accounts for classification error (Vermunt, 2010). To identify significant differences between the latent profiles in relation to the resilience-supporting resources that have a metric scale, the automatic Bolck, Croon, and Hageaars (BCH) approach was used, which applies multivariate Wald χ^2 -tests (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2014; Bakk & Vermunt, 2016). The BCH approach is superior to other methods for analysing metric variables as it uses robust standard

errors and accounts for the classification error of profile membership via weighted group analysis (Bakk & Vermunt, 2016).

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Sample characteristics

The final sample consisted of $N = 622$ participants, of which $n = 408$ (65.60%) were female, $n = 210$ (33.80%) were male, and $n = 4$ (0.60%) indicated 'other' as their sex. On average, the sample was 41.34 years old ($SD = 12.50$, range = 19–83 years), 65.10% were in a relationship (of which 37% were married), and 74.5% were currently employed.

Most participants were former members of Jehovah's Witnesses (68.00%), followed by free churches (8.50%), Pentecostal churches (2.60%), and others (20.90%), such as Seventh-day Adventist Church, New Apostolic Church, Baptist Church, or Chrischona Church. The majority of the sample (65.10%) was born into the community, with the remaining participants joining for various reasons (e.g., personal reasons, such as looking for a place of belonging). During their membership, 70.10% avoided contact with non-members, including friends and family. On average, participants left the faith community after 22.80 years ($SD = 11.16$, range = 0–60 years). Most participants left voluntarily by officially exiting (48.10%), followed by 33.00% who stopped attending without officially exiting, 16.40% were expelled, 0.30% because the community disbanded, and 2.30% due to other reasons. More than half the sample (51%) left the community at the same time as someone they were close to. More than half the sample (51.4%) reported feeling very well or more or less supported and emotionally cared for when they exited the faith community. For most participants, mental (63.20%) and physical health (44.20%) improved after the exit. For others, their mental (6.80%) and physical health (34.70%) stayed the same, or deteriorated (mental health: 30.00%; physical health: 21.10%). At the time of the study, the amount of time elapsed since exiting their respective communities ranged between less than 1 year and up to 63 years (mean = 12.07 years, $SD = 10.41$ years).

3.2 | Profiles of post-exit well-being

3.2.1 | Model fit

All model fit indices showed a decline with an increasing number of profiles, with up to seven profiles tested (Table S2). The amount of decline got smaller with each additional profile, which almost flattened after four profiles (Figure S1 for the trajectory of the BIC). Furthermore, while the BLRT stayed significant for each model tested, the VLMR test became non-significant at five profiles, indicating that the model with five profiles was not significantly better than the model with four profiles. Hence, the model with four profiles was selected.

3.2.2 | Identified profiles

All four profiles were distinct from each other and did not show any overlap (Figure 1). The profiles showed a categorical order, with the first profile having the best values and the last profile having the worst values in all indicators. Based on the operationalisation of resilience/vulnerability in the current study as a positive/negative deviation from the norm; the four profiles were labelled 'normative' ($n = 233$, 36.40%), 'resilient' ($n = 153$, 25.70%), 'vulnerable' ($n = 170$, 27.20%), and 'adverse' ($n = 66$, 10.70%). The normative profile, showed values closest to the mean of the entire sample, with a rather positive status in each indicator. The resilient profile showed the lowest perceived stress, negative affect, and symptoms, as well as the highest life satisfaction and positive affect. The vulnerable profile showed overall similarly negative values in all indicators. The adverse profile showed the worst status in all indicators and a peak in symptoms of psychopathology.

3.3 | Characteristics of heterogeneous well-being profiles

3.3.1 | Socio-demographics and membership-related aspects

Six participants were excluded from the following analyses due to missing values regarding gender or age. The four profiles did not significantly differ with respect to: reason for joining (i.e., being born into the community or not), membership duration, extent of involvement, reason for exit (i.e., involuntary), social support during exit, and time since the exit (Table S3). Three characteristics showed significant patterns: gender, age, and experience of abuse or maltreatment.

The gender distribution was about equal in the resilience profile, with a larger percentage of females in the other profiles (Figure 2a). The normative, vulnerable, and adverse profiles did not significantly differ with regard to the gender distribution (normative-vulnerable: $OR = -0.45$, $p = 0.09$; normative-adverse: $OR = -0.66$, $p = 0.10$; vulnerable-adverse: $OR = -0.20$, $p = 0.67$); but all three significantly differed from the resilient profile (resilient-normative: $OR = -0.58$, $p = 0.02$; resilient-vulnerable: $OR = -1.03$, $p < 0.01$; resilient-adverse: $OR = -1.24$, $p < 0.01$). Regarding age, only the resilient and vulnerable profiles differed significantly ($\bar{x}_{age\ resilient} = 44.44$, $\bar{x}_{age\ vulnerable} = 38.93$, $OR = -0.04$, $p < 0.01$; $\bar{x}_{age\ normative} = 41.39$, $\bar{x}_{age\ adverse} = 40.14$).

Some ex-members in each profile reported experiences of abuse or maltreatment (resilient: $n = 25$, 16.30%; normative: $n = 52$, 22.30%; vulnerable: $n = 56$, 32.90%; adverse: $n = 34$, 51.50%, Figure 2b). While the resilient and normative profiles did not significantly differ ($OR = 0.22$, $p = 0.55$), the vulnerable profile had a significantly higher ratio of participants who experienced abuse or maltreatment compared to the resilient ($OR = 0.83$, $p = 0.01$) and normative ($OR = 0.62$, $p = 0.03$) profiles, but significantly less than the adverse profile ($OR = -0.92$, $p = 0.02$). Hence, participants in the adverse profile were significantly more likely to have experienced abuse or maltreatment than in any other profile (resilient-adverse: $OR = 1.76$, $p < 0.01$; normative-adverse: $OR = 1.54$, $p < 0.01$).

3.3.2 | Resilience-supporting resources

In comparison to all other profiles, the resilient profile showed significantly higher values in most resilience-supporting resources (Table S4). No significant differences were observed between any of the profiles with regard to the personality trait of openness or SOC-R balance. All profiles were significantly different from each

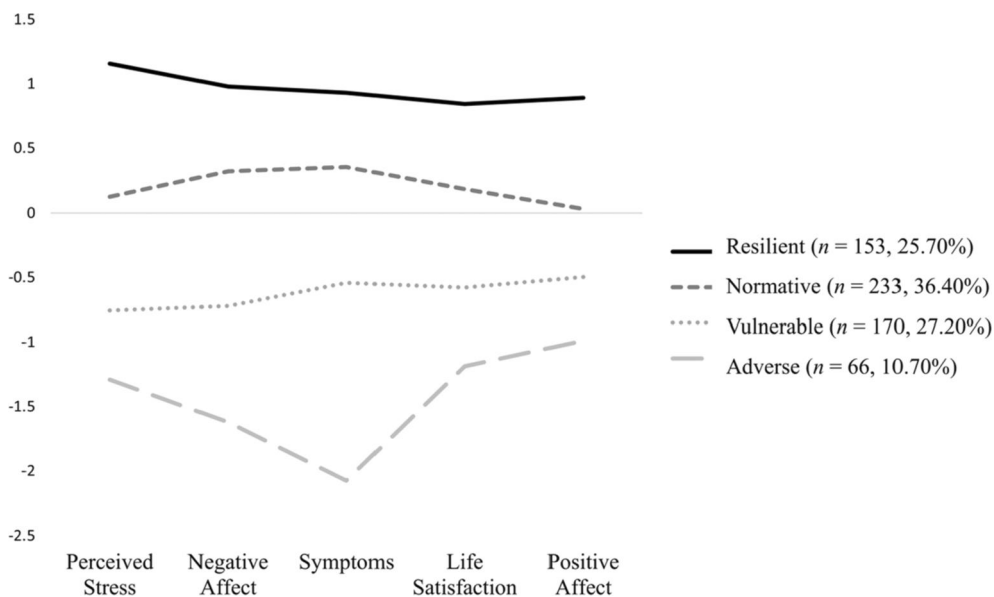
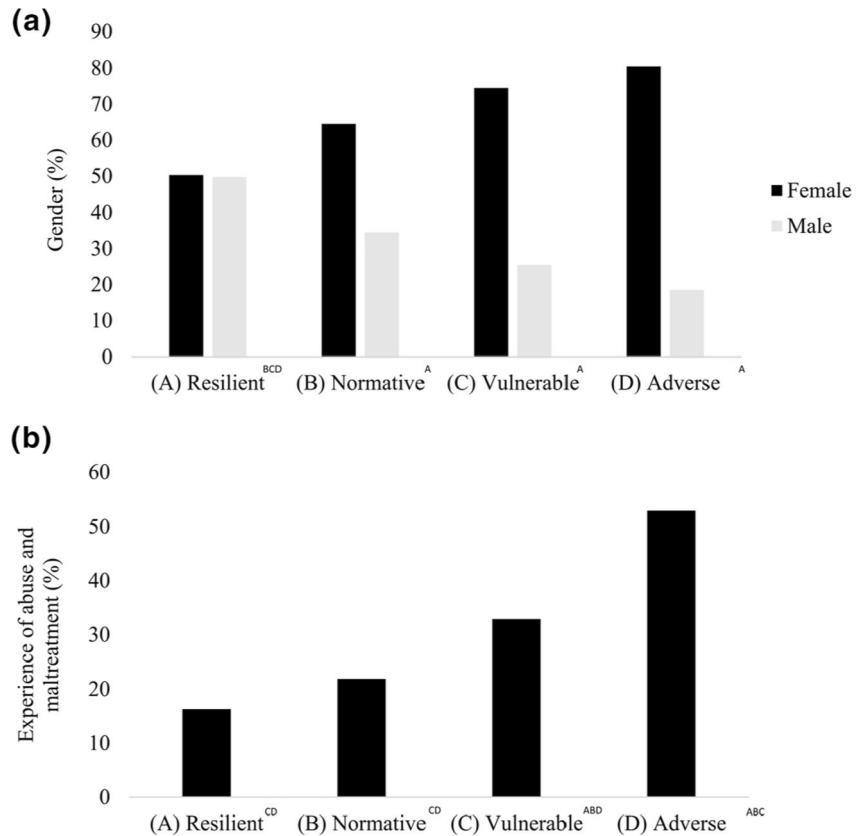


FIGURE 1 Identified latent profiles. Positive/negative values on the y-axis indicate a better/worse status of the respective indicator

FIGURE 2 Significant differences between the identified profiles for (a) gender and (b) experience of abuse and maltreatment. Superscripts (A, B, C, D) indicate which profiles differ significantly at $p < 0.05$



other with regard to neuroticism, SOC-R manageability, SOC-R total, self-esteem, and social support: The resilient profile showed the lowest level of neuroticism ($\bar{x}_{\text{resilient}} = 2.37$, $\bar{x}_{\text{normative}} = 3.46$, $\bar{x}_{\text{vulnerable}} = 4.00$, $\bar{x}_{\text{adverse}} = 4.43$, $\chi^2 = 379.66$, $p < 0.01$) and highest levels of SOC-R manageability ($\bar{x}_{\text{resilient}} = 19.92$, $\bar{x}_{\text{normative}} = 17.66$, $\bar{x}_{\text{vulnerable}} = 15.27$, $\bar{x}_{\text{adverse}} = 12.89$, $\chi^2 = 299.95$, $p < 0.01$), SOC-R total ($\bar{x}_{\text{resilient}} = 51.85$, $\bar{x}_{\text{normative}} = 48.70$, $\bar{x}_{\text{vulnerable}} = 46.23$, $\bar{x}_{\text{adverse}} = 43.49$, $\chi^2 = 90.90$, $p < 0.01$), self-esteem ($\bar{x}_{\text{resilient}} = 25.72$, $\bar{x}_{\text{normative}} = 19.92$, $\bar{x}_{\text{vulnerable}} = 14.69$, $\bar{x}_{\text{adverse}} = 9.31$, $\chi^2 = 740.23$, $p < 0.01$), and social support ($\bar{x}_{\text{resilient}} = 4.24$, $\bar{x}_{\text{normative}} = 3.74$, $\bar{x}_{\text{vulnerable}} = 3.38$, $\bar{x}_{\text{adverse}} = 2.92$, $\chi^2 = 135.44$, $p < 0.01$); followed by the normative, vulnerable, and adverse profiles. No significant differences were observed between the normative and vulnerable profiles with regard to extraversion, agreeableness, or subjective SES. No significant differences were observed between the normative, vulnerable, and adverse profiles with regard to conscientiousness or SOC-R reflection.

4 | DISCUSSION

Using LPA, this study identified heterogeneous well-being profiles in 622 German-speaking individuals who disaffiliated (i.e., left or were expelled) from a fundamentalist Christian faith community. It further identified factors that characterised the identified profiles, including socio-demographic factors, membership-related aspects, and resilience-supporting resources. Four distinct well-being profiles

were identified: resilient, normative, vulnerable, and adverse. The resilient profile was characterised by higher age, lower reporting of abuse or maltreatment as the exit reason, and highest levels of resilience-supporting resources. In contrast, the adverse profile was characterised by the highest levels of abuse or maltreatment and the lowest levels in most resilience-supporting resources.

4.1 | Well-being profiles of ex-members

First, regarding general health, approximately two-thirds of the sample retrospectively reported improved mental health and almost half reported improved physical health after the disaffiliation. In comparison, approximately one-third retrospectively reported deteriorated mental health and one-fifth reported deteriorated physical health after the disaffiliation. These numbers contrast somewhat with those reported in a study by Felton and Danielsen (2016), which found considerably poorer self-reported health in individuals who had disaffiliated from religious traditions or groups, compared to those who were still affiliated or never affiliated. However, that study examined Catholic and Protestant denominations, as well as some of the fundamentalist faith communities assessed in the present study (e.g., Jehovah Witnesses), which may account for the differences in the findings. Nevertheless, the (positive and negative) change in post-exit health reported in the present study indicates that disaffiliation from such religious groups is a significant life event that can impact the well-being of ex-members.

Regarding the four distinct well-being profiles identified (resilient, normative, vulnerable, adverse); that ex-members differ substantially in their well-being is in line with contemporary stress and resilience research that shows a wide variability in how individuals respond to major stress and adversity (e.g., Rutter, 2012). In the current study, the normative profile was the largest, followed by the resilient and vulnerable profiles (both of equal size), and the adverse profile (the smallest). That a normative response (i.e., values closest to the mean of the whole sample, with a rather positive status) was the largest, followed by a resilient response (i.e., lowest negative values and highest positive values) is not completely unexpected. It is in line with emerging perspectives in resilience research that a return to normative and adaptive functioning after stress or adversity is a common phenomenon, arising from adaptational processes (Masten, 2001). This further emphasises the importance of gaining a better understanding of the resources that facilitate these adaptational processes.

4.2 | Characteristics of well-being profiles: Socio-demographics

Regarding gender, while there was no meaningful gender difference in the resilient profile, the other profiles showed a clear predominance of females; while this could indicate that females who are disaffiliated are more likely to show normative or adverse responses, this finding should not be overinterpreted as results may be influenced by the higher proportion (two-thirds) of females in the current sample. Although this parallels the gender distribution (62%) of a recent quantitative study with former Jehovah's Witnesses (Ransom et al., 2021b), further quantitative research is needed to replicate this in a more gender-balanced sample.

Regarding age, the resilient profile was characterised by higher age. One explanation may be found in the general research on resilience in later adulthood, which suggests that in higher age, greater emphasis may be placed on psychosocial aspects (rather than physical health) for resilience (MacLeod et al., 2016). This notion is supported by the current study, which showed that during their membership in the faith community, over 70% of participants avoided contact with non-members, including friends and family. This hints at the social exclusion and isolation members of such communities may experience. After their exit, participants may have had the opportunity for social (re-)integration and improved psychosocial well-being, particularly important for resilience in those of higher age. However, given the limited quantitative research with this population, future studies are needed to examine age-related differences in well-being following disaffiliation.

4.3 | Characteristics of well-being profiles: Membership-related aspects

Several membership-related aspects were not relevant characteristics for the identified profiles, including reason for joining,

membership duration, extent of involvement, voluntary versus involuntary exit, time since exit, or social support experienced during exit. This contrasts with existing studies that found that the mode of joining the religious group (Illig & Kaufmann, 2020), the level of commitment/devotion towards the faith (community; Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016), the mode of exit (Ransom, Monk, & Heim, 2021a), and social support (Ransom et al., 2021b) were relevant factors for understanding the heterogeneous outcomes in ex-members. However, it may be that the different methodological approaches (e.g., qualitative vs. quantitative research designs, type of faith community assessed) could account for these differences. The lack of a significant result for social support during exit was particularly surprising, given the repeated finding on the relevance of social support in overcoming traumatic experiences (e.g., Maercker et al., 2017). However, current perceived social support (assessed with a standardized measure by Fydrich et al., 2009) was shown to be a significant resilience-supporting resource in the present study. In contrast, social support during exit was retrospectively assessed using only a single item. This may not be an optimal methodological approach to capture the complexity of social support during the process of disaffiliation. This highlights a key area for detailed quantitative investigation into ex-members' social support during the exit process.

Regarding experienced abuse or maltreatment as the reason for ending contact with the faith community, this differed between the identified profiles in the current study. The highest likelihood for reporting abuse or maltreatment as the exit reason was found in the adverse profile, followed by the vulnerable, normative, and resilient profiles. This order supports the dose-response relationship between the detrimental impact of abuse and maltreatment and health and well-being outcomes (e.g., Harkness et al., 2015). However, this finding must also be considered in relation to the sample sizes of the profiles: If the frequencies are considered (and not just the percentages), more participants reported abuse or maltreatment in the normative (i.e., 52 from 233) and vulnerable (i.e., 56 from 170) profiles, compared to the adverse profile (i.e., 34 from 66). It could therefore be speculated that despite the higher risk of abuse and maltreatment experiences in the normative and vulnerable profiles, the concurrent higher levels of resilience-supporting resources may exert a (counteracting) protective influence. This emphasises the need for research on well-being and resilience in ex-members of Christian faith communities.

4.4 | Characteristics of well-being profiles: Resilience-supporting resources

The resilience profile was characterised by the highest levels of most resilience-supporting resources, indicating that resilient individuals who disaffiliated from an exclusionary and demanding faith community may possess a greater selection and level of resources to draw from in times of need. More specifically, the resilience profile was characterised by the highest levels of most personality factors

(extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness), perceived or anticipated social support, self-esteem, SOC-R manageability and reflection, as well as subjective SES. These findings are in line with previous studies on resilience in other high-risk individuals (e.g., Thoma, Bernays, Eising, Maercker et al., 2021), and further corroborate the notion that these factors are relevant resilience-supporting resources. Given that fact that most of these factors are potentially modifiable and are often, at least to some degree, under the control of the individual, these factors may be potential targets for interventions. In addition, the resilience profile was characterised by the lowest level of neuroticism, which also differed significantly between all profiles. That the highest levels of neuroticism were found in the adverse and vulnerable profiles is in line with previous research that shows a commonly reported link between neuroticism and mental ill-health (Weinstock & Whisman, 2006). However, that the personality trait openness was not relevant in characterising the profiles was an unexpected finding. For instance, a previous meta-analytic review found that openness was negatively correlated to religious fundamentalism (Saroglou, 2002), which (contrary to the present study findings) may suggest that individuals who have disaffiliated from a fundamentalist Christian faith community would show higher levels of openness. However, a recent meta-analysis of studies predicting psychological and subjective well-being from personality traits found that openness was the weakest predictor of a variety of well-being indicators, with mainly modest associations (Anglim et al., 2020). It may be that openness is less important for well-being and resilience compared to other personality traits in this sample of ex-members of fundamentalist Christian faith communities. However, given the previously identified link between openness and religious fundamentalism (i.e., Saroglou, 2002), future studies should investigate this further. Similarly unexpected was the finding that SOC-R balance was not relevant in characterising any of the profiles. The SOC-R dimension balance refers to the balancing of positive and negative life experiences and feelings (Bachem & Maercker, 2018). It may be that as the initial negative life experience (i.e., disaffiliation) is over and in the past for these ex-members, the need to balance their feelings on this experience is not as urgent or necessary for this particular sample. SOC-R balance may therefore be more relevant during the process of disaffiliation, which could be investigated in future studies. Furthermore, SOC-R reflection, defined as reflection the ability to consider different perspectives and understand connections to the wider context (Bachem & Maercker, 2018), was highest in the resilience profile and also differed significantly to all other profiles. This may suggest that of all the SOC-R aspects, this ability to consider alternative perspectives is most beneficial for the resilience of individuals who disaffiliated from a fundamentalist Christian faith community (i.e., with its own perspective and specific doctrines). However, given that this is currently speculative, further research should examine this in more detail. Nevertheless, the current findings identified a number of (potentially modifiable) resilience-supporting resources differentiating the distinct well-being profiles of ex-members.

4.5 | Strengths and limitations of the study

This is the first and largest study to examine well-being profiles in German-speaking ex-members of various fundamentalist Christian faith communities. A major strength of this study is the comparatively large sample size of a unique group of individuals, on which very little quantifiable knowledge previously existed. Given their particular stress experiences, combined with the lack of knowledge on resilience in this sample, this study assisted in creating a knowledge base upon which further stress and resilience studies can be conducted.

Nevertheless, some limitations must also be considered with respect to the current study: First) Due to the nonprobability, purposive sampling method used in the current study, it is not possible to exclude a self-selection bias, which may restrict the generalisability of the findings. Second) The recruitment and inclusion of ex-members from various fundamentalist Christian faith communities may have led to a rather mixed sample with regard to religious beliefs and practices. While it is not uncommon to study members of different exclusionary and demanding religious groups as a homogeneous sample (see for instance: Buxant & Saroglou, 2008; Namini & Murken, 2009); this approach may disregard relevant differences between faith communities and the potentially differing impact of disaffiliation. Third) While the comparatively large sample size is a strength of the study, it also bears the increased risk that the data are overpowered, which should be considered in the interpretation of the results. Fourth) The lack of inclusion of a control group is also a limitation, as the well-being of the ex-members could not be compared to current members or individuals who never were affiliated with such religious groups. Fifth) Some of the included measures showed insufficient reliabilities (i.e., agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness, SOC-R balance), and related findings should be interpreted with the necessary caution. However, with respect to the BFI-10 (Rammstedt & John, 2007), Furnham (2008) stated that "...because of the small number of items, alpha coefficients often drop below the 'magical' 0.70 level, often rarely exceeding 0.50. Despite this those measures are often used and are still valid (Gosling et al., 2003; Rammstedt & John, 2007)" (p. 315). In research contexts that rely on the efficient assessment of data in a time-saving manner (e.g., online surveys), the application of this measure may nonetheless be endorsed.

Sixth) The cross-sectional, retrospective study design must be mentioned as a major limitation of the current study for several reasons: the chosen design (a) does not allow for causal inferences nor for the description of intraindividual changes in the post-exit trajectories of ex-members; (b) may have led to several biases, such as a recall or self-presentation bias; and (c) fails to comply with recommendations regarding the ideal assessment of resilience (as a process). In fact, resilience is best described as a dynamic, interactive, and domain-specific profile, trajectory, or process, which should be optimally assessed over time, including pre-, peri-, and (optimally) several post-stress measurements (e.g., Kalisch et al., 2017; Southwick et al., 2014). In light of the applied cross-sectional study design, the retrospective data assessment, and the non-inclusion of a non-affected comparison group, it cannot be entirely discounted that

the identified profiles could be unrelated to the contextual stressor (i.e., the disaffiliation). It could be argued that the identified profiles merely reflect general, rather than post-exit, differences in health and well-being. However, this is estimated to be rather unlikely in the current study as all participants experienced (to varying extents) the same (potentially significant) stressor (i.e., the process of disaffiliation, including pre-, peri-, and post-exit stressful experiences), which was in fact the major inclusion criterion for the study. Given that a rather homogeneous sample was investigated with respect to this common 'stress' denominator, it is rather unlikely that the profiles would be (fully) independent of and unaffected by the past stress exposure. Therefore, the outcome measures may indeed reflect post-exit differences in health and well-being, and as such, resilience.

Seventh) The labelling of the profiles (i.e., 'resilient', 'normative', 'vulnerable', 'adverse') reflect theory-driven (i.e., interpretative) thinking of the authors. While we believe that this labelling is justified due to the meaningful associations with the resilience resources (i.e., 'resilient' and 'adverse' profiles were related to the highest and lowest levels of resilience-supporting resources, respectively), the profiles could be labelled differently. For instance, depending on the applied resilience definition, it could be argued that the 'normative' profile could (also) reflect resilience, as these individuals may have bounced back from adversity. Similarly, it could be argued that the 'resilient' profile could reflect 'higher resilience', 'thriving', or 'steeling' (Höltge et al., 2018; Liu, 2015; Rutter, 2012). In addition, labels that tentatively imply a post-stress state may be speculative, given the cross-sectional, retrospective design. Therefore, although challenging to achieve, a prospective longitudinal study design with repeated measurements would be required (see for instance: Namini & Murken, 2009) to study the intraindividual change in health and well-being due to disaffiliation, as well as to identify antecedents and predictors of the more adaptive post-exit well-being outcomes.

5 | CONCLUSION

This study provided novel quantitative insights into the well-being profiles of individuals who disaffiliated from a fundamentalist Christian faith community in German-speaking countries. This study not only showed that these individuals can differ quite substantially with respect to their well-being, but also that the differential well-being outcomes can be characterised by factors that are, often to some degree, under the control of the affected individuals. These factors include resilience-supporting resources, such as the self-appraisal of one's own value (i.e., self-esteem; Collani & Herzberg, 2003), or the ability to consider different perspectives and understand connections to the wider context (i.e., SOC-R reflection; Bachem & Maercker, 2018). The identification of such potentially modifiable factors that are linked to resilience in ex-members may be useful in the assistance of ex-members in their process of (re-)integrating into the mainstream society. Also, such factors represent

useful targets for therapeutic intervention and the treatment of ex-members who show maladaptation and seek professional help.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Due to the sensitive nature of this research the study data cannot be made publicly available.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

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