CULTURE AND STIGMA IN RELIGION: THE WESTBORO BAPTIST CHURCH

by

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B.A., University of Dallas, 2013

A THESIS

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of Sociology, Anthropology, & Social Work
College of Arts and Sciences

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2016

Approved by:

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Abstract

This study examines the lived experiences of the members of the Westboro Baptist Church, a small church based in Topeka, KS and known for engaging in extensive protesting, from the perspective of stigmatization and the subcultural identity theory of religious persistence. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of the congregation, exploring issues of how they perceive themselves to exist in relation to broader American society. A qualitative analysis of the interviews revealed three main themes: religion as a guiding framework, members' relationships with others, and stigma and stigma management. Members of the Westboro Baptist Church see the world through a core Biblical framework of understanding that influences both how they relate to and disengage from interactions with others and the ways in which they negotiate stigma in these interactions. This research contributes to the body of research on stigma and stigma management as well as adds theoretically to the subcultural identity theory of religion.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

By protesting the funerals of American soldiers, desecrating the American flag, and carrying signs emblazoned with the words "God Hates Fags" the Westboro Baptist Church has earned the title of "America's Most Hated Family" (Mirsky & Cooper, 2011). The group has also been classified as a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center for their anti-homosexual rhetoric. Despite these inflammatory actions, the members of the church are embedded in their communities and interact with many individuals in broader society in their day-to-day lives. Many members are college educated, work outside the home, and their children receive public education (Baker, Bader, & Hirsch, 2015). Although in conflict with American society, members of the Westboro Baptist Church also engage in everyday interactions with those with whom they are in conflict. The opposition to society that the church maintains, while sustaining daily engagement with the community, leads to the question: How do Westboro Baptist Church members understand themselves in relation to society?

The Westboro Baptist Church has between 70 and 80 members and is located in Topeka, Kansas. The group held their first protest in 1989 against homosexual activity in Topeka, and since then has claimed to have protested over 50,000 times across all 50 of the United States (Baker, Bader, & Hirsch, 2015). The church protests not only what it understands to be the 'homosexual agenda' promoted by the United States, but also the funerals of soldiers. Baker, Bader, and Hirsch (2014) write of the Westboro Baptist Church, "Their protests are a highly concentrated expression of religio-political revulsion at the increasing inclusion of same sex couples in American society" (p. 59).

The Westboro Baptist Church can be understood as part of the fundamentalist movement within American Protestantism. Marsden (2006) characterizes fundamentalism as a movement that grew out of 20th century evangelicalism. Although individuals and churches within the fundamentalist framework may vary in the extent to which they emphasize certain factors that characterize fundamentalism, there are certain key themes that reoccur in fundamentalist thought. One of these themes is the identity as "outsiders" from the establishment. This understanding manifests both in the tension with and tendency towards separation from other Christian denominations that fundamentalists often engage in, as well as their ambivalence towards American culture that is often demonstrated within fundamentalism.

The Westboro Baptist Church's religious tradition is thus one that promotes separation from mainstream society. This separation is enacted out in their extensive protests explicitly condemning many aspects of American culture. Despite this, the members of the church are embedded in their local communities and coexist with individuals outside of the church in their daily lives.

Individuals belonging to a church that is so publicly adversarial must undoubtedly face stigmatization when engaging with members of the wider society. Stigma is usually theorized as a negative attribute individuals wish to avoid, rather than as something that potentially could increase group cohesion and understandings of solidarity. Goffman (1963) defines stigma as referring to "an attribute that is deeply discrediting…" (p. 3). However, the meaning placed on this attribute is arrived at in the context of relationships, which means that attributes that are discrediting to one individual may not be to others. The way in which members of the Westboro Baptist Church understand themselves and how they interpret how others understand them is essential to examine in order to illuminate how they manage a stigmatized attribute. This study

then aims to employ the concept of stigma in an exploration of the narratives of members of the Westboro Baptist Church in order to illuminate how they understand themselves within the context of their society. Additionally, the subcultural identity theory of religion is posited as a construct that serves to reconcile the difficulty of church members who simultaneously belong to an organization that sets itself against society while they themselves live everyday within that society.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

In examining the ways in which members of the Westboro Baptist Church perceive themselves in relation to broader society, both the cultural context in which they exist, as well as their strategies for negotiating interactions with wider society must be examined. The subcultural identity theory of religion offers a theoretical framework by which the persistence and maintenance of group membership in the church can be examined. In addition, the literature examining individual stigma management strategies for negotiating interactions within wider society are illuminative. Differing out-group perceptions of stigmatized attributes, as well as in-group support, further influences how stigmatized individuals negotiate interactions with others. In particular, individuals who are stigmatized on the basis of religious affiliation have been found by the literature to disengage and disidentifiy with the out-group of wider society. Lastly, the literature examining religious motivations for engaging in protests also points to the way in which these protests shape in-group cohesion and devaluing of out-groups. Reviewing the literature regarding the maintenance of religious group membership as well these dimensions of in-group and out-group interactions and perceptions with regards to stigma provides a backdrop in which the orientation of the members of the Westboro Baptist Church to the society in which they exist can be more fully understood.

Subcultural Identity Theory of Religion

The existence and subsistence of oppositional religious groups such as the Westboro Baptist Church in modern society can be understood through a subcultural identity theory of religion. Smith (1998) posits that religious traditions thrive when they directly engage with a wider society with which they believe themselves to be in opposition. This engagement with modern pluralistic society serves to bolster the commitment of members to their religious

tradition, and cements the identity of the religious group. This theory entails three propositions within this theory that are especially illuminative in relation the Westboro Baptist Church.

The first proposition is that social groups draw symbolic boundaries between themselves and particular out-groups, which allows them to sustain collective identities. In drawing distinctions between themselves and groups that are unlike them, social groups are able to solidify both the boundaries between the groups and their own identities. Smith (1998) writes, "…Modernity's sociocultural pluralism may actually strengthen, and not undermine, religion. Pluralism may do this by providing a diversity and abundance of ideological and cultural outgroups" (p. 97). Through social interactions between these many subcultural groups, boundaries between groups are created, as individuals employ symbols to designate who is part of and outside of the group.

Secondly, groups and individuals define their own identities in contrast with those of specific 'others.' These others are negative reference groups whom the individuals and groups understand to be antagonists. Individuals and groups understand their own identities are a result of the appraisal of others who are part of the in-group of those individuals. At the same time, identity is also constructed in interaction with out-groups that individuals and groups specifically do not want to be like. Smith (1998) writes, "Modern religious believers…establish and evaluate their world views and life-practices not in relation to everyone conceivable, but to members of their own reference groups" (p. 107). Here, the emphasis is on specific in-groups that people appraise themselves of begin a part of, and specific out-groups which they do not wish to be associated with, rather than a subculture or religion set against society as a whole. Lastly, there is the proposition that "intergroup conflict in a pluralistic context typically strengthens in-group

identity, solidarity, resources mobilization, and membership retention" (p. 113). Simply put, conflict with out-groups can serve to increase in-group cohesion.

Smith (1998) situates Christian fundamentalism in the United States today using religious subcultural identity theory. Smith (1998) theorizes that fundamentalist Protestantism fails to thrive in comparison with evangelicalism due to their separation from wider society. In failing to directly and consistently engage with members and groups that characterize pluralistic American society, the fundamentalist movement generally has a weakened ability to maintain a strong collective identity that thrives within this pluralism. He writes, "Fundamentalism's defensive separatism also reduces its chances of encountering self-identity-reinforcing exposure to and tension with hostile outgroups" (p. 146). Fundamentalists then, in an attempt to preserve the purity of their theological beliefs, tend to engage in separation from people who do not share those beliefs, leading to fewer opportunities for the maintenance of a collective identity.

The Westboro Baptist Church fits within the fundamentalist tradition, though with certain differentiations from the description offered by Smith (1998) of the general characteristics of fundamentalism. Bader, Baker, and Hirsch (2014) describe the perceived threat of homosexuality in American society today as the primary driving force behind the activism engaged in by the members of the Westboro Baptist Church. Additionally, the church understands much of what Americans value to be idolatry. Examples of this idolatry would be respect for the American flag and engaging in funerals after someone has died. The authors found that members of the church understand God to be judgmental of human sin and actively engaged in punishing humanity for the sins that individuals have committed.

Bader, Baker, and Hirsch (2014) also write that the members of the church also understand themselves to be members of the 'elect'—a small subset of humanity who God has mercifully decided to save from damnation. The hatred that the church receives from the rest of society is interpreted by the members as proof of their alignment with God against the sinners that make up the rest of the world. The authors found that the perspective of the members was that society and the church are participating in an eternal conflict and that this promotes feelings of solidarity among members of the church. They conclude that the protests of the Westboro Baptist Church are intentionally designed to cause a spectacle—the better to spread their message of God's hatred for sin and sinners on a national level.

The Westboro Baptist Church, according to Barrett-Fox (2011), is very focused on Christian eschatology in that they believe that the apocalypse is imminent and that events in the world today are signs of the impending end. Additionally, they believe that they will suffer persecution for their beliefs as part of the signs that the end is coming about. Because they understand themselves to be members of the elect, they experience themselves as having a special place within their eschatology. Similarly, because they believe that God is directly responsible for present-day actions, they believe that events occurring in the world are signs from God of the end times.

As Smith (1998) writes, "Premillennial dispensationalism gave fundamentalists the theological rationale for withdrawing from political involvement, shunning efforts at social reform, and abandoning the surrounding culture to its inevitable decent into perdition" (p. 145). While the Westboro Baptist Church undoubtedly believes in society's descent into perdition, what differentiates them from others in the fundamentalist tradition is their constant engagement

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with society through the form of protests. The Westboro Baptist Church, through the actions of its protests, finds itself embattled against the wider society, and the LGBT movement in particular, as a negative reference group. Protesting then fits within the subcultural identity theory of religion as a means of engaging in social interactions with out-groups, which serves to promote group cohesion and the formation of a collective identity, despite the aspects of the church that might otherwise promote separatism.

Stigma Management

As the members of the Westboro Baptist Church engage in contentious interactions with the out-group of wider society, society responds by stigmatizing members of the church. Individuals who are stigmatized in some way often employ strategies of managing that stigma in encounters with others in order to reduce the negative consequences of the stigma. According to Goffman (1963), stigma invokes the notion that the stigmatized is "not quite human," and other perceived negative attributes are often attached to the stigmatized individual because of the original stigma (p. 5). Goffman (1963) also states that a "stigma-theory" is often constructed by others towards a stigmatized individual that involves "an ideology to explain his inferiority and account for the danger he represents, sometimes rationalizing an animosity based on other differences, such as those of social class" (p. 5). Stigma is not limited then to one characteristic of an individual, but is often understood as a dimension of the individual that colors the whole of his or her being. Due to the far-reaching effects of stigmatization, individuals who possess a discrediting attribute may engage in extensive stigma management in order to prevent those around them from discovering the stigmatized attribute.

For an individual who is discreditable, stigma management can entail hiding the stigma from most people, but openly sharing the stigma with a small 'wise' intimate group upon whom he or she relies on for support. As such, the issue of stigmatization not only involves the relationships between stigmatized individuals and others who may discredit them, but cooperative relationships must also be taken into account (Goffman, 1963). For instance, Winnick and Bodkin (2008) discovered that ex-convicts endorsed transparency to others as a stigma management strategy. However, factors related to perceptions of exclusion, such as understandings that the discrediting attribute will damage employment opportunities, predicted secrecy and concealment. Factors influencing perceptions of inclusion (such as participation in a faith community), on the other hand, predicted transparency and revelation of the stigma to others. The decision to either reveal or conceal a stigmatized status is dependent the social lives of individuals and the support they receive from their social relationships (Goffman, 1963; Winnick & Bodkin, 2008).

Individuals may also engage in voluntary disclosure of their stigmatized status and be discredited by that disclosure. However, certain codes, or strategies, are formed either by the individuals themselves, or by professionals, as to the advisable situations in which to cover up stigma, or how to manage it (Goffman, 1963). Individuals in social situations who have been stigmatized can either accept that the stigma applies to them or challenge the stigma. These individuals then must also either accept the publicly held understanding of the stigma or challenge that understanding (Meisenbach, 2010). Within stigma management lie a variety of options for individuals with different stigmas (Millen & Walker, 2001; McKenna, 2013; Saxena, 2013; Yip, 1997). For example, Yip (1997) discovered in his analysis of the accounts of gay Christians that their stigma management strategies included attacking the stigma by seeking to

invalidate Biblical interpretations against homosexuality, attacking the stigmatizer, or reflecting on their own positive personal experiences. Here, maintaining both a Christian identity and a homosexual identity played a role in the formation of particular stigma management strategies. There are, therefore, a variety of stigma management strategies employed by individuals who have disclosed their stigmatized state.

The decision to either disclose or conceal a stigma influences not only social situations, but also the stigmatized individuals themselves. Individuals have been characterized as often engaging in selective self-disclosure as an information management tactic for managing stigma (Goffman, 1963; Kaufman & Johnson, 2004; Koken, 2012). Community involvement and other factors related to inclusion heighten self-esteem, while factors related to secrecy and lack of disclosure have been found to be related to lower self-esteem (Ilic et al., 2012). Similarly, disclosure of stigma can relate to greater social support, while concealment of stigma can influence perceptions of loneliness and social isolation (Koken, 2012; Newheiser & Barreto, 2014).

Despite the benefits of selective self-disclosure, concealment of a stigma is a strategy often engaged in by individuals who seek to 'pass' as normative members of society (Goffman, 1963). 'Passing' is not a simple matter of assuming a facade of a normative identity. As Renfrow (2004) writes, "Passing practices do not follow a simple, one-to-one relationship in which one identity is replaced or masked with another in isolation but entails a complex negotiation structured by societal expectations" (p. 499). In engaging in passing, individuals must present a cohesive identity which often involves a performance that deemphasizes or disguises other aspects of themselves inconsistent with the identity they are attempting to present. The act of

passing may then produce cognitive dissonance and affect the behavior and attitudes of individuals (DeJordy, 2008; Smart & Wegner, 1999).

Passing can also be characterized as an act of resistance, in which individuals who would otherwise find their stigma repressed by broader society instead 'pass' to maintain the stigma. This form of passing can serve to bolster commitment to preserving a stigmatized attribute. This is exemplified by white power activists who 'pass' to avoid discrimination, yet do so in order to maintain their racist identity (Simi & Futrell, 2009). Simi and Futrell (2009) describe how members of the white power movement disguise their affiliation in their daily lives in order to avoid conflict with others, yet at the same time look for subtle ways to indicate their identity when opportunities arise. The white power activists felt that maintaining the balance between conforming to a non-racist identity, while at the same time revealing parts of their white power identity through small-scale expressions, was an act of resistance against the expectations of the others with whom they interact.

The complexities of passing and the meanings that individuals or groups bring to the act serves to demonstrate that a stigmatizing attribute can be conceived of by those who are stigmatized in a variety of ways. Exploring how stigmatized individuals, such as the members of the Westboro Baptist Church, engage in stigma management strategies such as passing, would then be revelatory of their understandings of their stigma.

Stigma and In-groups and Out-groups

For groups that are stigmatized, their relationships with other members of the stigmatized group (the 'in-group') matter within the context of the broader community (the 'out-group'). Stigmatized individuals are often required to conceive of themselves from the point of view of

the wider society (Goffman, 1963). This conception of in-groups and out-groups with regards to stigma is of value in examining how the Westboro Baptist Church, which stands in opposition to the broader community, understands itself as it exists embedded within that community. Goffman (1963) emphasizes that to participate in shared norms is required for social life to occur, and that an individual's failure to maintain these norms can lead to psychological distress.

If, for example, an in-group member exhibits negative behavior, other members of the in-group may be impacted due to the fact that the out-group may interpret these actions as being a defining characteristic of all members of that group. Cohen and Garcia (2005) found that if the in-group is evaluated poorly by the out-group, this is damaging to the collective identity of the in-group due to "the collectively shared nature of social identities" (p. 566). The authors hypothesized that when a member of a group acted in a manner that might confirm stereotypes of that group, individuals who held membership in that group would tend to experience a threat to their collective identity and exhibit negative psychological effects. In this study, black students observed another student, either white or black, take an IQ test. Under the condition where the participant shared group membership with the student taking the test, collective threat was more likely to be experienced and the participants reported lower levels of self-esteem. The same results of experiencing collective threat and lower self-esteem were found when female engineering students observed other female engineering students taking a test of mathematical abilities (Cohen & Garcia, 2005).

Failure to maintain the norms expected by society can also cause individuals to alienate themselves from the broader community (Goffman, 1963). Stigmatized individuals can respond to stress in ways that modify or regulate the stressful experience by engaging in either voluntary or involuntary coping responses (Miller & Kaiser, 2001). Involuntary coping responses can

include emotional arousal and impulsive behavior in response to being stigmatized (Miller & Kaiser, 2001). One voluntary coping response is through disengagement and avoidance, in which the stigmatized individual withdraws from situations in which they may be stigmatized (Bos, Pryor, Reeder, & Stutterheim, 2013). Another voluntary coping response by stigmatized individuals is to deny and mentally minimize the extent to which discrimination or prejudice occurs from the out-group. Minimization is less likely to be chosen as a coping mechanism by a stigmatized individual if they believe they have social support (Ruggiero, Taylor & Lydon, 1997). The manner in which individuals then respond to being stigmatized is influenced by both their perceptions of the out-group and the perceived support of their in-group. Consequently, an exploration of the methods by which members of the Westboro Baptist Church cope with stigma may well be revelatory of their perceptions of the broader community and their own church.

Stigma influences how individuals relate to their 'in-group' as well as to the 'out-group' of normative society. Crocker and Major (1989) argue that individuals who understand the attribute of themselves that is stigmatized to be of central importance to their identities tend to have a stronger group identity with other individuals who share that attribute. Members of marginalized ethnic minorities and individuals with certain mental illnesses are both groups whose group identities have been examined on the bases of the stigmatized attribute (Crabtree, Haslam, Postmes & Haslam, 2010). The differences in relation to in-groups and out-groups is often examined in the literature in light of social identity theory. This theory posits that individuals engage in social comparison and align themselves with other individuals who share similar attributes to themselves that they consider to be of importance, which serves to create an in-group. Self-categorization also occurs, in which individuals tend to highlight similarities between themselves and their in-groups, and emphasize differences between themselves and their out-

groups (Stets & Burke, 2000). Research finds that individuals tend to evaluate their own group more favorably than they evaluate the out-group and attempt to counteract attempts by the out-group to devaluate their group (Cairns, Kenworthy, Campbell & Hewstone, 2006; Ellemers & Rijswijk, 1997). This understanding of out-group and in-group perceptions fits in well with the subcultural identity theory of religion and may serve to illuminate perceptions of wider society by the Westboro Baptist Church.

Ysseldyk, Matheson, and Anisman (2010) posit that examining religiosity from a social identity perspective demonstrates the significance of religion in the lives of many individuals. The authors emphasize that the belief systems inherent in religion are of special significance, as these beliefs are believed by the members to be the ultimate 'truth.' These beliefs would therefore reinforce ideas about the superiority of the in-group and strengthen the religion as a component of individuals' social identities.

Ysseldyk, Matheson, and Anisman (2010) conclude, "Religious identification offers a distinctive sacred worldview and eternal group membership, unmatched by identification with other social groups, and hence religiosity might be explained…by the immense cognitive and emotional value that religious group membership provides" (p. 67). From a social identity theory perspective, individuals whose in-groups are religious in-groups then may experience especially strong group identification due to their religious affiliation. Following from this, strong identification with a religion as an in-group would tend to heighten perceptions by members of the in-group that they are different from the out-group. In the case of the Westboro Baptist Church, understanding how the in-group is constructed in relation to the out-group, is essential for understanding how the members of the church manage stigmatization by the out-group of American society.

Religion as a Stigmatizing Attribute

In certain contexts, religious affiliation is perceived as a discrediting attribute by others outside of that religion. Kunst, Tajamal, Sam, and Ulleberg (2012) hypothesized that Islamophobia might cause Muslim individuals to experience stigma based on their religious beliefs, which in turn could shape the identities of these individuals. They discovered that in a societal environment in which Islam was stigmatized, Muslims who identified with their religious beliefs tended to disengage and disidentify with the broader society as whole. Vassenden and Andersson (2011) highlight the complexity of religious stigma in that although religion may be stigmatizing within the broader society, it often serves as a prestige symbol within the in-group. This leads to inter-group tension, and may lead to stigmatized religious individuals evaluating their in-group more highly than the out-group or isolating themselves from the out-group (Kunst, et al., 2012; Vassenden & Andersson, 2011; Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2010). Endelstein and Ryan (2013) focused on the potential of clothing to be either a stigma symbol or a prestige symbol for individuals who were either Jewish or Muslim. The narratives given by these individuals indicate an understanding that these symbols mark them as outsiders and that they are stigmatized because of them.

Stigma towards religion may do more than promote intergroup tension and isolation of stigmatized members—it may also serve as a means of increasing group cohesion. Iannaccone (1992) posits that religious organizations that promote the stigmatization of their members eliminate members who would not have strong group identification and therefore increase the group cohesion of the remaining members. The author notes that, "The costs can screen out people whose participation otherwise would be marginal, while at the same time increasing

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participation among those who remain" (p. 289). In this way, stigma serves to intensify the identification of members to their religious group.

Stigmatized individuals may also seek to 'normify' not only their own conduct, but also that of other individuals who share their stigma (Goffman, 1963, p. 108). Individuals who are members of a stigmatized religion may make efforts to characterize and perceive their lives as similar to those of broader society. Ryan (2011) studied the experiences of Muslim women in relation to religious stigma and found that these women emphasized their 'normalcy' and that their everyday routines were the same as that of non-Muslims. These individuals identified with the norms of the broader society, and did not attempted to frame their own lives within this context, while maintaining their religious identity.

There are a variety of ways in which individuals who experience religious stigma may attempt to negotiate that stigma. O'Brien (2011) explores stigma management strategies that occur backstage among American Muslim youth in preparation for them entering into civil places within the broader community. These stigma management strategies occur as rehearsals during private interactions in which members of a stigmatized group discuss a real or hypothetical public interaction and the best strategies for managing stigma in that interaction. These backstage rehearsals also allow individuals to express emotions that might be otherwise curtailed in the stigma management process. The author defines two types of stigma management rehearsals: direct preparation (for a specific event) and deep education (in which justifications are offered for the dominant stigma management strategy). The dominant stigma management strategy is the approach to managing stigma that is suggested by important members within the group.

Religious Protests

Religious protests may serve to increase group cohesion and to accentuate differences between the in-group and the out-group. Because the Westboro Baptist Church protests a wide swath of aspects of broader society, understanding the role that protesting plays in both in-group cohesion as well as the framing of out-groups may elucidate further the way in which members of this church understand their relation to society. Members of religions that claim adherence to the ultimate truth unknown by non-religious members of society have been found to understand their in-group as being morally superior to that of the out-group of broader society (Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2010). McVeigh and Sikkink (2001) posit that groups with these types of religious beliefs may construct a worldview that supports protests as a means to foster the truths these religious groups understand to be important. This employment of the use of contentious tactics, such as protesting, is dependent upon the religious identity of the members of that religion. Beliefs in human sinfulness, perceived threat to religious beliefs, and a belief in absolute moral standards were associated with approving of protests to change society.

Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2013) examine the issue of why individuals choose to engage in protest as a means to achieve an end. They state that every protest is caused by a grievance, which can be a moral indignation about some aspect of the world. This form of protest is an expression of moral outrage and is a conflict regarding principles. The particular beliefs of the Westboro Baptist Church may well then be significant in providing an understanding of why the members of this church protest extensively, while other churches do not.

In contrast to the suggestions that a set of theological beliefs can incline individuals to engage in certain actions, Iannaccone and Berman (2006) suggest that religious groups chose to

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engage in violent action when doing so is an act of resisting repression or will gain them political power. They cite Hamas, a Palestinian Islamic fundamentalist group, as an example of a religious sect that at certain points engages in militancy, but at other points does not, and engages in a reintegration of sacred texts to justify the militancy or lack thereof. The authors state, "We have argued that it is a serious mistake to view violent religious extremists as pathological drones enslaved by theologies of hate" (p. 123). Instead, they suggest that religious militancy occurs when the state favors one religion over another, and when there is an inadequate separation of church and state, so that it becomes possible for religious groups to seek political power.

The Westboro Baptist Church undoubtedly exists in opposition to and as an out-group of broader society and can be characterized both within the subcultural identity theory posited by Smith (1998) as well as theories of stigma proposed by Goffman (1963). Ideological beliefs within the church could also serve as motivating factors for the church to engage protests that cause them to directly enter into conflict with out-groups within society (Freilich, Almanzar, & Rivera, 1999), which would also serve to sustain group cohesion and collective identity according to the subcultural identity theory of religion.

Chapter 3 - Statement of Problem

The previous literature has demonstrated the intricacies of stigma management that stigmatized individuals engage in, as well as certain particular methods of stigma management employed by individuals whose religious views are stigmatized. As previously discussed, the Westboro Baptist Church exists within a cultural milieu in which it is demonstrably deeply discredited by the surrounding community and broader society. Additionally, both the church as an organization and the individual members of the church carry the stigma attached to membership in the church. The understanding of the members of the Westboro Baptist Church as an in-group, with broader society being an out-group, raises questions of the relationship between the in-group and out-group understandings of the members within the church.

The case of the Westboro Baptist Church lends itself to interpretation through a stigma perspective for several reasons. With regards to research regarding stigma generally, many of the stigmatized groups typically researched are only stigmatized within certain contexts during interactions with particular other individuals (Goffman, 1963). For example, the stigmatized status of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) individuals has been frequently studied within family units or the work force (Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009; Kaufman & Johnson, 2004; Yip 1997), yet stigmatization may not uniformly occur in the broader society. In contrast, the Westboro Baptist Church receives little to no support from outside of its own community, leading to a unique opportunity to explore the dimensions of stigma as experienced by individuals within this group.

The historical context of fundamentalism in the United States provides a context for understanding the orientation of the Westboro Baptist Church to society. Despite certain unique

characteristics of the church, the beliefs and opinions held by the members do not exist in a void, but rather are embedded within the history of religion in America. The subcultural identity theory of religion serves to illuminate how the construction of collective identities and cohesion is maintained by religious organizations, such as the Westboro Baptist Church, and how the maintenance of these collective identities is actually strengthened when conflict occurs with an out-group (Smith, 1998).

Notably, while both stigma and the subcultural identity theory of religion are theoretical concepts that can be applied to understand the contentious social interactions that the Westboro Baptist Church has with wider society, there is a disjunction between these theoretical orientations. The subcultural identity theory of religion posits groups draw symbolic boundaries between themselves and other reference groups and that the result of intergroup conflict is increased in-group cohesion. In this theory, there is no consideration of how, or even if, religious groups might experience and manage stigmatization by the out-group. In contrast, the concept of stigma tends to assume that within stigmatizing interactions there exists a consensus between actors that an attribute is discrediting. Employing both these theoretical concepts in examining the Westboro Baptist Church will provide a more complete understanding of the experiences of the members, as well as contribute to broadening the theoretical understanding of such religious groups. The present study therefore seeks to explore the question: How do Westboro Baptist Church members understand themselves in relation to society?

Chapter 4 - Methods

The use of qualitative methods was determined to be the most appropriate means of collecting data for the present study, as the perceptions and worldviews of Westboro Baptist Church members are the areas of investigation (Berg, 2004). Interviews allow participants to give rich descriptions of their experiences and understandings of their worlds (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). These semi-structured interviews included open-ended questions in order to allow the participants to freely share their point of view, while maintaining some structure regarding the topic of the interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Baker, Bader, and Hirsch, (2015) employed this method of interviewing in their study of the Westboro Baptist Church and found it to be effective for generating data. Previous literature using interviews to examine stigma have included questions based on self-identification, interactions with others, importance of identities, and self-appraisals (Kaufman & Johnson, 2004; Saxena, 2013). The questions for the current study were developed as guided by these studies and appear in Appendix A. This project was given approval by Kansas State University's Institutional Review Board (approval number =7923).

I began my attempts to contact the Westboro Baptist Church for the purpose of gaining permission to conduct interviews in August of 2015 by going to their church service. Despite the fact that the church lists the times and locations of their services and refers to these services as public, the church was locked during the listed times and I was unable to contact the members. Additional attempts were made to contact members through phone calls and emails, but these also received no reply. In October of 2015, I approached members of the Westboro Baptist Church during one of their local protests and provided my contact information for their media relations personnel. The media relations individual acted as liaison between me and the members of the church and asked members if they would be willing to participate in interviews. The

members who agreed then were placed on a schedule for interviews that took place on January 23rd, 2016.

Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 church members who volunteered to participate in this format for the research project. An additional 8 members of the church provided written answers to the interview guide. Three of the participants who volunteered for face to face interviews were women and the rest were men. Most had been members of the church since their childhood, although one had converted to the church within the past 12 months. All interviews took place after informed consent was secured for participating in the interview and being audiorecorded during this process. Extensive field notes were also taken both during interview times and after all interactions with members of the church. The interviews were conducted on January 23rd, 2016 and lasted from 25 to 46 minutes. All interviews took place in the back of the Westboro Baptist Church, where chairs had been arranged behind the pews for interviewer and participants to be able to face one another while talking. This space was semi-private, in that the room was empty during the interviews aside from the interviewer and the participant, however, church members could freely enter the body of the church and did so when it was around the time which they had selected to participate in an interview.

The confidentiality of the research participants was maintained by keeping all records of interviews, notes of interviews, and informed consent forms in a locked and secure location. The data was additionally de-identified prior to verbatim transcription, and participants were assigned a pseudonym. The transcriptions were password protected and stored on a password-protected computer. These transcriptions were then entered into Atlas.ti (Muhr, 2004) for data management.

The data was analyzed using a grounded theory approach, which entails inductively examining the data through the process of coding (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). The process of coding began with open-coding, which is a way to initially link data to categories that the researcher believes to be thematically important (Berg, 2004; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). During this process of coding, intercoder reliability checks took place through data conferencing, in which certain interviews were coded by a second coder and then compared for consistency, in order to increase the validity of the analysis (Berg, 2004). After open-coding was completed a codebook was created. The initially coded categories were then further integrated in the process of axial-coding, with specific themes and subthemes being delineated at this stage (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

Chapter 5 - Findings

The exploration of the question of how members of the Westboro Baptist Church understand themselves in relation to society can be understood both at the level of individual interaction, as well as on a broader structural level. In the analysis of this data, three themes emerged, as well as several subthemes within these broader thematic schema, out of the interviews conducted with the participants and are detailed below. The first main theme is the significance of a guiding framework through which the members of the Westboro Baptist Church interpret themselves and society. The cultural context of this framework for the members, as well as the manner in which they employ this framework to establish symbolic boundaries are subthemes within this first theme. An additional theme was the way in which members of the Westboro Baptist Church relate to others. This theme contained two subthemes, which consisted of the evaluation of certain groups as reference groups by Westboro Baptist Church and the intergroup conflicts engaged in by the members. Lastly, there emerged a theme of the way in which members of the Westboro Baptist Church view stigma and the management of that stigma. In particular, the subthemes within this theme were that Westboro Baptist Church members understand their core framework of belief to be a discrediting attribute and employ stigma management strategies to negotiate this stigma. Distancing themselves from this stigma, disengaging from interactions with others, and designating certain times and places as inappropriate to emphasize their Biblical framework were all strategies that formed subthemes of this main theme. These themes and subthemes are enumerated below.

Guiding Framework

One of the themes that emerged from the data was the centrality for the Westboro Baptist Church members of a core framework of belief rooted in the Bible. Members describe

intentionally keeping this framework in mind in their day-to-day lives, as well as cultivating and maintaining this framework. One of the subthemes of this theme is the cultural nature of this core framework, in that this Biblical basis for belief dominates every aspect of the lives of the members, and promotes the cohesion of the group as well as the formation of a collective identity. A second subtheme regarding the core framework held by Westboro Baptist Church members is that this worldview creates symbolic boundaries between those who are and are not in the church.

Cultural nature of core framework.

Members of the Westboro Baptist Church understand themselves as situated within a larger cultural context; they believe that the epistemologies and frameworks they use to conceptualize the world differ substantially from those employed by members of broader society. Specifically, members of the Westboro Baptist Church intentionally frame and understand their experiences through a particular Biblical interpretation of themselves, others, and the world as a whole. Smith (1998) writes that, "One of the primary ways social groups provide their members identities and meaning is by inculcating in them a normative and moral orientation toward life and the world" (p. 90). This particular Biblical orientation through which the members of the Westboro Baptist Church understand their world serves to provide them with a collective identity, promote in-group cohesion, and provides a strict differentiation between themselves and the negative reference group that constitutes broader society.

This framework of understanding mediates many aspects of Westboro Baptist Church members' lives; especially those aspects that involve interactions with those outside of the church. This Biblical framing of the world pervades every aspect of their lives and is explicitly considered to be both the differentiating element between those who are members of the church

and those who are not members, as well as the only true and valid epistemology by which the world can be understood. Nathan, an older church elder who joined the church as an adult, emphasized the primacy of this way of framing the world in saying:

> So when I'm thinking right about things all the day long, even when I'm not praying to God, I'm framing my prayer unto God. Which means I'm going through the rolodex, the mental rolodex of those things that I'm thankful for, those things that I need help with, those things that I'm going to petition the Lord for. And, also, praise and thanksgiving. So I got all that going on. So even beyond that, it's such a filter that even when I watch a TV show, or I'm reading a book, I watch, *The Office* or *Lost* or something like that, that I can't help but filter what happens to these people through a scriptural lens. You know, that's just the way I'm wired now.

> This Biblical understanding frames both the daily lives of the members of the church, as well as their beliefs regarding how to ascertain truth in this world. Elijah, another male member of the church, stated, "…We are incomparably sincere in our desire to tell the truth as we understand that truth in the Bible." These Biblical truths are understood by the Westboro Baptist Church community as being an immutable framework through which the world must be examined in order for the truth to be known.

Core framework establishes symbolic boundaries.

The Westboro Baptist Church establishes that this Biblical framework is what differentiates them from those outside the church, which creates an extremely clear symbolic boundary that separates the Westboro Baptist Church from the rest of society and establishes society as a well-defined out-group. This characterization of Westboro Baptist Church members' understandings of the Bible as serving to differentiate between the in-group and out-group for the members is supported by the findings of Baker, Bader, and Hirsch (2015). The authors of this study found that the Westboro Baptist Church's view of God was substantially different from

any other Christian group's understanding of God in a national sample of Christians. In particular, the Westboro Baptist Church characterized God as wrathful, yet loving, and engaged with the world today. The unique religious framework that Westboro Baptist Church members maintain in their understanding of the world therefore serves to establish a symbolic boundary between themselves and all others who hold differing beliefs.

The establishment of symbolic boundaries through the use of this Biblical framework by the members of the Westboro Baptist Church is especially apparent in their descriptions of how other Christians differ from themselves. For members of the church, other Christians and churches are universally characterized as incorrect in their beliefs and teachings. In speaking of the teachings forwarded by other Christian pastors, Nathan stated:

> And if you're gonna sit in that pew long enough to get to the part where the plate gets passed and you put some money in it, they can't sit up there and tell you what the Bible really says about your sin and your manner of life and your eternal prospects from a scriptural perspective. They gotta tell you stuff that makes you feel good. And that is why we've often said that these churches operate like whorehouses. I mean, that's fundamentally the way a whorehouse works, is you pay them some money and they make you feel good. Well, that's what these churches are doing. All they're really doing is they're piping sunshine up your ass, so that you'll pay them to say that.

Members of the Westboro Baptist Church use their unique scriptural perspective to separate themselves from other Christians in the establishment of a symbolic boundary between the teachings and beliefs forwarded by themselves as opposed to those of these other Christians. This symbolic boundary placed between the Westboro Baptist Church and other members of Christianity is consistent with the double separation practiced by certain fundamentalist denominations (Marsden, 2006).

The creation and maintenance of this framework of belief involves identity work engaged in by the members in the form of constant interaction among the members, which serves to bolster their sense of collective identity. In talking about the role that the Westboro Baptist Church played in his life, Samuel, a recent convert to the church, stated:

> ….You're supposed to communicate. "And to communicate, forget not. For such sacrifices the Lord is well pleased," right? That's the verse. He's well pleased with those because it provokes each other. Words, it's all about words. We talk to each other. We remind each other. Just seeing somebody can remind me, what's the end of all things. It's to obey God.

The constant communication between members about the Bible serves to promote a sense of collective identity within group members. This communication was described as occurring in everyday settings and conversations, as well as in structured settings, such as in Bible studies or during church services. Every participant who spoke of the community of the church, which most did, emphasized that a strong sense of solidarity and cohesiveness characterized the group.

Relations with others

Another theme that emerged from the data was that members of the Westboro Baptist Church characterize others in society as in opposition to their framework of beliefs. Within this theme is the subtheme of the creation of reference groups, in that church members view society in general as evil, but particularly attack homosexuality as the dominating evil within society. In addition, the members understand themselves as under an obligation to spread what they understand to be God's message, which results in frequent conflicts with others in society, which is the second subtheme. These conflicts serve to bolster the cohesion of the group as a whole by increasing the member's collective identity while simultaneously denigrating those in the out-group.

Reference groups.

The members of the Westboro Baptist Church set this scriptural epistemology in contrast to what they understand as the natural and unreflective way of understanding the world that those outside of their church employ. Amos, a church elder who grew up in the church, discussed this, saying, "…We view that what we do and what we say out of the Bible, not our goofy human words and thoughts. Those things that are taught in the Bible are the only reasonable, rational thing." For the members of the Westboro Baptist Church, there is a prevalent understanding that the knowledge and ways of life arrived at by those outside of the church are limited and misguided. There is, therefore, a dichotomy established by the members of those who understand the world through their particular scriptural lens in contrast to those who see the world in a "goofy" human manner.

This strict dichotomy serves to symbolically designate everyone who does not act through a Biblical understanding in line with the Westboro Baptist Church as a member of the out-group. Members of the out-group serve as a negative reference group for the members, in that these members understand the negative reference group as defining who they are not and who they do not wish to be. The Westboro Baptist Church characterizes this negative reference group as the vast majority of humanity who are not elected by God to be saved. Isaiah described this dichotomy by drawing on an Old Testament story, saying:

> I mean, you got two categories of people in the world. You got your Jacobs, and you got your Esaus. Right? So, twin brothers. Before, you know, united in the flesh, but spiritually, completely opposite. You have Jacob who's loved by God, and Esau who's hated by God. Before they're even born. Before they had done neither good nor evil. Those are the two types of people in the earth. The Jacobs are going to love us, and the Esaus are not. They're going to hate us.

Another member, speaking of society at large, repeated these sentiments, but again highlighted the difference in an understanding of the Bible as the framework that separated the Westboro Baptist Church from the out-group:

> And, so, you know, Jesus Christ said, he was asked the question, "Are many saved?" And he says, "Straight is the gate that leadeth to life. And broad is the way that leadeth to damnation." Most people are going to hell, that's his answer. Most people are going to hell. And, so, people don't like the truth of God. I mean, that's the fundamental thing. I get a lot of communication through our website and, you know, 99% of it is people trying to tell me what the Bible says, but it's their own thoughts, you know.

Because most of society is understood as being in this negative reference category, few individuals outside of the church fail to fit into this negative reference group for the Westboro Baptist Church. Even though most people in society are technically in this negative reference group, individuals who support homosexuality are targeted by members as those with whom they are unlike and in opposition to. Teachers, the United States government, and society in general are understood to be supportive of homosexuality, and so most individuals can be fit into this negative reference group, according to the members of the Westboro Baptist Church. Even as members of the church are labeled as outsiders and stigmatized by those in wider society, the members themselves then respond to this labeling by designating those in society as outsiders (Becker, 1963). Elijah spoke at length of his previous association with the Democratic Party prior to what he understood to be their growing support for homosexuality stated of this turn of events:

> Elijah: Well, that's what Christ said was gonna happen. "As it was in the days of Lot." Are you familiar with Lot? They surrounded his house. They ran the government. No one was there to stop them. "As it was in those days, so shall it be in the day that Christ

returns." That's very clearly said in the gospels…And one thing about them my friend, they're never ever, going to be satisfied.

Interviewer: Who?

Elijah: The homosexuals. Never, ever, going to be satisfied. They got the United States Supreme Court in their pocket and within hours they were on the national television saying, "Now we need to do this. Now we need to do that." They're never—If you don't learn anything else from me today other than this—they are never going to be satisfied.

Despite characterizing most people as being in the negative reference group, there are some who Westboro Baptist Church members believe to be in line with their scriptural understanding and who they conceive of as a positive reference group. Most frequently, Biblical prophets and apostles are those with whom the members of the Westboro Baptist Church draw comparisons to themselves. This comparison typically occurred by referencing how these Biblical characters acted or were treated by God as examples of how members of the Westboro Baptist Church should act. In speaking of physical conflicts that occurred during protests, David, whose family were members of the church and who himself converted as a young child, said:

What does it mean to turn the other cheek? If it doesn't mean something in practice? So, I had to learn that. And be thankful… It says about those guys that were getting beat up, those apostles, I'm talking about by the government. They'd beat on them, and then they'd let them go with an order that they needed to not preach anymore. And it says, "They departed from the counsel rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer affliction for the name of God." And you know, that's heady stuff. But it certainly takes the starch out of me. I don't want to be acting like it's about me. Cause it's not.

Interviewer: So you see the ministry in alignment with the work of the apostles?

David: Yes. Point, by point. And I would be terrified if it was any other way. That is, if I found any point where their behavior, clearly demonstrated in scripture, diverged from mine. I would know I need to change something.

Another member directly referenced himself as a prophet, saying:

> They're gonna hear—they're gonna know that there's been a prophet amongst them whether they believe or whether refuse to. Or whether they hear or whether they refuse to hear. They're gonna know there's been a prophet amongst them, because, eventually, it's gonna—they're going to come face to face with the reality that "I am bound by this same standard that that fat, ugly dude, who was standing outside Topeka high school, with them signs. That's the standard that I've been supposed to be governing myself with."

For members of the Westboro Baptist Church, society and its perceived support of sinfulness, especially in the form of homosexuality, is a negative reference group that the members understand themselves as unlike and in opposition with. Because the members adhere to a specific theological framework that portrays most people as damned by God, the members understand themselves as being part of a small group that exists in contrast to broader society. Biblical prophets and apostles are those who the members of Westboro Baptist Church understand as also being saved by God, and who they evaluate as a positive reference group with whom they seek to be in alignment.

Intergroup conflict.

In engaging in protests, members of the Westboro Baptist Church intentionally put themselves into antagonistic situations with other groups in society, which serves to increase their own collective identities and in-group cohesion. Westboro Baptist Church members understand that they have been placed under an obligation, as members of the elect, to preach Biblical messages to those in broader society. Entering into these hostile conflicts is justified by the members of Westboro Baptist Church as demonstrations of love for their neighbors. Joel, a man in his late thirties, in speaking of his obligation to preach through protesting stated:

So if you're not willing to suck it up, put your pride away, and say plainly, "This thing you're doing is going to take you to hell." If you're not willing to do that, you hate your neighbor, period. So, the idea that this current generation of extremely selfish individuals who are trying to take all the definitions of proper things and turn them on their head, "put bitter for sweet and light for dark," it's a shocking thing. It's cruel, it's cruel that you would watch a person go and do a thing against their own interest and not say one word.

The antagonistic interactions are experienced by the members as reinforcing the validity of their Biblical understanding of the world. Not only does engaging in this form of protest serve to bolster in-group cohesion and the collective identity of the group, it also indicates to the members that the Westboro Baptist Church is correct in its message. Samuel stated in speaking of protests:

Yeah, I hope people hate the message, because, um, and also there's another verse in the Bible that says, of course it's the Bible, sorry, um, it says, "Rejoice and jump for joy when all people speak evil of you, for so did they to the prophets. And woe unto you when men shall speak well of you, for so did they to the false prophets." So, we don't wanna be false prophets.

The conflicts that the members of the Westboro Baptist Church enter into under the justification of warning of the evils of society serve to highlight the symbolic boundaries between the Westboro Baptist Church and the rest of the world. These conflicts additionally serve as proof to the members that they are engaged in spreading the Biblical message as God intends. In the conflict itself is seen a validation of engaging in that conflict.

The intergroup conflicts engaged in by the Westboro Baptist Church members, are not always merely symbolic in nature. David discussed how early protests by the church were met by the local community and said:

[The police] would send, with recorders on, you know, uhm, people through our line. Making nasty comments to see how they could engage us. This was early on though. They'd set off like a block away with their cars and everything where they could swoop in. So, it was a real hostile environment. And of course, if the police are hostile toward you, anybody who is also hostile towards you gets the message they've go a free pass. And that's what was happening. They would just attack us on a regular basis. And I'm not talking about arguing, threatening. I'm talking about full on, coming out of their car, parked in the middle of the street, charging on us and attacking. That kind of thing.

The Biblical justifications by the members of the Westboro Baptist Church that promote intergroup conflict, which strengthens symbolic boundaries between those who are and are not members of the church can result in actual physical conflicts. The physical conflicts engaged in by members of the church bolster their sense of adversity with members of broader society. This adversity serves to highlight the symbolic boundaries between the groups, which acts to increase the cohesive collective identity of the group as a whole.

Stigma and Stigma Management

The final overarching theme within the data is that of stigma and the way in which the members of the WBC understand and manage that stigma. Members of the WBC understand that their core framework of belief is the discrediting attribute they possess, which is the first subtheme that emerged from the data. Three further subthemes of stigma management emerged, in that Westboro Baptist Church members distance themselves from the stigmatizing attribute, disengage with others outside of the church, and construct ideas regarding appropriate times and places for spreading their Biblical message.

Core framework as discrediting attribute.

There are a variety of ways in which members of the Westboro Baptist Church could interpret the interactions they have with those outside of the church. Despite the variety of

possibilities, members of the Westboro Baptist Church consistently described others in society as maintaining amicable relationships with individual members of the church on a personal level. Despite these personal cordial relationships, members also experienced themselves as being hated by individuals in society because of the Biblical message that the Westboro Baptist Church proclaims. In this way, the members of the Westboro Baptist Church understand themselves as being stigmatized, but portray this stigmatization as being misplaced by society. Anna, a lifelong member of the Westboro Baptist Church, reflected on the ways in which society views the church and stated that:

> We're vilified. This nation hates us. They hate these words. And it's not a surprise. The scripture's full of indicators that if you hold this testimony fast, the world hates it. And they're gonna target you cause they can't get their hands on God. So the only path they have to show that hatred is towards us as a group, collectively.

For the members of the Westboro Baptist Church, animosity that they experience from those outside of the church is not attributable to any personal characteristic of the members, but rather results from a displaced hatred of God's message as proclaimed by the church. The scriptural framework that the members of the church follow is what society hates—not the members themselves. In fact, the members of the Westboro Baptist Church universally described both themselves and other members as friendly, good-natured people who had good relationships with individuals in their communities. Deborah, an older female member of the church when discussing her interactions with those outside the church, specifically her children's teachers, said, "And I always had a very good relationship with my children's teachers. And you know, even in spite of themselves. Some of them, really, really, hate this religion. Hate these words." This sentiment of having a good relationship with those in society despite their hatred of the message was repeated by Anna who said that, "So, we just associate with people like anybody

associates. Honestly, I think we're some of the fairest, kindest, people there are in this country. So I think they benefit from us wanting to serve God and follow the Bible." In essence, this member not only perceives herself and other members of church as being good people, but that others directly benefit from their service to God.

Aggression, hostility, and the action of protesting do not play a role in individual or societal dislike for the Westboro Baptist Church, in the accounts of the members. Rather, it is a hatred for the scriptural framework itself—a framework that sets the church apart from society, which results in society becoming the aggressor towards the Westboro Baptist Church. In this way, members of the church understand themselves to be discredited and stigmatized by society but do not portray this stigmatization as a personal implication of themselves. The members instead understand this stigmatization as a rejection of the framework for seeing the world that they adhere to, which sets them further apart from society and reinforces boundaries between themselves and the rest of society.

Distancing as stigma management.

One of the major ways in which members of the Westboro Baptist Church manage what they understand as the stigma of their Biblical framework of viewing the world is by distancing themselves from this attribute by disavowing personal agency in proclaiming this Biblical perspective as truth. This denial of personal involvement is revealed in the persistent insistence of many of the members that they were both under an obligation to engage in these protests, and that their own selves are merely a tool for God's words to be spread through public ministry.

This theme ran throughout many of the interviews. For example, Joel said that, "I want my discussion to be filled with the scriptures. So, this isn't about us, you know? We're ambassadors, this is not about us. So I don't want any of that. I don't care about any of that

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stuff." Another member more explicitly separated the message emphasized in their protests from the individuals within the group, saying:

> See, this message really isn't about us. God doesn't need us. He could have dropped any group of people into this spot and one of the times when they were complaining about the disciples being, um, you know, stirring things up, he said, "If they didn't say it, the stones would say it." So, when they meet, I often get "Oh, you're nothing like I thought." But it's not about us. We're honestly pretty bland people when it gets down to it. So, you kinda have to separate that from the message. Nobody agrees with the message.

In this way, the members of the Westboro Baptist Church are able to maintain a collective identity that contains within it this inducement to engage in these protests that put them in conflict with broader society, while at the same time distancing themselves as individuals from the stigma of these protests. The members understand themselves to be unobjectionable, if not friendly people, who are stigmatized by a society that hates the message of the church, but not the members as individuals. Westboro Baptist Church members therefore engage in stigma management by distancing themselves on a personal level from the attribute that they understand as being stigmatized by society.

Disengagement as stigma management

Members of the Westboro Baptist Church not only mentally distance themselves from the attribute that they consider to be stigmatized, they additionally engage in distancing themselves from individuals who they believe might stigmatize them. None of the members interviewed mentioned any interpersonal relationships with individuals outside of the church that were anything deeper than friendly acquaintances. In addition, many members voiced a disinterest in interacting with those outside of the church. The way in which Isaiah expressed this standard account was by stating that:

Isaiah: I spend a lot of time with the people I work with because I'm at work all week. But outside of that I don't spend—I don't socialize. Unless it's part of a work event. I've got my hands full and I really don't have any interest in it. I'd rather spend time, with, you know, even if I had no family of my own, uhm, I would rather spend time in fellowship with the people in the church. Because you know, what better way is there to spend your time?

Interviewer: Could you say a little more about why that's the case?

Isaiah: Why it's the case that that's a good way to spend your time? Well, because, these are the people that you share a belief in and a hope with. And these are the people that you expect to spend eternity with. And, uhm, this is part of how a church works, that they have fellowship with one another. And it's just, it's helpful for the spirit of everyone involved, I think.

Members emphasize a disinterest in engaging with those outside of the church, as a form of stigma management. Additionally, however, the members highlight that in day-to-day activities, their focus is not on promoting their religious message, but rather on completing the vocational task at hand to the best of their abilities. Joel, a middle-age lifelong member of the church, in speaking of his job stated that:

When I'm doing that work, our instruction is "What your hand finds to do, do with your might." And to do it as unto God, no matter what we're doing. And so, you know, we're supposed to be good stewards of our master's resources and work in a work context our master is the people we work for.

In the context of work, even though an interpretive Biblical framework is still in play, the members of the Westboro Baptist Church no longer are focused on their public ministry, but rather engage in completing their socially appropriate duties. This perception of the appropriate orientation towards the world while at work serves as a justification for not engaging with those

who confront them in these settings. Samuel spoke of a time when he was recognized as a member of the church, saying:

> Well, someone from my work said, he said, um, "You're a member of the Westboro Baptist Church, aren't ya?" I was like, "Yeah." "I saw you at the picket," he said "I saw you at the picket." I was like, I don't like, I mean, I'm at work to do my job, so, I just kinda brushed it off.

Members of the Westboro Baptist Church employ stigma management by not engaging with others who overtly label them as members of the church in settings in which it would be disadvantageous for the members to have their religious affiliation highlighted, such as in professional environments. Justifications for this disengagement are provided by using the same Biblical framework, which is perceived by the members to be the stigmatized attribute that they possess.

Delineating appropriate times and places.

Only particular times and places are designated by members of the Westboro Baptist Church as being appropriate venues in which to spread their message. When engaged in their day-to-day business needed for maintaining their lives and that of their families, they do not engage in explicitly advancing the Biblical framework in which they believe. Anna describes this separation between time spent preaching and time spent in daily activities, saying:

> But when I'm at work or going to a school even or at the grocery store, or at the doctor's office, that's not the appropriate time and place to bring that up, so I don't. The appropriate time and place is when I'm on my own time, you know, on the public sidewalk or some such or that.

The appropriate times and places for spreading this Biblical message for members of the Westboro Baptist Church are those designated as times for public ministry by the church. Even

though the Biblical framework that the members understand as differentiating them from those in broader society is of central importance to the members, they can put this aside in contexts in which they wish to unassumingly exist in the community. In these contexts, the members do not attempt to forward this Biblical framework, and additionally view it as inappropriate for others to attempt to engage them on topics of the Westboro Baptist Church. Deborah in speaking of this states:

> I remember being pregnant with my child, and he's about to be 17, and going into a gas station. People I didn't even know, but they knew me, it's that unknown, yet well-known. Some guy comes in, "All because of YOU, blah, blah, blah" and you know, I don't really ever feel afraid. But, when I thought back, I thought that's just hostile. Who would come up to a woman—I was very pregnant.

The delineation between appropriate and inappropriate times and places to orient towards society in a religious context is not only understood by the members as applying to themselves, but also as applying to those who are not members of the church. The members adhere to these compartmentalizations of their time as a method of stigma management, in that in these interactions with the community they attempt to deemphasize and cover their religious framework as a stigmatized attribute. In these contexts, the members of the church have a negative view of individuals who enter into these interactions and who proceed to emphasize their knowledge of the religious framework followed by the members of the church.

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Chapter 6 - Discussion

The Westboro Baptist Church exists within a cultural context of American Christianity, in particular Protestant fundamentalism, and the beliefs that the church promotes with regards to ambivalence towards wider society are a reflection of this cultural context (Marsden, 2006). Even while the Westboro Baptist Church exists in this context, the belief system that it maintains promotes direct engagement with and condemnation of society, which sets it apart from other fundamentalist denominations.

The present study investigated the ways in which the members of the Westboro Baptist Church understand themselves in relation to wider society. Employing both stigma theory as well as the subcultural identity theory of religion allows a deeper understanding of the way in which the members understand their church membership in relation to society, as well as how members individually negotiate interactions with members of society. This research fills a gap in the present literature in that it utilizes these two theories, which are frequently used in different bodies of research, by integrating them so that they inform one another in the present study.

As the subcultural identity theory of religious persistence would suggest, the Westboro Baptist Church members' understanding of the world creates a clear symbolic boundary between members of the church and those outside of the church (Smith, 1998). Additionally, members of the church clearly set themselves against a negative reference group in wider society, which they understand as the antithesis of themselves. In holding this unique framework of beliefs and in characterizing those who do not hold this same worldview as evil, the Westboro Baptist Church can then enter into what it understands to be justified intergroup conflict. This persistent

confrontation with an out-group that is deemed to be inferior promotes the cohesion of the Westboro Baptist Church as well as solidifying the collective identity of the members.

The subthemes of the members of the Westboro Baptist Church engaging in the designation of others as a negative reference group and disengaging with others as a stigma management strategy are in line with previous studies. These studies indicate that the in-group evaluation and subsequent out-group devaluation can be associated with strength of religious belief, as is the case with the core framework held by the Westboro Baptist Church (Ysseldyk et al., 2010). For the Westboro Baptist Church as well, the strength of their religious beliefs and the opposition from the broader community, appears promote disidentification from wider society (Kunst et al., 2012; Vassenden & Andersson, 2011). The narratives of Westboro Baptist Church members are also consistent with previous findings that members of a group tend to employ tactics to manage attempts by the out-group to devaluate the group of which they are a part (Cairns et al., 2006; Ellemers & Rijswijk, 1997).

The manner in which the members of the Westboro Baptist Church conceive of themselves as stigmatized due to their core framework of beliefs is illuminative of the variations in the process of stigma management. While selective self-disclosure is a strategy that has been found to lead to beneficial support for the stigmatized individual (Ilic, et. al., 2012; Koken, 2012; Newheiser & Barreto, 2014; Winnick & Bodkin, 2008), members of the Westboro Baptist Church did not describe themselves as engaging in this type of stigma management. Many members understood themselves as already being known by outsiders as members of the church, and it is possible that this eliminated any inclination to engage in self-disclosure and instead promoted disengagement as a stigma management strategy with those who were not church members. Additionally, while concealment of stigma has been linked to increased perceptions of

social isolation (Newheiser & Barreto, 2014), Westboro Baptist Church members maintain a framework of belief that understands distance from the wider society as a positive goal. This framework may reduce the perception of social isolation as a negative consequence of not disclosing a stigmatizing attribute.

In fact, the stigma management strategies that the Westboro Baptist Church members do engage in, distancing, disengagement, and the delineation of appropriate times and places to spread their Biblical message, are all strategies that promote separation from those outside of the church. These stigma management strategies that involve disengagement from and disidentification with wider society are consistent those employed by other religious individuals, including Muslims and Jews, who experience stigmatization based on their beliefs (Kunst, et al., 2012; Vassenden & Andersson, 2011). Future research examining stigma management strategies engaged in by individuals from a wide range of religious traditions may be illuminative of further consistencies or differences in strategies employed in cases of religious stigma.

These stigma management strategies engaged in by Westboro Baptist Church members also involve a de-emphasis the core framework of belief held by the members, which is a method of passing or covering employed by individuals who possess a concealable stigma (DeJordy, 2008, Smart & Wegner, 1999). There is a delicate balance then that must be maintained by the members of the Westboro Baptist Church as they discredit themselves and are stigmatized through their public protests, yet at the same time maintain employment and go through their everyday lives within the community in which they are discredited. This intentional de-emphasis of the members' worldview in certain contexts serves as a means of maintaining oppositional beliefs, and a way of resisting the norms held by the broader community (Simi & Futrell, 2009). Notably, this strategy is not acknowledged by members as a means to maintain their belief

framework in their daily lives but rather is interpreted through the framework itself. For example, not engaging in religious discussion in the workplace is justified by the necessity of being "good stewards of our master's resources," which is a Biblically based interpretation an appropriate work ethic.

The manner in which members of the Westboro Baptist Church understand themselves as stigmatized due to their adherence to a core framework of beliefs illuminates a number of areas within the subcultural identity theory of religion that warrant further investigation. As previously discussed, the experience of being stigmatized by an out-group has been demonstrated in the stigma literature to promote disidentification and disengagement from wider society by the in-group (Kunst, et al., 2012; Vassenden & Andersson, 2011; Ysseldyk et al., 2010). Additionally, the subcultural identity theory of religion proposes that religious groups draw symbolic boundaries between themselves and other groups, that these religious groups understand themselves in contrast to negative reference groups, and that intergroup conflict will promote in-group cohesion (Smith, 1998). Both these descriptions of the consequences of stigmatization, as well as the propositions of the subcultural identity theory, are consistent with the narratives offered by the members of the Westboro Baptist Church. These findings lead to the question: What role does stigmatization play in the maintenance of symbolic boundaries, designation of negative reference groups, and emergence of intergroup conflict? Future research is therefore needed to explore the role of stigma in the maintenance of subcultural groups.

While the present study contributes to the existent literature on the subcultural identity theory of religion as well as that of stigma, it does possess a number of limitations. The predominant limitation is undoubtedly the limited time spent with individual members of the Westboro Baptist Church. This limitation was due to the fact that the individual in charge of

media relations for the church granted a restricted amount of access for this research. This time limit no doubt inhibited both the level of openness at which the members felt they could communicate, as well as the depth of the descriptions of their experiences and understandings. More in-depth means of qualitative data collecting, such as ethnography, could be used to curtail this limitation (Berg, 2004). Additionally, interviewing additional members might serve to provide a greater understanding of the views held by members as a whole.

Despite these limitations, this research provides valuable insight into how members of the Westboro Baptist Church understand society. Employing both the subcultural identity theory of religion as well as stigma theory provides a unique theoretical perspective in the examination of a group that exists in conflict with society, and it may be beneficial to utilize this combination of theory in future inquiries of such groups. Additionally, this study demonstrates the way in which individuals' understandings of their stigma contributes to the particular ways in which they negotiate that stigma in their interactions with others. Lastly, the understandings that the members of the Westboro Baptist Church have of their relation to society explicated in this study adds to the body of sociological knowledge of how groups such as this exist and persist within a society with which they are in conflict.

Examining the dimensions of stigma management practiced by other religious groups marginalized by society would be a valuable direction for future research. Members of the Westboro Baptist Church employ distancing from their core framework of beliefs, disengagement, and designating appropriate times and places in which to preach as methods of stigma management. Exploring similarities and differences between these and other manners of negotiating stigma would provide insight as to the ways in which other stigmatized religious groups relate to and interact with members of broader society.

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Appendix A - Interview Guide

Introductory questions:

Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?

What do you do for a living/ where do you go to school?

How do you like to spend your free time?

Can you tell me about the people you spend most of your time with? What are the things you like to do together? What do you talk about?

Could you walk me through a normal day at work/school for you?

Church Involvement:

How did you decide to join the church?

How long have you been a member of the Westboro Baptist Church?

How has your life changed since joining the church?

What were your views about religion prior to joining the church?

Personal meaning of church:

What does the church mean to you?

How do you think people who are not members as view your church?

What role does the church play in your life on a day to day basis?

What kinds of activities do you participate in that are related to WBC?

What are your thoughts on the media portrayals of the WBC?

If you could tell someone who is not familiar with what WBC stands for one thing about your church, what would you tell them?

What do you think the biggest obstacle the WBC faces in terms of spreading their message?

Protests: One of the things that the public most recognizes the Westboro Baptist Church for are the protests it holds.

How is the decision made where/what to protest?

How are you involved in public protests? What influences you to protest? What does protesting mean to you? Who else is involved in the protests?

Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about your life or participation in the WBC?