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Developmental Themes Associated with Religious Activity After Early Return from a Latter-day Saint Mission

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In the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, qualified young men are expected (and young women are given the option) to complete extended missionary service during the transition to adulthood. Some youth end their missionary service short of the anticipated duration, which is associated with markedly lower rates of religious activity post-return. This study is a qualitative inquiry into the developmental themes associated with early returned missionaries from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who chose to remain active (be consistently involved with the church), sampling from areas with high rates of Latter-day Saint activity, where stigmatization of an early return is highest. Seventeen active early returned missionaries were administered semi-structured interviews. Six prominent (occurring a majority of the time) developmental themes emerged from these interviews: identity transformation, optimistic future orientation, cognitive/emotional reconciliation, strengthened religious conviction, enhanced empathic capacity, and perceptual change. Perceptual change would have been a non-majority theme if male responses had been excluded. Three contrast cases of inactive early returned missionaries are included.

A particularly salient rite of passage for youth in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is missionary service, seen within the church as somewhat of a transition to adulthood (Riess 2019). In general, rites of passage seem to be a universal part of human development (Dunham, Kidwell, and Wilson 1986). However, they are often context-specific, such as being unique to particular faith traditions (Yung 2023). Rites of passage, including in religious contexts, often shape the transition from adolescence to young adulthood (Venable

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1997). One's experience with a particularly salient rite of passage could possibly influence perception of ideas and institutions associated with that particular rite of passage, including in the case of early return from missionary service within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Missionary service is expected to last for two years (for men, for whom missionary service is an obligation) or 18 months (for women, for whom missionary service is welcomed but not required). Social scientists have previously engaged with rates of post-mission *activity* (being consistently involved with the church) as a topic of research. Early returned missionaries (ERMs) have notable inactivity rates, observed in both qualitative (Doty et al. 2015) and quantitative (Riess 2019) work; in the latter publication, a nationally representative survey, early returned missionaries disaffiliated from church membership at a rate of 29%, compared with a disaffiliation rate of 9% for missionaries who completed the full term of their missions. Why do those who remain active do so, despite this experience? There is limited research in which specific developmental themes are associated with continued activity among early returned Latter-day Saint missionaries. The present study is an exploratory qualitative inquiry into the developmental experiences of active Latter-day Saint early returned missionaries, using narrative methodology.

Rites of Passage

The term “rite of passage” was first proposed by Arnold van Gennep, who stated that rites of passage: are liminal in nature (that they have a beginning and an ending), involve separating from society in some way (which includes a sort of separation from the formal self), and finish with an aggregation of the experience (one re-emerged in society with a new identity) (Turner 1960; van Gennep 1909). Essentially, they can be seen as a transition from one stage of life to another. Rites of passage often occur in different cultural and religious contexts (Yung 2023).

In Western cultures, rites of passage are commonplace in adolescence and one's transition to adulthood. For example, aspects of the high school experience could include rites of passage that prepare one for adulthood, such as a graduation ceremony (Larson 1988), while marriage ceremonies are also seen as rites of passage (Arosio 2016). In other cultures, rites of passage are similarly common for one's development into adulthood (Abbey et al. 2021). Rites of passage may be transitive in one's life, assisting in the transition from adolescence to adulthood (Venable 1997).

Religion is a developmental context that often involves rites of passage. In the Catholic Church, the process of initiation includes certain rites of passage, comprised of baptism, confirmation, and receiving the Eucharist. In Judaism, one comes of age with the Bar/Bat Mitzvah. The Hindu rite of passage of Upanayana signifies a boy's readiness to begin religious learning and includes communal acceptance. However, in instances where a rite of passage in a religious context is not fully completed, developmental outcomes might be influenced. The idea of incomplete rites of passage is not new (Hunter 2008) but remains understudied, particularly in religious contexts.

Latter-day Saint Early Returned Missionaries

One important incomplete religious rite of passage is returning home early from missionary service for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Serving a mission is an important rite of passage (Riess 2019), in which a late adolescent or young adult develops from and experiences both perceived successes and failures. Latter-day Saints can apply for missionary service beginning at age 18. As noted above, men are expected to serve for two full years. Women are welcomed to serve for 18 months if they so desire. While women are not obligated to serve a mission, they may be motivated to do so because they feel that God, family, or friends want them to. Thus, it is possible that some individual female missionaries may feel a similar degree of external duty to fulfill their missionary service. However, the collective experience of missionary service is inherently different between men and women due to the disparity in time (which is six months longer for men) and social expectations (where only men are obligated to serve a mission). As such, this report will comment on any notable gender differences.

A mission can be particularly important to individual development and can increase one's cultural understanding (Clifton 2018), although high expectations may lead people who have pre-existing perfectionistic tendencies to experience anxiety while serving missions, as these conditions are correlated (Saboonchi and Lundh 1997). Thus, one may experience both positive and negative experiences, even when serving the full term of a mission. However, perceptions of experiences and associated outcomes might differ for those who do not complete the full expected tenure of their missions.

Some missionaries either choose to return home early or are sent home early by mission authorities. While some who return early end up returning to their assigned mission area and completing their missionary service, many do

not and may endure hardships as a result. In a survey of 348 ERMs, the majority of respondents felt that they were “received indifferently or poorly” by their local congregation, and many felt the same about how their local leaders treated them (Doty et al. 2015, 41). Around one-third of respondents reported that their “friends and family were indifferent or unkind.” As this may reflect how many ERMs feel about their circumstances, it is important to understand whether being in this situation can result in positive or negative development. In the same study’s survey, less than one-quarter reported breaking church rules prior to their missions or breaking mission rules as the reason for their return. Some reported returning purely for mental or physical health reasons (Doty et al. 2015).

Social contexts have a major impact on one’s level of well-being (Helliwell and Putnam 2004), and as such ERMs who return to cultures with high church activity, wherein early return is more likely to be stigmatized, may find their return more difficult than those who return to a place where missionary service is not commonplace. One author posited using grounded theory that activity level for missionaries who return home to Utah, a U.S. state with high membership in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, relates to the levels of social acceptance that the returned missionary receives (Chou 2013). As such, it is meaningful to this particular exploratory inquiry to sample active ERMs from areas with higher church activity, to provide insight into which developmental processes are associated with continuing church activity *despite* higher levels of stigmatization.

How might outcomes be different for those who return home early and remain religiously active? And for those who do not serve for the entire duration, do they feel that they have completed this rite of passage? These questions require more research, as there are only two existing peer-reviewed articles that focus their study on LDS ERMs or those even associated with ERMs: the aforementioned study that surveyed 348 ERMs and conducted qualitative interviews with 12 male ERMs (Doty et al. 2015) and one that studied parents of ERMs (Doty-Yells et al. 2017).

Identity Development

Since rites of passage may be particularly important to identity formation, failed rites of passage may have a salient impact as well. One approach to identity development that might be particularly useful for understanding ERMs is that of narrative identity (McAdams 2011). During late adolescence and

young adulthood, individuals begin to construct life narratives, which become a core part of their identity. A person's narrative identity is the story they tell themselves and others about their life. This is like a book, comprised of key characters, a general plot, overarching themes, and critical moments (often called "turning points"). Interestingly, such turning point moments during late adolescence and young adulthood often remain strongly salient in the life narrative throughout adulthood. Thus, this critical period profoundly shapes the developing narrative identity of LDS prospective and returned missionaries, as this is the time when Latter-day Saint youth are encouraged to serve missions. A disrupted or integrated narrative identity may explain how ERM's psychologically process and are impacted by their truncated rite of passage.

Similarly, religion creates a structure for making meaning in life, and as such is formative in creating identities (Reimer and Dueck 2012). The experience of returning early from a mission can be daunting and difficult. Those who can make meaning from hardship (Ryff 2014) and have a support group, such as a supportive family (Walsh 2020), are more likely to experience growth (Zeligman et al. 2018). Therefore, it is likely that an ERM's narrative identity is positively shaped by the meaning they assign to their experience and the degree of support they receive from the people around them (Cho 2021).

Future Orientation

In addition to their impact on identity, incomplete rites of passage, such as returning home early from a Latter-day Saint mission, might also affect how youth envision their future. This is particularly important to understand, as future orientation is something people may consider more than their past, despite their past being more knowable (Baumeister, Vohs, and Oettingen 2016). Rites of passage in general serve the purpose of educating and preparing individuals for their futures (Weichold, Mahama, and Fehmer 2023). Further understanding of how ERM's perceive their futures will contribute to understanding rites of passage. This may also inform better interventions post-mission and give insights into how to assist missionaries who struggle with returning early.

The Present Study

The guiding research question for this study was: Which developmental themes are associated with continued activity after returning early from a mission for

the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints? We chose to investigate this question using qualitative interviews. Qualitative methodology can be particularly useful in exploring topics that may be difficult for the participants to re-live (Zhou et al. 2022). This study provides insight into the developmental themes that emerged from interviews of a group of active ERMs sourced from areas with higher stigmatization of ERMs.

Methods

Participants

Our initial sample included 20 young adults (11 female, nine male) who had returned home early from serving a mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Participants were first sampled from a database comprising states in the Western United States, where there is high Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints membership relative to the rest of the world, and then through snowball sampling from the initial participants. Of the 20 participants, 17 (eight female, nine male) indicated that they were *active* members of the church, meaning that they regularly attended Sunday worship services and were otherwise believing and involved. In terms of the various reasons given for their early return, seven were due to mental health challenges, five to physical health challenges, two to negative experiences with other missionaries, one to college enrollment, one to disobeying mission rules, and one to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Three female *inactive* members, meaning that they did not regularly attend Sunday worship services, were also interviewed, but their findings are not included among those of active early returned missionaries. Two reported coming home early due to mental health challenges and one because of a faith crisis. The findings from these inactive interviews are included in Table 1 as contrast cases.

Recruitment Procedures

We started our sample with 10 active participants. Participants were eligible for the current qualitative study if they had served a mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and had ended their mission before their originally planned end date. Participants discussed their religious activity during their interview. We obtained interviews from 10 active members (and two

more inactive members) via this recruiting method. Upon the completion of these first 10 interviews, we had not yet reached coding saturation (the point at which new codes stop emerging with each additional interview). Thus, we recruited seven more active early returned missionaries (and one more inactive early returned missionary) for interviews based on the snowball method by recontacting our original sample of interviewees and asking for references. This allowed us to reach coding saturation. ERMs who consented to participate were interviewed over Zoom. The average length of interviews was 37 minutes, with a range from 21 to 63 minutes. Interviews were recorded via the Zoom recording function as well as the EaseUS desktop recording application. Potential participants were compensated with \$50 Amazon e-gift cards.

Interview Protocol

The qualitative interview protocol was semi-structured and narrative-based. Narrative research methodologies are particularly useful in understanding human experiences (Polkinghorne 1995). The interview included 11 open-ended questions, including the ERM's personal history, missionary experiences, early return, and experiences since returning early (see [Online Supplement¹](#)). From their responses, the interviewer had the option to inquire further into the participant's experiences if necessary. The interview questions were investigator-developed for this study, based on the research questions and the areas we believed would be highlighted. The interview questions were piloted with one active ERM, who gave feedback on the interview questions at the end of the pilot interview.

Coding Process

We coded our interviews searching for consistent themes that emerged from our interviews (Braun and Clarke 2006) and organized our themes using the NVivo software (version 15). The first author was the primary coder. The first author read all 20 interviews as they came in, from both active and inactive ERMs, creating open codes along the way. This resulted in 74 open codes, which were then categorized into groups, including life prior to mission, mission experiences, returning early, life after mission, relationships, what others should know, and future life. It is important to note that there were many open codes that did not fall under the category of a developmental theme relevant to

¹ <https://osf.io/hbfsfsw/files/uenv8>

this particular investigation. Codes that are classified as developmental themes include instances in which the participant changed or evolved following their early return, whether perceived positively or negatively. The themes also included participants' own perception of their futures and how they might continue to develop.

One of the co-authors, experienced with this topic and with thematic qualitative methodology, then helped to establish the validity and reliability of the coding done by the first author. The co-author double-coded a random selection of 25% of the interviews to ensure the trustworthiness of the codes. Once the coding team had reached agreement on the coding scheme based on the initial subset of interviews, the first author completed the coding process for the remaining interviews. This follows processes in studies of outcomes following a difficult experience, where a lead author who has more familiarity with the interviews has a research assistant help and input opinions and then establishes reliability with a subset of interviews being double-coded (Genuis et al. 2023; Matos et al. 2024).

Positionality Statement

The corresponding author—who oversaw the study, conducted the interviews, and was the first coder of the interviews—is an active member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The first author has been an active member their entire life and is very familiar with the cultural underpinnings of missionary service for the church. The first author also served a mission for the church and returned home early. These experiences necessarily influenced how data were collected and interpreted; this helped the author better connect with the participants and understand the nuances of their experiences.

Results

The themes from our interviews of these ERMers (who had all returned within the past five years and were still young adults) are summarized here. Any theme that appeared in a majority of the interviews of active early returned missionaries (nine or more) was classified as a majority developmental theme. Non-majority themes included decreased religious participation (four people; two of nine men, two of eight women), emergence of new psychological distress (three people; one of nine men, two of eight women), diminished religious conviction (one person; one of eight women), pessimistic future orientation

(zero people), and being an ERM not a current factor in identity (zero people). The six majority developmental themes will each be presented in detail below. For a summary table of all developmental themes, including explanations, frequencies, and representative quotes, see Table 1. We used pseudonyms for the participants to protect confidentiality.

Theme 1: Identity Transformation

Returning home early from an LDS mission profoundly shaped the identity of the ERMs. All 17 active participants reported experiencing a transformation in their identity. Participants often remarked that the person they are today is very different and that they noticed a significant amount of change. This change was usually perceived as positive:

I didn't realize how arrogant I was. ... And then through this experience, I realized like, wow, I'm actually extremely cocky. I'm just really arrogant. ... I didn't realize that until I'd gone through this and I'm like, oh my gosh, there's so much more. ... And so, it definitely was a very humbling experience and a very eye-opening like, wow, I really need to change how I think. (Stephen)

However, some participants expressed that their early return would remain a painful chapter in their life narrative. For example, Elaine remarked, "Obviously, I always carry that with me, and I just sob every time I think about it because it sucked for sure." However, Elaine later said, "I am so grateful I got sent home, which sounds so weird, but I wouldn't be who I am, where I am if I didn't get sent home." Thus, it seems the effects of this experience are multi-faceted; regardless, they can deeply affect a person. One participant remarked:

Honestly, I think coming home from my mission is a really big thing. It really defined who I am as a person and my understanding of church member[s], because before I thought a church member had to be someone that grew up in the church, that served a mission ... things like that. Then I understand that a church member is someone that just tries their best to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. And so that really helps me shape and understand the members of the Church in a broader sense and not just the typical Utah stereotypes. So, I think coming home from my mission definitely helped with that. (Sarah)

Theme 2: Optimistic Future Orientation

In our interviews, we asked, “How do you see your future unfolding given these experiences?” (referring to returning home early). Despite the difficulties associated with coming home early, all active interviewees (17 out of 17) reported having an optimistic perception of how their futures would develop, given their experiences as ERMs. Common sub-themes included a greater trust in God’s plan for them, a focus on goals, and improved self-efficacy in navigating hardship. One reported:

I think looking forward, those experiences have given me the opportunity to genuinely face opposition with optimism and not in a superficial, everything’s fine, it’ll be all right. ... I think going towards the future, those are, I see my life as one that will always be close to my Heavenly Father because I know that no matter what trials or whatever comes my way, I know what it means to be close to Him. And that’s not something that I’m ever going to stray from. And not only do I trust Him to help me through everything, but I trust myself to trust in Him if that makes sense. (Lily)

This participant was not the only one who felt that the difficulties of coming home from their mission prepared them for future difficulties they might have. Another remarked:

It’s interesting because I feel less almost fearful for the future because I’m like, I already have had something that has literally broken me down to lower than I thought I could be at, and I came out of it. So, it kind of gives me more confidence that whatever comes, I know I’ve been through the process before of only having God to rely on. So, I think it provides that perspective of I know that God will be there no matter what it is. Obviously, I don’t know what’s coming, and it could be something that comes and breaks me down. Again. Obviously, that’s what trials do, but at the same time, I’m like, I have that confidence that no matter, even if that does happen, I know that he’s there. And I think having the hope of, and almost the excitement that I have control over what influences I can have on my life, I can have control over boundaries that I set. (Ashley)

Theme 3: Cognitive/Emotional Reconciliation

The theme of reconciling one’s early return was likewise ever-present among active participants, occurring in 17 out of the 17 interviews. This is not par-

ticularly surprising, as the experience of returning home early from a mission can result in feeling dissonance, which can be uncomfortable if left unresolved. Participants reported making this peace in different ways, such as through communicating with God, resolving conflicts they had with other missionaries, receiving support from family, and finding purpose through the work they did upon returning home. One remarked:

And I still say to this day that coming home was the worst day of my life ... even though I wasn't coming home for reasons that were worthiness or mental health. It was brutal. It was really emotional. I was really tired, burnt out. I mean, I got home in January, well December, January, and with the middle of winter, nothing's going on. I don't have school. All my friends are on missions. I was all alone. That was really tough. But looking back now, that made me reassess my plans. It's why I'm at [school] right now. It's why, I mean, I'm engaged right now. I'm going to get married in four months. I met my wife at [school]. That wouldn't have happened if I didn't come home early. So, it's so many more things have lined up after coming home early that yeah, if I had stayed out six more months, I would've just done my plan the way I wanted to and not have reassessed it, ask for God's guidance. I was really stubborn. But yeah ... a lot of things happened together that all worked out in the end, but coming home was still rough during that time period. ... The farther I get from the mission, the less I really care about how long I served versus what I actually got out of it. (Taylor)

Some reported finding solace in the feeling that God had a plan for them. This participant wrote in their journal during the flight home from the mission:

My Heavenly Father is so wise in giving me an experience like this. It forces me to actually fully trust in him, which I do. This is one of the first experiences in my life that I can't fully plan out first. (Lily)

Theme 4: Strengthened Religious Conviction

A strong majority (14 out of 17) of early returned missionaries who remained active specifically mentioned having *stronger* faith in God or religion as a result of their early return during their interviews. This occurred at a rate of seven out of nine men and seven out of eight women: relatively equal rates between genders. Speaking about what their life might have been like if they had not returned home early, one participant stated:

I wouldn't have a deeper connection with Heavenly Father. I wouldn't be as in tune to receiving revelations. So, I would just kind of be like was when I was a kid floating around thinking, oh, I've never had anything hard in my life happen. And you can't live like that. You have to go through bad experiences and hard things because you come out so much stronger. (Elaine)

Another reported:

There was a time that it wavered, but I'd say I've grown closer to Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ because of the experience that I've had. And I know it would've been really easy for me to be like, oh, it's fake. I don't believe it. I'm leaving the church, this, that, or the other thing. But as alone as I felt the entire time that I was going through the ordeal and getting home, I knew that I had at least someone with me through the entire experience. And it may have been dark, but it wasn't always pitch black. (Craig)

Some participants also felt they were meant to have trials and that going through them helped deepen their connection with God. One remarked:

I feel like I am stronger now because of it. ... I mean, everyone's going to have times in their life that are less than ideal. People are going to have trying times, they're going to have flat periods. You're going to have times where you might be a little depressed, but I always keep my testimony in my relationship with God constant. So, I just never see a reason why to stop doing those things when those things help you get through the hardest challenges. (Taylor)

Similarly, one participant said:

I think it just really taught me that as real as Christ and his Atonement are, Satan and his followers are just as real, that darkness is just as real. And so, because of that, the steps I took afterward, it made me read the scriptures harder than I've ever read in my life, and it's made me love just light, seeing people's light, and the light of Christ in them. I feel like I'm able to see it so easily and I appreciate it so much because I've seen the darkness. ... And so, I just am really, really grateful for the hard. ... I was never a missionary to pray for hard experiences, but they were given to me. And I think really just how I was able to come to love the Book of Mormon and come to love my Savior, that is what really made a difference in my life, and that is really the experience that I think has shaped me from my mission. (Callie)

This tone of positivity rang true for many, but there was one who reported more difficulties after returning home:

And actually when I got back, I had a long period of time where that wasn't as important to me. I still went to church, I still prayed. Reading my scriptures has gotten really hard, a lot of why me, God, when I wanted to go on a mission for you, and this all sounds so stupid now, but right when I chose to go out on a mission to serve you, was I abused and bullied and hurt when everybody has all these such good experiences on missions and why? Why did I have to be the one to go through that? And that was really hard ... I'm still, even though it's been about two years since I came home, I still, I love God. I love going to church. I love Jesus Christ. But my testimony has definitely dwindled a lot, and I don't blame God at all. (Valerie)

Theme 5: Enhanced Empathic Capacity

A strong majority of participants (13 out of the 17 interviewees) mentioned increased empathy as a result of their early return. This occurred at a rate of eight out of nine men and five out of eight women. This is the first theme in which a somewhat notable gender disparity manifested, favoring men. Participants reported feelings of increased empathy for other ERMs, those who struggle with living up to expectations within the church, and/or anyone going through difficulties.

I'm a lot less judgmental towards [other ERMs]. At the beginning of my mission, I would hear those kinds of stories and I'd be like, I can't believe that they would do something like that. So just that's impossible for me to be able to comprehend. There's no way that somebody could actually do that. And then I did it and they were all like, and I was like, oh my gosh, I need to be a lot more just caring for everybody else. Everybody has their own issues. Everybody has their own sins that they're going through that they're trying to repent for. And I just need to be there as a loving individual who's there to support and not there to judge. (Stephen)

This sentiment continued with others:

I think I am a lot more forgiving of other people. I think not just people who've come home. Obviously, I have sympathy for them, but overall, before and on the mission, I could never imagine why someone would leave the church, why X, Y, Z problems. But I think coming home, having a real struggle, really enabled me to have a lot of empathy for everyone. I

think through those struggles, I think I'm just generally a lot more understanding of people. (Brad)

Elaine later said, "Maybe I'm a little bit more compassionate on people who struggle with the church because I mean, I struggled, and a lot of people say things about people that come home."

Another stated:

I'd say it was unique and unique to just me. Had it been anyone else, maybe they could have thrived in the situations and maybe they would've cracked under the pressure, but I don't know. It made me who I am today, and I see myself as a kind, loving, playful person that wants to see everyone succeed and do the best in all that they can. And had I not seen myself be in such a low point in my life, then I wouldn't be able to reach out to others in a similar state. (Craig)

Theme 6: Perceptual Change

Although a perceptual change can be part of one's ability to make peace with their situations, perceptual change may not coincide with making peace. A little over half of the participants (11 out of 17) reported that the way they saw their early return changed as they gathered more information. This occurred at a rate of eight out of nine men and three out of eight women. This was an interesting case as it was not a majority theme for women, but the strong imbalance at which it occurred for men pulled it into a majority theme when genders were combined. One of these three women participants, who returned home early from a "service mission" (where they lived at home and did not proselytize but participated in service projects), said that serving God did not necessarily have to be defined in one way: "You're just serving in different capacities, which is exactly what Jesus Christ did" (Rachel). On the other hand, one of the women for whom perceptual change did not occur mentioned that she had felt the same way about her early return since coming home:

"Most central to who I am now is the peace that I felt when I was coming home ... I feel like I'm in a place in life where that's my default is to feel peace and to feel close to my Savior, to feel close to my Heavenly Father. I think that's a part of who I actually am ... And it's the same feeling that I feel like every day." (Lily)

Although participants often reported perceptual change, some still felt that their negative memories would never truly leave them. In these cases, the

perceptual change was not thinking of their experiences as missionaries and returning early as positive per se but rather that it was something that had a dramatic influence on their former lives. One of the male participants stated:

So, I felt like a big part of my process coming home was kind of ... redefining what coming home from my mission early meant for me. It was less like I did something bad and more, it was something that I got to learn from. And it didn't mean that I was incomplete, or I had not completed a task, but that I had completed a task and that I had done it diligently and that it just looked different than other people. ... And I still have missionary nightmares. I still dream that I'm out on the mission and then I wake up and it's like, oh, that was horrible. I'd hate to be back there. (Gabe)

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore common qualitative developmental themes in a sample of early returned missionaries who remain active in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The interview questions were specifically designed to be open-ended and can be found in the Appendix of this paper.

Theme 1, identity transformation, occurred in all 17 interviews. We classified identity transformation as an instance where one mentions specific changes in self-perception. Since an early return from a mission occurs during the transition from adolescence to early adulthood, identity development will be crucial, as a strong sense of identity is particularly important to develop from one's adolescence (Erikson 1968). This is particularly relevant to the person's understanding of religiosity (Ysseldyk, Matheson, and Anisman 2010). So, it is not surprising that identity development was such a prevalent theme in our interviews.

Theme 2, optimistic future orientation, occurred in all 17 interviews. In the interviews, we asked: "How do you see your future unfolding given these experiences?" (referring to returning home early). Individuals tend to shift away from optimistic outlooks when faced with the idea of an uncontrollable future (Sweeny, Carroll, and Shepperd 2006). This implies that active ERMs may generally believe that they still have control over how their lives turn out. This finding should be explored in future studies.

Theme 3, cognitive/emotional reconciliation, was multi-faceted in its sub-themes and showed that individuals find various ways to come to terms with their situations as active ERMs. It is not surprising that making peace was

such a common theme among active interviewees, also occurring in all 17. Guilt, in particular, is an implication of cognitive dissonance (Kenworthy et al. 2011). Reduction of cognitive dissonance is particularly important to those experiencing it (Festinger 1962).

Theme 4, strengthened religious conviction, occurred in a majority of interviews (14 of 17; seven of nine men, seven of eight women). However, one active woman reported weaker belief in God or religion due to her early return. While a majority of active ERMs reported testimony growth, that wasn't always the case. Future mixed-methods research is needed to understand which factors predict stronger or weaker religious conviction. Using such methods would benefit the field as a whole (Davis et al. 2016).

Theme 5, enhanced empathic capacity, was mentioned in 13 of 17 interviews (eight of nine men, five of eight women). There is somewhat of a disparity in gender reporting favoring men for this particular theme, which could be a result of stronger social pressure on men to complete a full-time mission, or possibly due to existing social pressure on women to have already developed stronger empathic skills from a younger age (meaning that there could have been less empathy for these women to build). In actuality, the percentage of active ERMs who reported increased empathy for others might have been higher if they all had been asked that question directly, so the fact that increased empathy for others emerged in so many conversations is notable. This can turn out to be beneficial for society, as higher levels of empathy are associated with more prosocial behaviors (Eisenberg and Miller 1987). Future research should more explicitly explore empathy as an outcome of failed religious rites of passage and examine gender effects on empathic development in early returned missionaries.

Theme 6, perceptual change, was mentioned a narrow majority of the time (11 of 17; eight of nine men, three of eight women). The gender disparity within the reporting of this theme is now strongly notable, as this is not a majority theme among women. It is possible that high rates of perceptual change in men are due to associations of change with the perception of a man's full-term missionary service as a commandment from God. Intertwining reconciliation and perceptual change can be seen in Brad's instance: his peacemaking was a result of his perceptual change. However, Gabe mentioned that his perception of his mission is something that he will continue to process (consistent with narrative identity theory; see McAdams 2011). There is nuance in how an active ERM's perceptions of their experiences may impact the ways they report said experiences. It would be helpful to conduct longitudinal studies of the

degree to which evolving perception of experiences influences other majority experiences.

These exploratory findings detail the lived experiences of a group of ERMs who continue with activity in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. These findings are not transferable, especially in instances where the rite of passage is not as socially relevant. Future research should interview inactive early returned missionaries specifically and report on their development and lived experiences, as doing so could influence how resources for this subpopulation of early returned missionaries are developed. Additionally, it is important to stress that the experiences that led the majority of these active ERMs to experience positive development were enormously difficult, and many appeared to find it difficult to speak about these experiences. Future research should specifically focus on negative developmental outcomes. The lack of commonality in negative themes between interviews may be a result of individuals desiring to over-report positive outcomes as a coping mechanism. It could also be that negative developmental themes are more individual and do not group together, as positive outcomes do. Future qualitative studies of this particular subpopulation should specifically ask which negative developmental outcomes an active ERM has had post-return.

Limitations

The results of this study should be interpreted in light of its limitations. First, the nature of the study as a self-report style of interview may influence individuals to paint their perceptions in a more positive light. Despite this, self-report is a necessary measure to use for understanding people (Brener, Billy, and Grady 2003). Concerns could be mitigated in the future by interviewing those close to the missionaries, such as parents, siblings, or friends, for their perspectives on how the active ERMs developed after returning home.

Second, the sample was comprised entirely of missionaries who had returned home early within the past five years. As such, there may be more lasting effects from the early return that we could not observe due to the sample of interviewees being structured the way it was. However, those who have been home longer may not remember their experiences and development as clearly. Third, it would provide better insight in future studies to separate out findings by the reason for one's early return. Fourth, given that this is an explorative qualitative study on lived experiences, it is not sufficiently powered to draw quantitative conclusions on activity among all ERMs.

Fifth, this study included a relatively equal amount of men (nine) and women (eight). The experience of missionary service and its social implications are substantively different between men and women, as noted earlier. So, developmental themes, while first reported combined, are also reported split between genders both in-text and in Table 1 for an idea of where noteworthy disparities lie (most notably in perceptual change as well as in increased empathic capacity).

Sixth, this study sampled from regions in which church activity is higher. ERMes who return to these areas are likely to encounter more stigmatization from their social settings upon their early return. Thus, these exploratory findings are not generalizable to developmental themes associated with continued activity in ERMes who return to areas with sparse church activity, who may not encounter the same levels of stigmatization.

Conclusion

This study specifically surveyed the developmental experiences of a group of active early returned missionaries from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, using qualitative methodologies to determine which developmental themes are associated with continued church activity. Alongside the majority findings of cognitive/emotional reconciliation, enhanced empathic capacity, strengthened religious conviction, and perceptual change, this provides strong implications for theory, research, and practice. We hope this adds to the overall understanding of religious rites of passage and inspires further work on the impact of failed rites of passage on developmental experiences in general.

In terms of implications for theory, our studies expand the understanding of non-normative, non-linear developmental phenomena. Most developmental theories focus on accounting for normative, linear development, largely ignoring perturbations in the typical trajectory (Lerner et al. 2006). Additionally, this study provides evidence that meaning-making develops over time and is a part of the construction of narrative identity, as has been theorized previously (McAdams 2011). Implications for future research include the utility of qualitative methods for understanding development, particularly points in development such as rites of passage. Active ERMes who returned early longer than five years ago should be studied to better understand developmental themes in this subpopulation after more time has passed post-return.

Table 1. Summary of Developmental Themes

Theme	Definition	Frequency	Illustrative Quote
Identity Transformation	Feeling as though the person they are now is different from the person they were prior to the process of their early return	17/17 Active - 9/9 Male 8/8 Female - 3/3 Inactive	"Through this experience, I realized like... I'm just really arrogant... And so, it definitely was a very humbling experience and a very eye-opening like, wow, I really need to change how I think." – Stephen
Optimistic Future Orientation	Feeling that, given their experiences returning early, their future will be positive	17/17 Active - 9/9 Male 8/8 Female - 2/3 Inactive	"I feel less, almost, fearful for the future because... I already have had something that has literally broken me down to lower than I thought I could be at, and I came out of it. So, it kind of gives me more confidence that whatever comes, I know I've been through the process before of only having God to rely on." – Ashley
Cognitive / Emotional Reconciliation	A mental reconciliation with their early return	17/17 Active - 9/9 Male 8/8 Female - 2/3 Inactive	"My Heavenly Father is so wise in giving me an experience like this. It forces me to actually fully trust in him, which I do. This is one of the first experiences in my life that I can't fully plan out first." – Lily
Strengthened Religious Conviction	A stronger relationship with, belief in, or trust in God or religion due to their early return	14/17 Active - 7/9 Male 7/8 Female - 0/3 Inactive	"I feel like I am stronger now (in testimony) because of it... everyone's going to have times in their life that are less than ideal... I just never see a reason why to stop doing those things when those things help you get through the hardest challenges." – Taylor
Enhanced Empathic Capacity	Mentions a greater degree of empathy towards others	13/17 Active - 8/9 Male 5/8 Female - 3/3 Inactive	"It made me who I am today... had I not seen myself be in such a low point in my life, then I wouldn't be able to reach out to others in a similar state." – Craig

* Fractions in the **frequency** column indicate the proportion of respondents within a specific category whose statements aligned with a given theme. The numerator represents the number of individuals who referenced the theme, while the denominator represents the total number of respondents in that subgroup (17 total active, 9 male, 8 female, 3 inactive).

Table 1. Summary of Developmental Themes (continued)

Theme	Definition	Frequency	Illustrative Quote
Perceptual Change	A change in how they perceived their early return	11/17 Active - 8/9 Male 3/8 Female - 1/3 Inactive	"It was less like I did something bad and more... that I had done it diligently and that it just looked different than other people." – Gabe
Decreased Religious Participation	Reports instance of less attendance in Church services due to their early return	4/17 Active - 2/9 Male 2/8 Female - 3/3 Inactive	"But during that period, I think my attendance... kind of faltered... I never went to second hour. I didn't feel a lot of motivation to do that." – Jake
Emergence of New Psychological Distress	Mentions feeling a new or worse mental health struggle due to their early return	3/17 Active - 1/9 Male 2/8 Female - 1/3 Inactive	"The church puts you through therapy... I am very closed off now... it actually ended up being almost like PTSD... I ended up just moving back home after about three months." – Valerie
Diminished Religious Conviction	A weaker relationship with, belief in, or trust in God or religion due to their early return	1/17 Active - 0/9 Male 1/8 Female - 3/3 Inactive	"I was very isolated... I had kind of built my moral authority and my understanding of myself around the church... I no longer attend." – Allison
Pessimistic Future Orientation	Feeling that one's future is worse in some way due to their early return	0/17 Active - 0/9 Male 0/8 Female - 1/3 Inactive	"The mental pain of it... I think if I had had a great experience on my mission... that the whole religion thing wouldn't be so painful." – Joan
Being an ERM is not a current factor in identity	Feeling that being an early returned missionary is not a part of one's identity now	0/17 Active - 0/9 Male 0/8 Female - 1/3 Inactive	"I don't know. It doesn't really have an effect on my identity... That was enough for me." – Kayla

Appendix: ERM Narrative Interview Guide

Before beginning the interview, ensure that both computer audio-capturing software and Zoom recording are running and working.

- Greet the interviewee:
 - “Hello [name]! Thank you so much for meeting with me today. Before we begin the interview, I just wanted to let you know that we will be recording your answers but that the interview will be kept anonymous outside of our lab. Do you have any questions before we begin?”
 - Answer any questions. Afterwards, or if no questions, follow up with: “Great! Just so you know, I may stop you at certain points if you bring up something I’d want to dive deeper into! Let’s begin the interview.”

Personal Background and Life Context

- “I’d love for you to share your life story apart from your mission, starting with your early experiences in life.”
 - Where they grew up
 - Family dynamics
 - Family religiousness/spirituality
 - Their individual religious/spiritual development
 - Important moments that shaped them before their mission
 - “What aspects of these early experiences do you feel have influenced who you are today?”

Mission Experience and Early Return

- “Could you walk me through the journey of your whole mission experience?”
 - Initial decision to go
 - Thoughts and feelings while leaving on their mission
 - Significant moments while on their mission
 - The circumstances that led to their early return?
- “How did you experience the transition back home?”
 - Internal reactions
 - External reactions

Reflections on Identity and Community

- “In the time since returning, how have you felt about your identity as an early returned missionary?”
 - Particular moments or interactions that stand out (shaping their identity)
- “How has coming home early from your mission affected your church activity, testimony, and relationship to God and Christ?”
- “Can you describe how your relationships have evolved or changed for you post-return?”
 - Family
 - Friends
 - Church community

Personal Growth and Self-Reflection

- “Reflecting on the time since your return, how have you come to view yourself and your journey?”
 - Particular lessons or insights
- “Looking back, what parts of your story do you think are most central to who you are now?”
- “How do you see your future unfolding given these experiences?”
- “Is there anything else you would share with me to better help me understand your experience as an early returned missionary?”

After finishing, say “All right, that’s all the questions I have for today! Thank you so much for meeting with me. Do you have any questions before I go?”

- If yes: answer any questions.
- Afterwards, or if no, say: “You’ll receive that \$50 Amazon gift card within 1 to 2 weeks. Thank you again, hope you have a great day!”
- End interview. Upload recording of interview to Box.

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