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Return with Honor: An Investigation of the Reentry Experiences and Discourses of Returning Missionaries in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints

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ABSTRACT

Reentry is one of the most difficult and important periods of a traveler’s journey – a time to reflect on and integrate new experiences, identities, and perspectives into life at home. This period is often bittersweet and marked by a host of challenges and symptomology. Religious language and practice may function to alleviate or exacerbate these routine reentry challenges, or introduce a host of new concerns. Situated in the nexus of religion and tourism, the purpose of this critical-constructive qualitative inquiry is to (a) investigate the experiences and discourses of returning missionaries in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and (b) explore how these experiences and discourses influence the well-being and religious commitments of emerging adults. Primary data were collected via interviews with fulltime missionaries (n = 16) who had returned to a southeastern stake of the Church between January 1, 2015 and December 31, 2016. Additional data were collected from social media posts; archival membership data; news stories; Church sermons, periodicals, handbooks, curriculum, and multimedia; and scholarly literature crossing a range of disciplines. These additional data points were used to inform discourse analyses and contextualize responses.

Review of the literature, coupled with results from multiple layers of analysis (i.e., Willson’s approach to narrative analysis, Braun and Clarke’s approach to thematic analysis, Gees’ building tasks of critical discourse analysis), provide evidence that religious and secular discourses influence reentry via multiple points across the missionary cycle (i.e., recruitment, training, departure, mission, and return) and subsequently alter or anchor their religious identity and commitments. Specifically,
feelings of alienation, loss, interpersonal discontent, and anxiety may be a product of or
worsened by discourses related to the Significance placed on the mission, the Practice of
dating and marriage, Identification as a returned missionary, the Sign Systems that
privilege returned missionary knowledge and contributions, the Politics that make
priesthood advancement and temple marriage more likely realities for returned
missionaries, and the Relationships and Connections sacrificed via the adoption of
alternative social discourses that elevate individual autonomy and engage with anti-
Mormon ideals.

As Church leaders prepare missionaries for and help them respond to the
challenges of reentry and the transition to adulthood, they may wish to more intentionally
steer the discourse of reentry via Church sermons, trainings, and more proactive social
and multimedia campaigns. Church leaders also need to balance organizational goals
(i.e., retention) with individual needs (i.e., the well-being of emerging adults). More
broadly, reentry scholars and practitioners may wish to look beyond outdated
anthropological theories of cross-cultural adjustment (i.e., theory of reverse culture
shock, cultural identity theory) to enrich understandings of reentry. For example,
evidence from this study indicated that the theory of place attachment, social comparison
theory, and human development scholarship may all help explain the challenges and
opportunities associated with reentry.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank those whose personal experience, critical feedback, wise council, consistent encouragement, and creative ideas helped make this research possible. I would especially like to thank my committee chair, Dr. Lauren N. Duffy for her amazing mentorship throughout this process. She has become a great colleague and trusted friend. To Dr. Gregory Ramshaw, thank you for guiding me through deep and rich theoretical discussions and for asking thought provoking questions. To Dr. Billy Terry, I am grateful for your expert tutelage in qualitative methods and scholarly interest in a new area of inquiry. Your genuine excitement about engaging in new terrain rekindled my passion for this project. To Dr. Dorothy Schmalz, thank you for helping me discover previously unforeseen connections between my research and scholarship in other fields.

In addition to the remarkable faculty who served on my committee, I wish to thank the missionaries who shared their time and lived experiences with reentry. This dissertation is a product of their generosity of spirit and willingness to share their experiences without restraint.

I owe a special thanks to my close friend and colleague Ryan Gagnon. Thank you for teaching me to love science and to never produce anything less than my best. Thank you to my children Anderson and Norah for bringing light into my life and reminding me to enjoy the journey. Most importantly, thank you to my patient and supportive wife Michelle. You are my rock, and I could not have completed this project without you!
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Reentry – “the transitional process of returning and reintegrating into one’s home country after an extended period abroad” (Pitts, 2016, p. 420) or “after an intercultural sojourn” (Martin & Hall, 1996, p. 308) – can be a difficult undertaking, resulting in a number of intra- and interpersonal challenges (e.g., disrupted relationships, role ambiguity, or loss of the “lifestyle and material resources” that sustain one’s routines and behaviors; Pitts, 2016, p. 420). Long-term and religiously motivated sojourns may introduce additional complexity to the reentry process “with change affecting [reentrants] relationships with their multiple communities and their God” (Selby, 2011, p. 8; Walter, 2008). In this dissertation research, I investigate the phenomenon of religious reentry in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Church)1 and how this phenomenon is influenced by Church discourse and culture. I further explore how this process can be navigated by emerging adult returning missionaries (RMs) and managed by Church leaders. In this introductory chapter, I present my personal experience with reentry in the Church, explain the critical lens guiding this research project, describe the problem and rationale of this research, and outline the content and structure of the remaining dissertation chapters.

1 The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is name of the Church being studied. The terms Latter-day Saint (LDS) and Mormon have become common synonyms in the public vernacular, however, leaders of the Church have mandated, as a matter of policy, that any mention of the Church in published works use the following abbreviated forms: “the Church” or “the Church of Jesus Christ,” which will be used interchangeably throughout the dissertation (Newsroom, 2016a).
The Problem of the Study

In July of 2007, I was called to serve in the Colorado Denver North Mission of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which covered parts of Nebraska, Colorado, and Wyoming in the United States. At the time, I knew very little about how these assignments were given, other than that they came via Church leaders through ‘revelation’ from God (Appendix A). I remember anxiously waiting to receive my call. My family had taken a poll, making guesses about where I would be assigned to labor. I was attending Brigham Young University at the time, a private university sponsored by the Church, living in the dorms with hundreds of other soon to be missionaries. Mine was probably the tenth call that had been opened that week, just in my dormitory building alone. I sat at a table with a handful of family members and friends sitting around me – half a dozen cell phones were opened with the speaker phone turned on. My parents were the lucky ones who got to watch via Skype. I recall similarly sitting in my living room at home when my brother’s opened their calls to Copenhagen, Denmark and Halifax, Canada. I secretly hoped I was going to be called to serve in England. I had always had a longing to go to England. I remember my mom thought I would go there as well, if for no other reason than because we had ancestry there (and so few other people do—sarcasm). My voice quivering a little, and my hands shaking (I was about to read the letter that would largely dictate the next two years of my young adult life after all) I opened my call — The Colorado Denver North Mission, English speaking. I was to report in July. I

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2 Called to serve is a phrase used by LDS Church members to describe the process by which prospective missionaries are given their assignments. Typically a call comes in the form of a letter in the mail.
remember feeling a preliminary jab of disappointment but did my best to sound like Denver was exactly where I had hoped to go. My dad would later say something to the effect of “we need good missionaries in the states, just like we do abroad” and while I recognized that he was correct and eventually became genuinely excited to serve in Colorado, the initial chagrin was still there.

The Mission. As part of my two year assignment, I spent 12 months in Laramie, WY and 12 months in suburbs of Denver, CO (i.e., Boulder, Arvada, and Loveland). I was paired with eight different companions and moved between four different zones, or subdivisions within the mission. During this time, I was apart from family and friends, providing service, proselytizing, and supervising other missionaries. A typical day, aside from the scheduled activities (e.g., study, exercise, planning), usually involved a mix of tracting (i.e., knocking doors), cold contacting people on the street, or teaching people in their homes. Occasionally, my companions and I were a bit more creative and hosted events or tours at our local church buildings. Often, we would visit members of the congregation and encourage them to reach out to and either invite their friends to come to church, be taught by us, or attend some church event or activity. At numerous points throughout my mission I was asked to serve in leadership positions that required me to step out of my comfort zone and supervise, train, and correct other missionaries. In fact I

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3 In the culture of the Church in the United States, international missions are often regarded more highly than domestic missions.
4 Every missionary has a companion who they are to remain with at all times. These companions often become either the best of friends or the biggest thorn in my side.
5 This is true for most proselytizing missionaries in the Church of Jesus Christ (Church of Jesus Christ, 2016d).
would say I spent 50% of my mission being a missionary and the other 50% managing other missionaries who struggled to follow mission rules, had neglected to disclose and resolve personal issues prior to entering the field, or who were causing problems in their assigned areas. There were certainly times where I questioned what I was doing and considered going home early.

The decision\textsuperscript{6} to serve a mission (and remain when things got tough) was a complex one for me. I had struggled with social anxiety (never clinically diagnosed) and introversion for most of my adolescent years and, therefore, lacked confidence in my abilities to fulfill my duty as a missionary. That said, I believed in the doctrine of the Church, as I understood it, and felt serving a mission was the right thing to do and ultimately that if God wanted me to do it, he would help me “notwithstanding my weakness” (Maxwell, 1976). Not serving seemed like a non-option at the time and rarely crossed my mind. My anxiety about disappointing my parents and congregation far outweighed my fears about how I would perform as a missionary. I also had been exposed to quotes and language that framed the Latter-day Saint mission as a commandment, such that choosing not to serve was implicitly equated to sin. Add to that the stigmatizing language that crept into congregations labeling those who did not serve missions or who returned early as somehow ‘less than’ and the decision\textsuperscript{7} to serve was even clearer. Taken together my motivations for serving were a mix of altruism, faith, 

\textsuperscript{6} Many would argue that the discourse in the Church and missionary imperative position the mission as a normative obligation rather than an agentic choice.

\textsuperscript{7} I wrestled with this term “decision” as opposed to choice. While I believe we are all agentic to some extent, the social pressure and norms associated with missionary service made the decision not to serve much more difficult.
fear, pressure to be seen as obedient, a desire to please my parents, and the perceived need to pass through a significant rite of passage in the Church.

My mission experience itself was much less conflicted. The rules and routines of the mission were well-aligned with my organized lifestyle and temperament. My first companion was very dedicated to the work and matched my image of what a ‘good’ missionary should look like (e.g., obedient to the mission rules, prayerful, hardworking, optimistic, confident, a good teacher). I had also completed a year of school before serving so I had lived away from home and was prepared for the autonomy and, in many cases, the diversity I encountered in the field\(^8\). All in all, the mission experience was transformative for me. I became more confident as I was forced to cold contact people on the street, testify boldly of Church doctrines to complete strangers, provide training, and occasionally correct the behaviors of my fellow missionaries. My perspective also changed as I came in contact with people of different religious backgrounds, socio-economic statuses, cultures, and worldviews. Laramie, WY, for example, was surprisingly diverse – the university attracted people from the continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa, and from Hindu, Buddhist, and other Christian and non-Christian religious traditions. Boulder, CO was similarly diverse and was where I first encountered more open views about sex, drugs, and secular views of how life should be lived. While I enjoyed the mission experience, it was still uncomfortable for me in that by fulfilling my duties I had to overcome my anxieties. Couple that with fatigue and I was more than

\(^8\) The mission ‘field’ makes reference to scriptural allegories that equate missionary work with harvesting sheaves of wheat. The sheaves represent people who are prepared and ready to receive the message.
ready to come home when my two years of service had come to an end. That said, missionaries are often considered to be “trunky” if towards the end of their missions they start to slack off, ease up mission rules, etc. This refers to the idea that their bags (trunks) are already packed and they are ready to go. While I was certainly anxious to get home, I would not say I was trunky.

**The Return.** Like all other missionaries, I spent my final day in the field at the mission home, gathered with the other prospective RMs and the mission president. Reunions with prior companions or acquaintances from the mission ensued and there was a buzz of excitement. We were going home. Now, having been home for more than seven years, I remember very little from that day in the mission home. I recall that we went out to lunch, which was rare and signaled to me that we were in transition and that some of the restrictions of mission life were being lifted. Aside from that, I remember two things that are worth mentioning here. First, I was terrified to return home because I was worried that my family would remember the quiet, shy, anxious boy who left and not see the confident, capable, man who returned. Second, I met with the mission president for an exit interview (which I now know is called a release interview) and was given two pieces of counsel—get married and get a job.

Though the details of that meeting are irretrievable (I know he recommended that I take a career placement test), the emotions attached to it are still fresh—uncertainty and anxiety. I had been on one date prior to my mission, not because the Church prohibited dating (although dating expectations for teens were quite restricted), but because I was so worried about making a fool of myself that I had generally avoided any opportunity to do
so. But, the next rite of passage looming ahead would be marriage in one of the Church’s temples. And I remembered well the oft cited quote, attributed to one of the Church’s better known former leaders, Brigham Young, that anyone who was over 25 (the age always changes) and unmarried was “a menace to society,” and stereotypically less likely to get married. While we all laughed at the quote, I am certain I was not the only one whose stomach churned at the thought of being ostracized by remaining single in a Church that touts traditional, temple marriage as a key to exaltation and a pinnacle achievement. In addition to the exit interview, we had a small group gathering in which my Mission President at the time shared a few insights and we each shared our testimonies (declarations of belief) with each other.

My initial goal upon returning home was to try to maintain the missionary schedule as much as possible. I would wake early, exercise and study, and then look for opportunities to work or serve around our house. The school semester was not going to begin for another month, and I had not planned to find any employment during those few short weeks, so aside from prepping for school and setting up interviews with prospective employers, I had very little that I had to do. The lack of clear duties and tasks each day created a feeling of aimlessness and produced feelings of guilt. I felt like I had been so productive and now was doing very little of value. I had also been a big movie bough prior to departing for my mission and wanted to catch up on some of the media I had

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9 Houses of worship that require that one meet certain standards of worthiness before entering. These buildings are typically places of learning, service, and reflection.
10 Typically defined as the ability to become like and live with God and one’s family after death. Tied to the assumption that through Jesus Christ all mankind would be immortal and that through personal righteousness one could spend that time with God in happiness rather than in misery.
missed while I was serving. Doing so also produced some guilt. I felt like watching movies rather than working or serving was not a good way to use my time and showed laziness when I could have been out serving, teaching, or otherwise doing more meaningful tasks. I attempted to volunteer for Church assignments and, at one point, was asked to do a speaking circuit of sorts at different wards in our stake; otherwise, there was not much by way of Church work for me to do – from what I could tell.

Again, I felt like I had been making a daily impact, with clear responsibilities as a missionary and now I was twiddling my thumbs, waiting for the next stage of my life to begin. To pass the time I attended institute, which is essentially a weekly Bible study for young single adults (YSA) and also attended the YSA ward (i.e., congregation). The goal of YSA wards, in my opinion, is to facilitate marriages. However, growing up in a more ‘rural’ part of Northern California, there were few women my age in the ward, and none that I was particularly interested in. In fact I felt out of place at our institute, and admittedly perceived the other YSA as older and nerdier…ultimately not my type. This was discouraging and my parents were already asking about dating and even trying to set me up. I tried to reassure them (and myself) that I was no longer afraid to date and just was not particularly interested in dating in our area but I suspect that neither of us were totally convinced.

Finally, I made it out to Utah where I continued to attend Brigham Young University. I was rooming with a former missionary companion and we had determined that we would try to go on one date a week in order to eventually find an eternal companion. The first date was extremely awkward for me, especially given my lack of
dating experience and the dating restrictions associated with missionary work. However, I continued to date on a regular basis. In some ways I attached success and worth to the frequency of dates I had. I would call my parents on a weekly basis and while they did not put any pressure on me to do so, I was quick to report on my progress in that regard. I ‘seriously’ dated three women before I eventually met and married my wife Michelle. I had just turned 25 and was pushing the menace to society boundary and Michelle was 24 and nearly graduated (most LDS women would have begun to lose hope of getting married at that point). It was not until the summer before we met that I really felt like I had ‘returned’ and that things were going to be okay regardless of what happened in my life.

Continuing on with my story, after about six months of being home, my stake set up an RM class. I thought I ought to attend the class, but after one session, I dismissed it as a class for “socially awkward guys who could not get girlfriends” rather than as the class I was looking for – how to find purpose and offer meaningful service in the Church after my mission. No matter what assignment I was given or what I tried to do, nothing seemed to compare with the meaningfulness of being a missionary. I was especially disheartened when I heard talks about how it was possible to have the ‘same spirit’ as when I was a missionary if I prayed, read my scriptures, and performed other similar tasks. I thought I was doing all of those things well and yet I was somehow deficient? Conversely, one of the things that the mission did for me that positively influenced my reentry experience is that it guided me towards a ‘helping’ field. I asked myself the question, what career could I have that would closely resemble the features of a mission I
most enjoyed: helping people, serving, teaching, etc.? I read through every program in
the academic catalog before I found Recreation Therapy which would eventually put me
in a position to study abroad, work in rewarding youth development positions for nearly
five years, and build connections that would put me on the path to graduate school.

While I continued to struggle with anxiety, the mission also gave me confidence
and persistence to not take what I perceived as ‘the easy way out’ by withdrawing into
myself or my books. So, in many ways, while returning was difficult, I believe I
leveraged the skills I developed as a missionary to navigate my reentry experience well.
Though I could go into further detail here, suffice it to say that reentry was a time of
discouragement, discovery, and continued development for me. Furthermore, there were
things about the mission experience that made reentry both more manageable and more
difficult; things that facilitated my religious commitments and things that easily could
have undermined them. Regardless, I feel like there could have been more support and
ey early intervention to help me transition more quickly and seamlessly and that more could
be done to assist RMs generally. In sum, in thinking about my own experience as an RM
and my observations of other RMs in the Church who had similar experiences, I believe
that the Church could do more to serve its members and could take a more
active/effective role in managing the process of reentry. Thus, in this dissertation I apply
a critical lens to consider what the Church – as an institution with a responsibility to its
membership – could do to better hear and serve its members. As a travel and tourism
scholar, I use the language of the ‘critical turn’ in tourism studies to further describe this
lens.
Critical Lens

Critical tourism scholars posit that “in the current neo-liberal era, the discourse of tourism as an ‘industry’ has overshadowed other conceptualizations of the tourism phenomenon…this discourse serves the needs and agendas of leaders in the tourism business sector,” thereby neglecting to address diverse stakeholder perspectives (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006, p. 1192). Critical scholars further contend that tourism and its parallel body of scholarship has the potential to do more than just increase gross domestic product (GDP) and can be a social and environmental asset if managed responsibly. In line with this thinking, Higgins-Desbiolles (2006) revived two old notions related to travel and tourism: social tourism, the idea that tourism is a universal right and should be made available to all people, and pilgrimage, the non-Western practice of travel and tourism that focuses on spirituality rather than hedonism. She argues that by embracing these alternative views of tourism, and others, scholars can counteract the marketization of tourism and accomplish social good. In many ways, Higgins-Desbiolles’ (2006) work embodies the ideals of the ‘critical’ tourism movement sustained, in part, by Ateljevic, Morgan, and Pritchard (2013) and broadens the discourse of tourism to be inclusive of topics, populations, and forms of inquiry that have previously been pushed to the peripheries, such as mission trips, proselytizing missionaries, and qualitative inquiry.

The ‘critical turn’ in tourism scholarship challenges traditional discourses and dominant ways of knowing and being in the world (e.g., post-positivist, industry focused discourses; see Ateljevic et al. 2013; Bianchi, 2009). It is an inherently critico-political movement concerned with (a) identifying and uprooting inequitable/oppressive power
dynamics manifest in the tourism academy and industry, and (b) confronting and challenging the neoliberal paradigms and practices that prevail in modern society. Neoliberalism in tourism is often linked to globalization, global inequality, and the uncontrolled impact of multinational corporations. It is a form of economic thought and development that favors capitalism, deregulation, and the growth of the private sector (Boas & Gans-Morse, 2009). Neoliberalism is criticized for perpetuating class distinctions, unfairly favoring the ‘elite’ at the expense of the ‘lower’ classes (Wacquant, 2009).

Conversely, the ‘critical turn’ in tourism studies has embraced theoretical perspectives (e.g., feminism, critical race theory) that promote social justice, increase individual empowerment, and advance alternative economic and general knowledge constructions. Duffy, Stone, Chancellor, and Kline (2015) engaged in this critical work, for instance, by investigating the economic impact of neoliberal tourism development in the Dominican Republic (DR). The authors concluded that industry-claimed economic trickle-down effects were not reaching the majority of households in the 12 communities surveyed, challenging the notion that tourism positively benefits all people equitably. As another example, Terry (2013) drew attention to discourses that reinforced “well-worn Filipino stereotypes” and positioned Filipinos as “seafaring,” “inexpensive” and “docile” – the ideal, subservient employee for the cruise industry (p. 73). He proposed that the validity and source of these discourses needed to be carefully reviewed and potentially revised to increase agency and opportunities for Filipino workers who have historically been socialized into restricted roles in the tourism labor market.
Bianchi (2009), while supporting the underlying assumptions and aims of the critical turn in tourism studies, questioned its current and future ability to address contemporary social problems. He argues, in essence, that critical tourism scholars are gleefully hacking away at branches, while neglecting the root(s) of significant tourism issues. One of Bianchi's (2009) primary criticisms is aimed at the lack of ‘sustained’ exploration of how certain power dynamics and discourses are produced, reproduced, and endure. In other words, the critical turn has identified the ‘what’ (e.g., inequity, oppression) but does little to investigate and challenge the ‘how’ and ‘why’. Bianchi (2009) further contends that critical tourism research has been de-contextualized or isolated from the macro-systems/situations (e.g., global politics, migrations, broader social discourses, etc.) in which specific tourism/development problems occur.

With Bianchi’s (2009) criticism in mind Pritchard, Morgan, and Ateljevic (2011) proposed the ‘hopeful tourism’ framework, which they argue is not just critical and discursive, but also transformative; e.g. oriented towards political action and transformation. In brief, hopeful tourism is guided by five principles that highlight the existence of inequity and privilege, the agency of individuals, the relativity of truth(s), the possibility of emancipation, and the power of language in shaping realities. Its strongest successes have been in regard to challenging oppressive gender dynamics and rigid adherence to hegemonic/post-positivist approaches. Higgins-Desbiolles and Whyte (2013) initiated a scholarly dialogue on the topic of hopeful tourism in which they argued that just as hope can be miss-placed, the efforts and energies associated with the hopeful tourism agenda are also likely to backfire. Specifically Higgins-Desbiolles and Whyte
challenge the notion that as tourism scholars we can address privilege from a position of advantage or understand oppression from a position of power. They argue that tourism scholars must be “situated within the struggle” in order to build the solidarity required to bring about transformation (p. 431).

This critique champions feminist viewpoints that challenge normative, ‘empirical’ ways of knowing; i.e., methodologies that adopt masculine and euro-centric perspectives and assume the researcher is capable of being and ought to be impartial, objective, and detached from the research process (Aitchison, 2005; Ateljevic, Harris, Wilson, & Collins, 2005; McDowell, 1992). In contrast to this sterile, idealistic, and somewhat unrealistic approach to research, critical scholars acknowledge that researchers have bias (conscious or unconscious), are continuously ‘in the field’ or artificially and arbitrarily create ‘fields’ of study, and are co-creators or co-participants in the research process (Katz, 1994; Rose, 1997). With this recognition in mind, critical-qualitative scholars contend that researchers should more clearly identify themselves, position themselves, and in some cases, literally write themselves into their research (Drake, 2010; Feighery, 2006b; Westwood, Morgan, & Pritchard, 2006).

Therefore, in an effort to write myself into my research, I adopt a first-person writing style where appropriate and detail my personal connection to the topic being studied. I feel this is fitting given my proximity to both the research topic and population and given that my interest in the project largely stems from my personal experiences with the phenomenon being studied (Cohen, 2013). I believe that rather than undermining the quality of my dissertation research, this intimate prose and introspection helps the reader
come to better understand a topic with which they are likely unfamiliar, allows me to establish my emic/expert status, and enables me to align my voice (as another data point) with the other voices or perspectives collected and represented throughout the research process. Taken together the critical turn calls for tourism research that is reflexive, discursive, political, situated, and transformative, all of which this dissertation research aims to be. In line with this critical lens, this dissertation research is rooted in a critical-constructivist research paradigm.

**Research Paradigm**

Kuhn (1970) defined *paradigms* as “universally recognized scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions [later called patterns] to a community of practitioners” (p. viii). In other words, a paradigm is a worldview and guide that supports and is supported by a group of scholars. Paradigms are typically rooted in or detail a set of shared ontological (i.e., what is the nature of reality?), epistemological (i.e., what is the relationship between the researcher and the researched), and methodological (i.e., what is the process of research?) assumptions (Creswell, 2007). In the contemporary social sciences there are five commonly cited paradigms: positivism, post positivism, constructivism/interpretivism, critical/participatory, and pragmatism (Creswell, 2007). The research questions, methods, analytical approaches, and means for establishing trustworthiness in this dissertation are grounded in the social constructivist paradigm, with a critical bent as noted above.

**Constructivist Ontology.** Put simply, constructivists posit that reality—truth—is socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). In other words, reality is subjective,
contextualized, pluralistic, and composed of a set of shared meanings (Searle, 1995). Knowledge of a given reality is learned, over time, through the processes of socialization. Discourse (language and social praxis) acts as a fundamental unit of reality socialization and maintenance in society. Therefore, a foremost goal of constructivist research is to understand the process by which the construction of reality occurs and, in the context of this study, to expose taken-for-granted realities that help give shape to these everyday realities for RMs (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). In other words the study identifies the discourses or “characteristic way[s] of saying, doing, and being” (Gee, 2010, p. 8) and cultural scripts or social/linguistic norms that “tell people who are playing specific social roles how they should think, desire, feel, and behave” (Smith, Christofferson, Davidson, & Herzog, 2011, p. 142) that shape the social practice of reentry in the Church.

**Constructivist Epistemology.** Reality in social constructivism is dialectical/discursive, transactional/co-created, and hermeneutic (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Reality is dialectical in that it is partially a product of social interactions; in other words, an individual’s reality is inseparable from his or her social world. Constructivist research is transactional in that the investigator, participant, and phenomenon being studied are intertwined (Guba & Lincoln, 2008). Whereas post-positivism positions the investigator as objective and detached, social constructivism places the investigator in the milieu (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Thus, constructivist research ought to be reflexive in that the investigator is more inclined to acknowledge and describe (or even embrace) bias rather than minimize it. Similarly the constructivist researcher recognizes that knowledge is co-constructed and therefore biases and backgrounds play an important part in the
research process (Guba & Lincoln, 2008). Finally, whereas the goal of other paradigmatic approaches is to either to verify or falsify a known reality, the goal of most constructivist research is to understand lived experiences or shared meanings, and how they emerge and influence social behavior (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). The final aim, according to Guba and Lincoln (1994) is “to distill a consensus construction that is more informed and sophisticated than any of the predecessor constructions” (p. 111). With this in mind, a goal of this dissertation is to arrive at a more ‘sophisticated’ consensus construction regarding the reentry experience and discourse(s) of RMs.

**Purpose & Significance**

My aim in this dissertation is to address gaps in and bridge together various disparate bodies of literature (e.g., tourism, religious studies, human development, and reentry) by exploring the reentry experiences and discourses of RMs in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and how they influence emerging adult religious commitment. The study provides evidence of some of the challenges encountered by RMs and explores theories and practices that may assist this group and other populations (e.g., military personnel, humanitarian aid workers) with the reentry transition and transition to adulthood (individual level). The study also explores how the Church could better meet the needs and increase the religious commitment of its members (organizational level). In other words, determining how to assist RMs with their adjustment has implications for missionary’s spiritual, social, mental, and physical health and well-being (individual level) and could impact member behavior and retention (organizational level). Understanding the reentry process for RMs in the Church may also
shed light on their transition to adulthood and the process of maintaining or altering religious commitments, and may help other types of young travelers with their post-travel transition.

**Rationale**

In relation to travel and tourism, reentry scholarship can be viewed as an extension of prior work investigating how travelers/tourists adjust to foreign, host countries (i.e., departures), to studies of how tourists adapt to their country or community of origin (i.e., arrivals). Notwithstanding the centrality of returning or reentry to conceptualizations of tourism and despite the recent maturation of interdisciplinary reentry research, travel and tourism scholars have had relatively little to say about the topic (Frey, 2004; Grabowski, 2011/2013; Grabowski & Wearing, 2014; Lean, 2016, Kaftanoglu & Timothy, 2013; Pocock & McIntosh, 2011/2013; Walter, 2008). In fact Frey (2004) noted that few rites of return exist (particularly in the Western world) and that the return seems to be “culturally constructed as unimportant” (p. 96). According to Lean (2016):

> Travel experiences are often framed as ending upon a traveler’s physical return to their place of origin. This has had significant implications for the way transformation through travel has been conceptualized and investigated. From a research perspective it has meant that travelers are often interrogated about their travel experiences not long after their return (and sometimes while they are still travelling) with the assumption that this is the final part of the travel story. This limited temporal scope has played a significant role in developing a static perspective of both travel and transformation with little consideration paid to how transformations alter over time. (p. 204)
Travel experiences persist well beyond the physical relocation of the traveler, and become “entwined” in every aspect of one’s life and life course (e.g., relationships; roles, routines, and religious performances; recollections via tangibles – photos, souvenirs, and intangibles – multisensory memories; Lean, 2016). The importance of reentry has recently been acknowledged in lines of research by Pocock and McIntosh (2011, 2013) who challenge traditional notions of home and place; Grabowski and Wearing (2010, 2014) who posit that real transformation occurs after, rather than during, travel; and a handful of other scholars; however, further research by tourism scholars – that considers the traveler’s journey in its entirety – is warranted.

Missionary reentry has similarly been neglected in both tourism research and the broader reentry literature. Moreover, to my knowledge there are few studies exploring reentry for RMs in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and most of these are dissertations and theses published out of Brigham Young University, a private religious university affiliated with the Church. These studies have covered a wide variety of topics including: academic enrollment, engagement and success (Gilbert, 1967; Jepson, 2014; Palmer, 2009); burnout (Bordelon, 2013); cultural adaptation and re-adaptation (Callahan, 2002/2010/2011); cultural competence and geographic literacy (Bradford, 1986, Chu 1974; Smith, Roberts, & Kerr, 1996; Stahmann, 2000); dating behavior (McLaughlin, 2000/2007); economic, social, and religious activity (Clawson, 1936; Chou, 2013; Groberg, 1936; King, 1936; Madsen, 1977; McClendon, 2000; McClendon & Chadwick, 2004; Probst, 1936); identity (Dunn & Heffelfinger, 1987); the prevalence of infectious disease (Green, Maza, Stewart, & Stoddard, 2012); language competence
and loss (Cottrell, 2008; Hansen 1995/2011/2012; Kirk, 2014; Wyatt, 2013); mental health and stigma associated with early returns (Doty et al., 2015; Doty et al., 2016; Doty et al., 2017); and physical fitness (Hoglund, 1971).

While useful, studies of RMs in the Church, to date, neglect to capture the lived experience, meanings, or discursive/institutional factors associated with missionary reentry. A study of discourse in a religious reentry context could highlight problematic cultures, language, and practices that contribute to reentry distress, discourage help-seeking behaviors, or stifle dissenting or critical voices. Given that the Church, in this dissertation research, is hierarchically structured and doctrinally oriented toward the pursuit of perfection, this possibility is even more likely (Matthew 5:48, The King James Version). Thus, this dissertation invites Church leaders and members to reflect on ways in which they contribute to reentry difficulties and/or could act to address them.

This dissertation research is also positioned after a period of significant changes to the missionary program of the Church including the introduction of new teaching/training material, the lowering of the missionary age for men and women, a softening of formerly rigid guidelines about technology use, and the establishment of a formalized reentry program (Newsroom, 2016b; Preach My Gospel, 2004). The lowering of the missionary age, in particular, could contribute to a shifting missionary demographic that is less developmentally mature and, therefore, less secure in terms of its religious identity and commitments. This identity insecurity could affect the post-mission transition to adulthood and religious commitment in the Church, which again have implications for missionary well-being (individual level) and organizational retention (organizational
level). Moreover, because this study is set in the southeastern United States, it also provides an additional case to compare to (a) prior studies that were predominately conducted with Utah and Idaho-based populations (both of which have higher concentrations of Mormon’s and potentially different subcultures, though these studies were conducted decades earlier with a different purpose and methodology) or (b) future domestic or international cases.

Additionally, reentry scholars have called for research that investigates new populations, such as missionaries in the Church of Jesus Christ, and cultural nuances associated with reentry, be they ethnic, organizational, or ideological (Szkudlarek, 2010). In the context of this study, religion may affect every aspect of the sojourner’s journey, from socialized childhood aspirations and the ‘call’ to serve (e.g., motivated by a religious imperative), to their experience in the field (e.g., tethered to home and Western values via their proselyting message), to their expectations about reentry (e.g., unpacking the belief that they will be “blessed” for their service; Callahan, 2010/2011; Palmer, 2009; Rasband, 2010).

By exploring the religious discourses and cultural nuances of missionary reentry, this dissertation research also contributes to the short list of critical discourse analyses in both tourism (see Jaworski & Pritchard, 2005 for a discussion of tourism-based discourse analyses) and religious studies (see Hjelm, 2013 for a discussion of religion-based discourse analyses), and reinforces the aims of the critical turn in tourism studies. In other words, the study highlights a population (i.e., missionaries), process (i.e., reentry), and methodology (i.e., discursive qualitative inquiry) that are traditionally marginalized in
mainstream, neoliberal travel and tourism research. Finally, reentry has been deemed the most important aspect of the tourist’s journey because it is where transformation and change is solidified and reintegrated (Mendelson, Citron, & LaBrack, 2006). Thus, by understanding the reentry concerns of missionaries in the Church of Jesus Christ, I might be able to glean principles that could assist them, and the general reentry population, in navigating this sometimes tumultuous transition.

**Structure of the Dissertation**

Chapter 2 of the dissertation begins by establishing the link(s) between religion and tourism, positioning mission trips and missionary reentry in the broader tourism scholarship. Following this conceptual orientation, the chapter consists of a review of reentry scholarship using the major categories presented in Austin (1983a) and Austin, McDonald, and Austin’s (1988) annotated bibliographies of reentry, which include: Corporate and government expatriation, international education, military expatriation, missionary travel, and a general classification. Following this more general review of reentry, the chapter includes a summary of refereed and non-refereed scholarship on reentry in the Church of Jesus Christ. The chapter concludes with a discussion of doctrine, culture, discourse, and power and how they may influence reentry for this population. The goal of this chapter is to frame the discussion of missionary reentry in broader discussions of tourism, reentry, and the discursive practices associated with reentry management.

Chapter 3 of the dissertation addresses the following research question(s): What is the lived experience of returning missionaries in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day
Saints? And, why do some missionaries seem to ‘flourish’ while others ‘flounder’? A phenomenological case study approach was employed to highlight a ‘common’ case in order to further describe the reentry experience of missionaries and establishes a context for discussing dominant discourses inherent in the reentry process. A Southeastern stake of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was selected as the case to be studied, partly out of convenience but also because it may be ‘representative’ of other cases in the Church, particularly in the U.S. where the Church (in its contemporary form) originated and its presence is greatest. This chapter acts as a reference point for other chapters by contextualizing reentry (i.e., identifying settings, processes, and interactions that affect reentry) via the six types of case data described by Yin. Specifically, interviews with sixteen missionaries who returned between January 1, 2015 and January 1, 2017, scholarly literature, Church sermons and training/teaching material, archival membership data, diverse multimedia (e.g., film, memes, etc.), scholarly literature, participant observations, personal anecdotes, social media content, and popular press articles were collected to construct the case. A process of traditional thematic analysis revealed multiple touchpoints wherein Church leaders may intervene to affect reentry during the anticipation/planning, in-field, and reentry phases. Additionally, moving beyond outdated anthropological theories of reentry, this chapter draws from Tourism Geographies, Sociology, and other disciplines to provide a richer theoretical understanding of the process of reentry.

Chapter 4 of the dissertation addresses the following research questions: What is discourse of missionary work and reentry in the Church of Jesus Christ? To what extent
does this discourse influence RMs during their transition home? And, to what extent can/should this discourse be challenged by the Church, both its members and leaders, to reduce reentry distress? Drawing on multiple data points as part of a larger case study (i.e., interviews, social media posts gathered via Radian6 social media monitoring software, multimedia produced about and by the Church, and archival data available through the Church’s extensive libraries), this chapter identifies the dominant religious, social, and political discourses (i.e., language and practices) used to describe the Church and the Latter-day Saint reentry process. Using Gee’s (2010) method of discourse analysis (i.e., seven building tasks), a number of social/linguistic practices were identified that may correlate with missionary reentry distress including, for example, expectations related to dating and marriage (i.e., Building task 2: Practices), or beliefs that RMs are perfect and cannot make mistakes, show discomfort (i.e., Building task 3: Identities). The chapter concludes with a discussion of how the Church could intervene to help steer or correct problematic discourses, and the challenge of doing so given that discourse is co-created.

Chapter 5 of the dissertation addresses the research question: To what extent does the reentry process influence the transition to adulthood and post-mission religious commitments? Guided by a phenomenographical approach to qualitative inquiry this chapter further documents each missionary’s lived experience with reentry, post-mission religious commitments, and links between the two. Specifically, in this chapter, narrative analysis and phenomenographical techniques are employed to develop portraits (i.e., chronological, biographical, contextualized depictions) and profiles (i.e., clusters of
common experience) of twenty emerging adult missionaries who returned to a Southeastern stake of the Church between January 1, 2015 and December 31, 2016 (4 of the 20 represent a smaller theoretical sample of disaffiliated RMs). This process of portraiture and profiling allowed for the diversity of missionary experiences to be represented, and also allowed for a discussion of common experiences that may have led individuals to align with or depart from the Church. Inability to resolve doubts in the Church, find help through the primary answers, feel socially supported, or feel authentic/autonomous were common in profiles of religious disaffiliation or distress.

Chapter 6 of the dissertation includes implications for research and practice, reflections on insider research, and conclusions. Specifically, in this chapter I describe my experience with insider research, weave together the findings from chapters 3-5 to tell a more comprehensive and coherent story of reentry, and discuss the “so what?” of the dissertation. As part of this chapter I explore organizational level changes that could be made to ease the reentry transition for missionaries. Specifically, I draw attention to the Church’s My Plan reentry program and discuss elements that may be added to or changed in this program based on the findings of this dissertation. Similarly, I explore the problematic nature of reentry discourse in order to petition for a new discourse of reentry in the Church. In addition to practical implications for the Church, I also discuss the theoretical contributions and research implications of the dissertation; i.e., what this means for the larger bodies of tourism, reentry, and religious studies research.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualizing Tourism – the Returned Missionary as an ‘Object’ of Study

According to Theobald (2005),

The word tour is derived from the Latin, ‘tornare’ and the Greek, ‘tornos’, meaning ‘a lathe or circle; the movement around a central point or axis’. This meaning changed in modern English to represent ‘one’s turn’. The suffix –ism is defined as ‘an action or process; typical behavior or quality’, while the suffix, –ist denotes ‘one that performs a given action’. When the word tour and the suffixes –ism and –ist are combined, they suggest the action of movement around a circle. One can argue that a circle represents a starting point, which ultimately returns back to its beginning. Therefore, like a circle, a tour represents a journey in that it is a round-trip, i.e., the act of leaving and then returning to the original starting point, and therefore, one who takes such a journey can be called a tourist. (p. 9)

This all-encompassing and inclusive meaning of the word tourism contains two key elements – mobility and a return – both of which are pertinent to establishing the link between tourism and missionary reentry. Mobility, the movement of people and ideas within and between communities, countries, and cultures has been, and will continue to be, a hallmark of the tourism phenomenon and tourism research (Hannam, Butler, & Paris, 2014). The return, however, has received far less attention in tourism scholarship despite its obvious centrality to conceptualizations of tourism (Pocock & McIntosh, 2011; Walter, 2008). Missionaries are certainly mobile and, in almost all cases, return to their country or community of origin; therefore, RMs could be considered tourists by this inclusive definition. Beyond etymology, contemporary conceptualizations of tourism are split into two classes – technical and heuristic (Leiper, 1979) – both of which clarify the link between tourism and missionary reentry.
**Technical definitions.** Technical definitions of tourism are usually arbitrarily determined and designed for the purpose of categorizing and counting tourists and/or tourism products (Leiper, 1979). For example, the World Travel Organization (UNWTO, 2014) defines a tourist as:

> A traveler taking a trip to a main destination outside his/her usual environment, for less than a year, for any main purpose (business, leisure or other personal purpose) other than to be employed by a resident entity in the country or place visited. (p. 13)

This definition again includes mobility and temporality, but adds criteria that distinguish ‘tourists’ from other travelers (e.g., employees, refugees) and tourism from other types of mobility (e.g., forced migration, deployment). Localized versions of this definition have been introduced that incorporate additional spatial elements, such as the specification of distance traveled (e.g., > 50 miles), in order to differentiate ‘residents’ from tourists when determining use, visitation, or economic impacts of tourism. However, while useful, these definitions fail to capture the experiential aspects of the tourism phenomenon and might exclude certain types of returning, temporary travelers such as missionaries who often remain abroad for lengthy periods of time.

**Heuristic/theoretical definitions.** Tourism scholars have attempted to address the inadequacies and narrow scope of technical tourism definitions for years. For instance, addressing the question “who is a tourist?” Cohen (1974) proposed a number of touristic features; he concluded that tourists are temporary, voluntary, returning, long-term, non-recurrent, and non-instrumental travelers (see pp. 531-532). In later works Cohen (1979) expanded his definition to include what he called partial tourists, those
who met some of the earlier criteria (e.g., temporary, round-trip, and/or voluntarily), but not others (e.g., instrumental purpose); he listed students, pilgrims, and business travelers among these pseudo-tourists and, in the case of this dissertation, missionaries might also be included in this more inclusive categorization.

Cohen’s (1979) broadened definition also acknowledged the blurred boundaries between ‘technical’ and ‘theoretical’ tourists and between tourists and non-tourists. For example, Cohen (1992) used pilgrimage as a metaphor for tourism, suggesting that pilgrims and tourists share similar existential needs, often fulfilled through mobility or visitation to equally ‘sacred’ places during ‘sacred’ time, or time set apart. This metaphor appears to have become reality to some extent, given Collins-Kreisner’s (2010) observation that the adjectives ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ have become affixed to the term pilgrimage in order to distinguish between touristic and spiritual journeys.

Despite years of theorizing, typologizing, analyzing, and reporting, McCabe (2005) suggested that attempts to conceptualize tourism have produced inadequate and in many cases limiting results. Likewise, Abram, Waldren, and Macleod (1997) questioned whether or not it was even possible to distinguish tourists from non-tourists and cited Kohn’s (1997) supposition that “the category of tourist is extremely pliable,” or in other words, the boundaries between tourist, traveler, host, and guest are blurry at best (p. 3). Likewise, lack of consensus about terms and theoretical confusion in the field of tourism may be a product of its ‘indiscipline’ (Echtner & Jamal, 1997; Leiper, 2000; Taillon, 2014; Tribe, 1997). That is, some contend that tourism is a program of study, not a discipline, and thus tourism research borrows theory and explanatory power from parent
disciplines such as anthropology, geography, or in the case of the proposed dissertation study, religion. This definitional and disciplinary ambiguity, while problematic and concerning to some extent, also provides room for a study of diverse types of tourists and tourism, such as RMs and mission trips.

**The crossroads of religion and tourism.** Religion, spirituality, travel, and tourism have a long, rich, and overlapping history (Timothy & Olsen, 2006). In a survey of the ‘crossroads’ of religion and tourism, for example, religious studies professor Michael Stausberg (2011) outlined a number of places where the fields intersect. From his text we gather that religion can be a tourism attraction (e.g., religious sites, festivals, and events), a source of motivation to travel (e.g., pilgrimage, ancestral tours, and exposure to world religions), a site of conflict and contestation in shared spaces (e.g., travelers threatening/displacing local worship), a set of tourist performances (e.g., rituals, worship, and dances), and even a metaphor for tourism (e.g., the tourist as a pilgrim; Stausberg, 2011).

Classic works by tourism scholars such as MacCannell (1976), Cohen (1992), and Graburn (2004) reaffirm that tourism can be both sacred and spiritual, positioning tourism as a pseudo-religious act. According to these scholars, tourism is about pursuing sacred spaces, during sacred time, in order to achieve sacred goals such as de-centering or seeking out new (and more authentic) socio-cultural and spiritual Centers among geographic and cultural Others. Largely motivated by a need to ‘get away’ from the demands and stresses of their work and lives (i.e., alienation of modernity), tourists seek new Centers or spaces where they be recreated and revitalized. These Centers may or
may not be geographically distant/distinct but certainly resemble the liminal spaces or sites of anti-structure described in Turner's (1995) Rites of Passage. Graburn (2004) challenges these notions and contends that tourist experiences are neither liminal nor transformative because the tourists eventually return to their original Centers neither recreated nor reconciled. Specifically, Graburn (2004) suggests that the issues that alienated them to begin with will still exist or that they may have become centered among Others and now feel even more alienated from their ‘home’ Center after returning. Similarly, Cohen (1992) discusses the “ecological bubbles” that protect tourists from the “strangeness” they may experience as part of their time in Other locales. He contends that while many guard against strangeness, others are drawn to it (an indicator of how de-centered they are). In either case, tourism is said to parallel the aims and processes of religion.

Religious tourism represents one of the oldest and enduring forms of travel. For instance, in the pre-Christian era, the Grecians traveled to the oracle of Apollo at Delphi to seek spiritual guidance and, perhaps, glance into their futures (Eisner, 1993). For thousands of years, pilgrims from three major world religions have travelled to, worshipped at, and walked the sacred paths of the Holy Land, Jerusalem. Muslim acolytes and non-Muslim tourists have visited Mecca in Saudi Arabia for millennia to participate in the Umrah and the Hajj (Timothy & Olsen, 2006). Likewise, for the better part of two centuries, the European grand tour – a cultural, educational, and recreational tour of the world – exposed affluent male (and chaperoned female) aristocrats to a number of holy shrines and hallowed places (and vice versa; Cohen, 2006). Further,
religious tourism (loosely grouped here with spiritual and/or faith-based tourism) continues to be an important and rapidly growing segment of the modern tourism industry (Timothy & Olsen, 2006).

Contemporary religious tourism allows people to diversify their experience by engaging in collective and individualized spiritual journeys such as: becoming a “Monk for a Month” in Cambodia (World Weavers, n.d.); attending healing ceremonies with the Shaman of Peru (Prayag, Mura, Hall, & Fontaine, 2016); hiking the Camino de Santiago in Spain (Lois Gonzalez, 2013); or re-emerging after a retreat in Bali (Williams, 2014a). Notwithstanding the frequent and widespread interactions and linkages between religion and tourism, and the growing popularity of this segment, it continues to be an understudied area in tourism research (Timothy & Olsen, 2006). That said, Cohen (1974, 1992, 2006) has repeatedly reinforced the literal and metaphorical links between religion and tourism, suggesting that modern day tourism is a representation of religious pilgrimage both in terms of motivation (e.g., the search for authenticity, centeredness, or answers to existential questions) and structure (e.g., ‘sacred’ time away from home). Fife (2004) extended this metaphor to include missionary travel, but until recently this form of travel – like religious tourism generally – has been pushed to the margins of travel and tourism research. Given this gap in the tourism scholarship and the likely links between mission and post-mission experiences and behaviors (see Callahan, 2011), a brief review of mission trips and their transformative potential is warranted.
Conceptualizing Missions – The Mission as a Transformative Practice

Many religious organizations, including non-Christian entities, engage in missionary activities or have done so in the past. The dissemination of “Buddha’s universal message…was the first large scale missionary effort in the history of the world’s religions” (p. 37) and was tied to economic activity along the expansive Silk Road trade routes. Soon after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, Muslims began to spread the message of Islam through various mechanisms; i.e., proselytizing (i.e., ‘Dawah’, the call to Islam), conquest, and/ or more subtly through example and engagement in new communities (Arnold, 1913; Oxford Islamic Studies Online, 2018). While it is important to note that missionary work is not an exclusively Christian endeavor, because the Church of Jesus Christ is a Christian organization, this dissertation will predominantly focus on describing Christian missionary work. That said, to detail the entire history and evolution of Christian missionary activities across all denominations is beyond the scope of this dissertation; thus, a cursory study of contemporary Christian missionary service and mission trips will be presented.

Since the meridian of time, Christian denominations of various types or theologies have hearkened to the biblical injunction to “go ye therefore and teach all nations” (Matthew 28: 19; Elshtain, 2008). The aims, format, and consequences of these missionary endeavors have been quite diverse, however, contemporary missions can generally be broken down into two categories: (1) proselytizing missions – those focused on teaching and preaching to ‘save’ souls through conversion and retention, and (2) humanitarian missions – those focused on operationalizing the message of Christ by
“visit[ing] the widows and the fatherless in their affliction” (KJV James 1:27) and otherwise bringing peace and hope to the world through services such as responding to disasters, reducing hunger, decreasing poverty and homelessness, or preventing and treating illness (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2018). The latter of the two categories in particular has created space for and blurred boundaries between faith-based and secular forms of volunteering (i.e., voluntourism; Bandyopadhyay, 2018; Ferris, 2005).

Regardless of their form, missions typically have the dual purpose of transforming missionaries while transforming communities or potential converts.

**Proselytizing missions.** A number of scholars have aimed to describe the character of proselytizing churches, distinguishing them from those with a humanitarian focus. According to Bibby and Brinkerhoff (1974) proselytizing churches adhere to the belief that “anyone who has not made ‘a personal commitment to Christ’ is considered a ‘spiritual outsider’” and, therefore, must “be ‘reached,’” by proselytizing efforts (p. 190). While this phraseology has been finessed (to be more inclusive or less ostracizing) in recent years, the general message that non-members need to be ‘reached’ – so that they have the opportunity to make commitments with Christ and partake of His blessings – persists. Historically, research on proselytizing churches has focused on supply-side factors influencing their growth (e.g., the number of missionaries, appeal of the organization, or proselyting strategies). For instance, one study analyzed the extent to which proselytizing churches (n = 20) successfully employed the following supply-side proselyting mechanisms: contacting (i.e., reaching out), bridging (i.e., bringing in), and assimilating (i.e., keeping in). Generally, they found that a lack of success in recruiting
new proselytes was indicative of poor contacting, bridging, and assimilating practices. Conversely, Cragun and Lawson (2010) argue that demand-side factors such as the level of economic development also affect the success of proselyting efforts. They suggest, for instance, that “economic development can reach a stage where a secular transition takes place, resulting in slowed growth of [proselytizing] religions” (Cragun & Lawson, p. 4). Proselytizing churches seem to be aware of this affect as well, as evidenced by their tendencies to (a) frame their message as a “salve for modernity” and (b) reach out, with more success, to societies undergoing substantive economic development (Cragun & Lawson, 2010, p. 4). Parry (1994) also acknowledge that the mission functions as a socialization agent, affecting the missionary as much, if not more so than the field/flocks he or she has been called to serve.

Recognizable Christian, proselytizing churches or associations with clearly defined mission structures include the Gideons International, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, though other Churches encourage their members to share the message of Christ in their own way and time (e.g., Roman Catholics, Anglicans). A brief review of each of these groups is presented below, with the greatest emphasis placed on the Church of Jesus Christ.

*The Gideons International.* The Gideons International is an association of protestant businessman that, since its organization in 1908, aims to make “the Word of God available to everyone and, together with the local church, reaching souls for Christ” (Gideons International, 2017a, para. 1). This is accomplished primarily through the distribution of Bible’s and copies of the New Testament to targeted markets (e.g.,
prisoners, military, or students) and in strategic locations (e.g., prisons, hotels, or hospitals) by businessmen/professionals and their spouses who are aged 21 and over and have an ecclesiastical endorsement from their pastors (Gideons International, 2017b/2017c). To date, the Gideon’s have placed over 2 billion copies of the bible in addition to their humanitarian and personal witnessing efforts.

*The Jehovah’s Witnesses.* Jehovah’s Witnesses break from a number of traditional Christian views (e.g., the trinity, the immortality of the soul, the traditional view of hell) but similarly take seriously the Biblical imperative to “spread the Bible’s message ‘to the most distant part of the earth,’ doing so ‘publicly and from house to house,’” (Acts 1:8; 10:42; 20:20; JW.org, 2017a, para. 3-9; JW.org, 2017b). Enacted locally and globally, professional witnessing became formalized for Jehovah’s Witnesses with the development of the Watchtower Bible School of Gilead, a school established in 1943 to provide Biblical and evangelical training (JW.org, 2017c). The school helps the more than 8,000 men and women who have and continue to enroll to learn how to strengthen their own and others’ relationships with Jehovah (JW.org, 2017d). Whether through field service or informal witnessing, ALL Jehovah’s Witnesses have an obligation, by virtue of their membership in the organization, to participate in public preaching (JW.org, 2017e). Jehovah’s Witnesses are expected to regularly engage in and report on personal missionary efforts. *Pioneers* are full-time evangelizers in the Jehovah’s Witness tradition while *regular* (i.e., part-time, 70 hours a month), *special* (i.e., assigned to specific areas of need), *and auxiliary* (i.e., part-time, 30-50 hours a month) pioneers all commit to evangelism in different or lesser capacities (JW.org, 2017f).
During the year 2016, proselytizing efforts (i.e., nearly 2 billion hours spent in the field by nearly 20,000 ordained ministers) in the Jehovah’s Witness organization resulted in a 1.8% membership increase (i.e., approximately 264,535 individuals baptized; Jehovah’s Witness, 2018).

**The Church of Jesus Christ.** The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was officially organized in upstate New York on April 6, 1830 with Joseph Smith Jr. acting as its first president and five others designated as its first legitimate members\(^{11}\) (Arrington & Bitton, 1992). Despite its humble beginnings, a history rife with persecution, and its reasonably short tenure, the Church has expanded rapidly and now has more than 15.4 million members worldwide (Church of Jesus Christ, 2016a). According to the National Council of Churches (2010), the Church of Jesus Christ is the second fastest growing church in the U.S (measured by member of record and convert baptisms: see also Church of Jesus Christ, 2016b)\(^{12}\) and it could be argued that the Church’s growth is due, in part, to its contemporary missionary force, which now numbers in the 70,000s (Cragun & Lawson, 2010; Church of Jesus Christ, 2016a/ 2016e). For the young members who choose to participate, a mission has the potential to be transformative, as it typically places missionaries in novel social, cultural, and geographic contexts where they encounter languages, lifestyles, economic statuses, and beliefs that are vastly different from their own (Pepper, 2014).

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\(^{11}\) According to the laws of the land, six members was the minimum required to organize a Church at that time (Green, 1971).

\(^{12}\) Membership statistics may not reflect active participation, informal disaffiliation, or localized growth patterns and therefore are not a precise estimate of the “real” growth in the Church (Cragun & Lawson, 2010).
Historically, ‘proclaiming the gospel’ has been a key part of the three-fold mission of the Church of Jesus Christ; while the structure of that mission has evolved overtime, proclaiming the gospel continues to remain a central component (Olson, 2005). This proselytizing focus is rooted in the Church’s scriptural cannon and doctrine which urges members to: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world” (Matthew 28:19-20 King James Version). Proselytizing missionaries have been a feature of the Church since its beginnings. For instance, Samuel Smith, the brother of Joseph Smith Jr. and one of the Church’s original six members, was sent to preach the gospel only a few months after the Church’s formal organization (Carr, 2004). Smith’s initial efforts sparked the flame that led to the conversion of Brigham Young, the Church’s second president, and set the stage for other missionary assignments that would soon follow (Carr, 2004). Most early missionaries were deployed to New England states, Native American territories, and Canadian provinces until 1837, when missionary efforts expanded beyond the North American continent to England (Doctrine & Covenants Stories, 2002). Not long after this initial overseas expansion, missionaries were working throughout the European continent and in countries from Asia to the Pacific Islands.

The modern missionary program of the Church of Jesus Christ has taken on a drastically different form when compared to its earlier renditions. For instance, during the Church’s beginnings older men, many of whom had wives and children at home, were often sent on missions alone, with little provisions, oversight, or direction (Tait, 2015).
However, over time the missionary age progressively lowered, a hierarchical reporting framework was created, and multiple centers of instruction (called Missionary Training Centers or MTCs) were established alongside a uniform missionary training and teaching curriculum (Newsroom, 2016b; Preach My Gospel, 2004). This curriculum currently focuses on language training, teaching, and doctrinal instruction that emphasize the missionary’s ability to develop Christ-like attributes and to recognize and be guided by the gift of the Holy Ghost\textsuperscript{13} (Newsroom, 2016b). Additionally, whereas early missionaries were contained to the Eastern states, Europe, and Polynesia, the current missionary program sends members to 418 missions in hundreds of countries, with a presence on nearly every continent (Church of Jesus Christ, 2016a/2016e). In the last five years the missionary program has continued to experience changes, most notably a decrease in the approved missionary age: from 19 to 18 years old for males, and from 21 to 19 years old for females (Newsroom, 2012). These changes have resulted in an influx of missionaries (especially \textit{sisters}—the term used to describe female missionaries) though the consequences of this inflow of missionaries on church growth and retention are currently unknown (Newsroom, 2013).

The purpose of the Church’s missionary program, as stated in the most recent iteration of the Church wide missionary training manual is to “to invite all to come unto Christ by helping them receive the restored gospel through faith in Jesus Christ and His Atonement, repentance, baptism, receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost, and enduring to the

\textsuperscript{13} In The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints the Holy Ghost is the third, distinct member of the Godhead. His role, as a disembodied spirit is to testify of truth, inspire, and comfort members who have received the Gift of the Holy Ghost (Gospel Topics, 2016).
end” (Preach My Gospel, 2004). This mission statement builds upon fundamental doctrines/historical events in the Church, namely that: (a) God, the Father of mankind, and His Son, Jesus Christ, appeared to Joseph Smith Jr. and named him the president of the Church and prophet of the last dispensation, (b) God restored His priesthood authority and power to the prophet Joseph Smith Jr. after centuries of apostasy and commissioned him to reorganize the Church of Jesus Christ in these, the latter-days, (c) in the meridian of time, Jesus Christ came to this earth to take upon Himself the sins of the world, suffer, and die so that mankind could repent and return to live with God, the Father, again, and (d) the purpose of life is to come to earth, obtain a body, and through the Atonement of Jesus Christ (see ‘c’)) become like and return to live with God again (Church of Jesus Christ, 2012). Embedded in the aims and core a doctrine of the Church is a strong proselytizing orientation that emphasizes the life and mission of Jesus Christ. A secondary purpose of proselytizing is to assist missionaries as they themselves “come unto Christ” and develop in spiritual, social, psychological, and temporal ways, which ultimately allows them to better serve in the Church and their communities. Elder Vaughn J. Featherstone a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy and former mission president described this secondary aim when he said “one of the great purposes of a full-time mission is to prepare the missionary for his or her future role in the Church”

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14 The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints employs a top-down organization placing Jesus Christ at the head of the Church. Additionally, the Church is organized with general and local leadership as follows: The General Authorities consist of the First Presidency, the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, the Presidency of the Seventy, the First and Second Quorums of the Seventy, and the Presiding Bishopric. The General Auxiliary presidencies consist of the Primary, Relief Society, Sunday School, Young Men, and Young Women General Presidencies (Organization, 2016). Local and mission leadership mirrors this organizational structure to some extent.
(Brigham, 1978). In other words, the missionary program has dual goals of (a) engaging/retaining youth members as they (b) solicit new converts and serve in the Church.

Though the nature of the Church’s missionary program, and the individuals within it, has evolved over the years, the bulk of the contemporary missionary force is comprised of young adults ages 18-25 who dedicate 18-24 months of their formative years to proselyting full-time in their assigned areas (Church News, 2012; Church of Jesus Christ, 2016e). The majority of missionaries currently serving are single males (68%) though the number of females serving has increased (now at 26%) as a result of the recent change in missionary age (Church of Jesus Christ, 2016a). One reason for this gendered difference is likely the emphasis, expectation, and obligation to serve a mission that is placed on males, whereas missionary service is positioned as an enriching option or alternative for women (Church of Jesus Christ, 2016c). Women also typically serve for shorter periods, 18 months, compared to men who serve for 24 months.

The mission itself is highly structured and includes a strict schedule (Table 1.1), specified attire, clear daily tasks, regularly planned and reported goals, restrictive social relationships, and a rule book that outlines standards of health, cleanliness, and behavior (Church of Jesus Christ, 2006). Additionally like historic, apostolic missionaries, modern missionaries in the Church of Jesus Christ essentially serve without “purse or scrip” or without concern for food, housing, clothing, transportation, and management of personal finances (Mark 6:7-8; Tait, 2015).
### Table 1.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Task</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6:30 a.m.</td>
<td>Arise, pray, exercise (30 minutes), and prepare for the day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:30 a.m.</td>
<td>Breakfast.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:00 a.m.</td>
<td>Personal study: Book of Mormon, other scriptures, missionary library, and Preach My Gospel. Emphasize the doctrines of the missionary lessons.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:00 a.m.</td>
<td>Companion study: share what you have learned during personal study, prepare to teach, practice teaching, study chapters from Preach My Gospel, and confirm plans for the day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:00 a.m.</td>
<td>Begin proselyting (or language study for 30 to 60 minutes). You may take an hour for lunch and additional study and an hour for dinner at times during the day that fit best with your proselyting time. Normally, dinner should be finished no later than 6:00 p.m.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:00 p.m.</td>
<td>Return to living quarters (unless teaching a lesson; then return by 9:30), and plan the next day’s activities (30 minutes). Write in your journal, prepare for bed, pray.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:30 p.m.</td>
<td>Retire to bed.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Notes: see Church of Jesus Christ, 2006.*

To be clear, missions are not free and missionaries are self-funded or funded by their families\(^1\), but those funds are collected in a centralized account and then distributed as needed to each mission/missionary, with housing, banking, and other tasks of daily living managed by volunteer mission staff. Thus, missionaries are neither employed nor enrolled in institutes of education while actively serving and are to be entirely focused on

\(^1\) Like other positions in the Church, missionary service is voluntary or comprised of a lay ministry. Missionaries fund their own missions with occasional support from friends, family, local congregations, or the Church’s general missionary fund which members can donate to at any time.
teaching the gospel. The one exception to this rule is the weekly preparation day, where missionaries are permitted to prepare for the week (i.e., do laundry, get a haircut), communicate with family (via letters, emails), and participate in appropriate leisure activities (Church of Jesus Christ, 2006). However, many of the mission rules and routines still apply during this time. For example, missionaries must always be with their assigned mission companion and must wear their name tag even if they are not in missionary attire—Sunday dress, or slacks/skirt, collared shirt, and tie—or technically ‘on duty’. Though missionaries largely function on their own, the mission is organized hierarchically (mirroring the organization of the Church as a whole) with missionaries nested in companionships, nested in districts, nested in zones, which are nested in the macro unit, missions (Church of Jesus Christ, 2006). Within these hegemonic structures, there are daily and weekly reporting requirements intended to monitor missionary health and safety as well as track missionary success measured against daily and weekly goals (Church of Jesus Christ, 2006). Given that the structure, higher standards of conduct, social restrictions, and purpose of the mission are relaxed and revised when missionaries return, it is no wonder the transition may be fraught with difficulty.

**Humanitarian missions.** While LDS missions remain focused on proselytizing, humanitarian missions, which are predominately protestant or non-denominational, typically allow for the provision of aid without a ‘requirement’ that the person receiving the aid convert or commit to the religious tenets of the sending organization. Usually these missions are framed in the language of John 13:35 “by this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another”, with the implication that Christian
love, service, and example is sufficient to bring others to an understanding of Christ. This shift in thinking about missionary work (from evangelism to the provision of aid) has resulted in the secularization of mission trips and the blurring of boundaries between faith-based missions and other forms of humanitarian aid (e.g., international service learning, voluntourism, disaster relief). Thus, where missions historically emphasized religious evangelism, they now embrace service and experience-based models. Given that humanitarian missions tend to be shorter and more hedonistic in nature and they have become more appealing to a broader audience. In fact, in many countries and religious cultures missions have become a normative experience – even a rite of passage – for many emerging adults.

**Conceptualizing Reentry – The Return as a ‘Subject’ of Study**

Reentry has become an interdisciplinary concern, touched on by scholarly perspectives as wide-ranging as anthropology (e.g., cross cultural adaptation; Szkudlarek, 2010), archeology (e.g., the repatriation of cultural property and human remains; Plets, Konstantinov, Soenov, & Robinson, 2013), and criminology (e.g., incarceration and community reintegration; Jonson & Cullen, 2015) to name just a few. Dubbed repatriation, reverse adaptation, reintegration, reincorporation, and returning, the reentry experience can be difficult, marked by a host of challenges (e.g., strained social relationships, difficulties integrating changed identities or perspectives). Many travelers expect the transition ‘home’ to be familiar, safe, inviting, relatively stable, and, therefore, easy. Thus, they find themselves unprepared and ill-equipped to meet the unanticipated challenges of reentry. With that in mind, some scholars have argued that reentry is the
*most disorienting* part of the traveler’s experience (Gaw, 2000; Mooradian, 2004), while others claim it is the *most important* part of the tourist experience, raising the question: if skills and knowledge gained abroad are lost or compartmentalized when an individual returns home, what was the point of their traveling abroad to begin with (Mendelson, Citron, & LaBrack, 2006)?

While some put forth a reductionist view of reentry – one in which reentry experiences are treated as equivalent, possessing shared characteristics germane to all adaptations, adjustments, or transitions (Black, Gregersen, & Mendenhall, 1992), I share Storti’s (2011) perspective that reentry experiences are distinctive, to some extent, depending on the individual, population, and programmatic features. In either case, in this section I will attempt to review various disciplinary explanations for why reentry difficulties occur, in order to provide a more complete understanding of the complexity of the reentry process. This section is organized using categories identified by Austin (1983a) and Austin, McDonald, and Austin (1988) in their annotated reviews of reentry scholarship, which include: Corporate and government repatriation, International Education, Military Reintegration, Missionary Work, and General Travel.

**Corporate and government repatriation.** Corporate repatriation, the “return to one’s country of origin from an overseas assignment” (Chew & Debowski, 2008, p.4), has received a great deal of attention in the reentry literature. Repatriation management matters, in part, because it influences retention, performance, and, consequently, return on investment (Adler, 1981; Black, Gregerson, & Mendenhall, 1992; Chew & Debowski, 2008; Medatwal, 2014; Szkudlarek, 2010). Significant resources are expended to support
corporate expatriation and, if retained, repatriates bring new knowledge, skills, and abilities back to the organization. In contrast, if repatriates do not feel that their new skills are valued or that they have room to grow within the organization, they are likely to leave. Currently, approximately a quarter of expatriates leave their sending corporations after returning; thus, greater efforts have been made to understand and reverse this trend (Medatwal, 2014). Providing support in multiple aspects of the expatriation and repatriation processes can demonstrate to a repatriate that he or she is valued, and reduce stress and anxiety associated with returning to his or her country of origin. A few authors led the field in the early years of corporate repatriation research, including Stewart Black and Hal Gregerson, Mila Lazarova, and Linda Stroh. Samples of their work will be presented here followed by a review of more contemporary repatriation research.

As early as 1991, Black and Gregerson were concerned with understanding the anticipatory and in-country factors influencing work and repatriation adjustment experiences for U.S. managers of large multinational corporations (n = 125) and their spouses (n = 76). In their initial research, they concluded that expatriate age (i.e., older repatriates have an easier time adjusting overall), length of expatriation (i.e., more time spent overseas had a greater negative impact on relational and general adjustment), social status (i.e., greater role discretion – autonomy – and role clarity correlated with improved adjustment), and housing conditions (i.e., many expats experienced improved housing conditions while abroad and thus returned to a subpar state) significantly predicted repatriation experiences for both managers and their spouses. In contrast, the clarity of reentry programming, cultural distance of the foreign assignment, and time repatriated
were insignificant predictors of adjustment in this study, which may suggest that reentry programming needs to be revisited, that culture may not play as significant a role as previously stated in the cross-cultural adaptation literature, and that the bulk of adjustment may occur immediately following return. Building on these findings, Black et al. (1992) developed a multifaceted theory of repatriation that underscored the importance of levels of anticipated and in-country certainty (or uncertainty) and control (or lack thereof). Put simply, the theory states that the greater the level of certainty and control, the more successful or smooth the adjustment would be. Specifically, these factors (certainty and control) function as mediating variables between the previously identified independent variables (e.g., age, time overseas) and the dependent variable, adjustment. For example, during the anticipatory stage individual variables such as time overseas and organizational variables such as pre-return training are likely to impact repatriation adjustment positively or negatively depending on the level of uncertainty or control. Likewise, in-country organizational factors such as role clarity or network factors such as housing conditions would similarly influence adjustment, when mediated by control and uncertainty.

Given that this and similar models of repatriation adjustment were developed with the needs of North American managers in mind, Gregerson & Black (1996) tested some of its features in a cross-cultural sample (n = 173 Japanese repatriates). The results of this study suggest that differences in organizational commitment exist between Japanese and North American repatriates. Specifically, with Hofstede’s cultural dimensions in mind, Gregerson & Black (1996) found that the more individualistic American managers were
likely to develop dual commitments (i.e., to both parent firm and local operation) while more collectivist Japanese managers were likely to maintain loyalty to a single entity (i.e., the parent firm). Moreover, unlike prior studies of U.S. managers, cultural distance/adjustment seemed to matter to Japanese managers who adjusted better if their overseas adaptation went smoothly. These conclusions were further supported in a study of Finnish repatriates, which determined that where older age, longer stay overseas, etc. predicted better adjustments for U.S. managers, the opposite was true for Finnish repatriates (Black & Stroh, 1997). Taken together, these and other findings point to a need for cross-cultural repatriation research and nuanced, cultural embedded theories of repatriation.

Continuing to build on this work, Stroh, Gregerson, & Black (1998) posited that an additional factor influencing repatriation was the gap between repatriate expectations and reality – expectation violation theory (see also Mooradian, 2004; Rogers & Ward, 1993). Expectation violation theory, put simply, posits that “everyone has expectations regarding behavior” and that “changes [or violations] in these expectations trigger disturbances” (Mooradian, 2004, p. 41). That is, reentrants often underestimate the difficulty of returning and the changes that have occurred at home and abroad (Kostohryz, Wells, Wathen, & Wilson, 2014). Specifically, expatriates typically expect to experience some sort of culture shock and have prepared for it, whereas reentrants often expect ‘home’ or their country of origin to be familiar and comfortable. Two assumptions of the theory are that (a) expectation violations can have either positive or negative, extreme consequences, and that (b) perceptions of violations are largely due to the social
and cultural meanings and values attached to norms, expectations, and violations. In other words, the discourse surrounding repatriation may influence expectations about what reentry will be like and how one should feel or behave if those expectations are violated. To shrink the expectation-reality gap Stroh et al. (1998) recommend that employers do the following: accurately describe the duties and demands of the repatriate’s position in the company, accurately describe the challenges they may encounter in the new position, clarify the amount of job discretion or autonomy they will have in the position, ensure that there is room for growth and application of skills acquired overseas, introduce novelty in tasks and work relationships, and inform the repatriate of changes in non-work factors (e.g., housing).

Stroh, Gregerson, & Black (2000) added that the relationship between expectations and adjustment is not always linear or clear cut. Specifically they contend that “the nature, or content, of the expectation can influence the degree to which a positive or negative surprise will occur and the degree to which expectations and commitments will exhibit differential linear and nonlinear relationships” (p. 694). For example, under met expectations (e.g., fewer interpersonal constraints were experienced than anticipated) resulted in higher organizational commitment in some contexts while over met expectations (e.g., greater discretion or autonomy in the position than anticipated) resulted in higher organizational commitment in other contexts. This expectation-reality gap may be particularly distressing for RMs whose sole purpose has been to teach a message of “hope” and who are encouraged, as with ordinary members of the Church, to think and act optimistically. In other words, when optimistic views of the
future are juxtaposed against the stark realities of reentry in the present, reentry distress is likely to ensue.

Lazarova’s work functions as an extension of these findings predominately focused on the relationship between organizational support and organizational commitment as it relates to repatriation (see, for example, Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2001; Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001; Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007; Lazarova, 2015). Specifically, Lazarova and colleagues developed a model that states that organizational support influences perceptions of support which in turn affect organizational commitment and turnover intentions. Common forms of support included but were not limited to, pre-departure debriefings, career counseling sessions, mentoring programs, financial counseling, and tangible indications that overseas experience was valued (Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001).

More recently, Szkudlarek (2010) and Szkudlarek & Sumpter (2015) conducted comprehensive reviews of scholarship on repatriation and corporate repatriation respectively. As part of their reports, Szkudlarek and Sumpter identified: (a) the issues faced by various types of repatriates, (b) sources of variation in repatriation experiences, such as personal factors (e.g., age, gender, or religion), destination factors (e.g., length of stay, level of immersion), and home factors (e.g., organizational support, family support), and (c) the key elements of corporate repatriation programs that contribute to variability in how programs are designed and implemented.

Repatriates often move from a position of high autonomy, salary, and status to lower levels in those areas (Medatwal, 2014). Repatriates may also feel dissatisfied with
or marginalized within the organization (Linehan & Scullion, 2002). In addition to these organizational concerns, repatriates may feel disillusioned with their home country or experience reverse culture shock. Add family concerns (e.g., resettlement, living conditions, school and work opportunities) into the equation and a repatriate certainly has much to worry about (Chew & Debowski, 2008). Time spent abroad and motivation for repatriation can also influence corporate repatriation. For example, if one’s assignment naturally ends at the predetermined time, one might adjust back more easily than if he or she failed his assignment or struggled to adjust and returned early or involuntarily (Medatwal, 2014). Finally, Linehan and Scullion (2002) argued that female expatriates may have a more challenging experience with repatriation since they often fill “pioneering roles” as they are outnumbered by males in managerial positions. They are typically isolated or victims of tokenism given the lack of role models and their exclusion from the good-old-boy network in the business world. Thus providing mentors and assistance with networking both at home and abroad would help soften adjustment issues for this group.

Effective repatriation policy, agreements, programs, and evaluation can alleviate these concerns (Chew & Debowski, 2008). Chew and Debowski (2008) elaborated on these areas and stressed that policies should acknowledge reentry distress, recognize the value of repatriate knowledge, consider repatriate and managerial rights and responsibilities, and identify available repatriation resources and services. All relevant stakeholders ought to be involved in the development and promotion of these policies. After policies have been defined they should be translated into individualized agreements
with each repatriate and catered repatriation programming. Agreements define the details of the overseas assignment and outline potential post-assignment positions/opportunities. The agreement also defines what the organization will provide in terms of reentry support and resettlement resources. Promises outlined in the agreement are delivered via repatriation programming which includes the development of a directory to track and maintain contact with each repatriate, the use of mentors to guide repatriates through the reentry process, and the provisions of cultural assimilation and family support.

Repatriates should also be given growth positions and opportunities to use their skills to train other expatriates/repatriates. Various forms of evaluation (i.e., outcome measures, process evaluations, deficit audits, and quality assessments) should be conducted to determine the formative and summative effectiveness of the program and policies. Medatwal (2014) confirmed that policies and support should be delivered before and during expatriation as well as during the repatriation and retention stages. Prior to departing, expectations need to be managed and information and mentoring provided. While abroad, the sending corporation can assist with physical relocation and maintain communication and accountability. During repatriation, transitional and readjustment assistance can be provided to minimize reverse culture shock. Finally, during retention, it is important that one alleviates boredom and ensure that new skills do not go to waste.

Szkudlarek and Sumpter (2015) built on Chew and Debowski’s (2008) work and posited that content (e.g., work based, non-work based), timing (e.g., before reentry or after), and format (e.g., individual or group) were all important factors predicting the success of reentry programs. However, they noted that these factors were all affected by
variables such as organizational goals, the cost of implementation, the training of reentry instructors, and confidentiality requirements. These variables give little consideration to the needs and wants of the reentrant. Thus, their work highlights the need for programming driven by the needs of the employee, not the employer. Moreover, they contend that programming should: (a) involve both organizational and non-organizational components (i.e., focus on personal well-being not just corporate retraining), (b) be proactively delivered (i.e., both before and after reentry), and (c) be offered in a format that is most conducive to the needs of the individual. However, these recommendations must be considered in light of organizational resources and structure. Additionally, reentry training, while dealing with affective aspects of the reentry experience, should also address practical/tangible aspects such as financial counselling, career planning, and communication (Szkudlarek, 2010). This type of training can help reentrants shift from a negative self-focus (e.g., no one understands me) to a proactive and positive self-focus (e.g., what is the next step for me, how can I keep moving forward?). Szkudlarek (2010) recommended that reentry programming begin with a debriefing meeting to familiarize and prepare the reentrant for the challenges of reentry before he or she ever set foot on his or her home turf.

As an added consideration, Ellis (2015) contends that new technology and social media shrink the relational distance between expatriates and their employers and between expats and their families. These technologies allow expatriates to stay attuned to matters in their home country while filling their expatriate roles in a foreign domain. In other words, some of the ‘unexpected’ challenges that were historically associated with
repatriation may be eliminated or diminished as a result of the communication/contact available through new technologies.

**International education.** Hsiao (2011) succinctly summarized a number of circumstances influencing reentry difficulties related to international education (e.g., study abroad, foreign exchange, etc.), such as: the loss of social cues and conventions; changed communication styles and systems; lack of awareness of internal changes; host country factors (e.g., length of time abroad, depth of immersion); home country factors (e.g., changes in the home environment); lack of receptiveness from family; political and economic shifts; and career concerns. These symptoms and behaviors are also a product of the grief and loss reported by reentrants. For example, many reentrants experience a loss of friendships, loss of lifestyle, loss of purpose, loss of experience, or loss of their idealized view of their culture of origin (Kostohryz et al., 2014). Some reentrants also experience disillusionment and dissatisfaction with the cultural values and behaviors of friends, family, and countrymen in their country of origin, which fosters an uncharacteristic pessimism and cynicism in students (Haines, 2012). Reentrants also report feeling misunderstood, unable to connect with others, and, consequently, alienated (Allison, Davis-Berman, & Berman, 2012; Haines, 2012; Weaver, 1987). Though this list is not exhaustive, it illustrates the wide variety of situations and stumbling blocks individuals could encounter during their reentry experience.

Though not discussed in the context of reentry per se, Griffiths, Diana, and Yiannis (2005) introduced a theory of learning shock – the “experience of acute frustration, confusion, and anxiety experienced by some students, who find themselves
exposed to unfamiliar learning and teaching methods” (p. 275). It is possible that after studying abroad in a new cultural context with different peer groups or learning and teaching styles, one may return to a traditional North American learning environment and experience learning shock, to some extent. As an example, this may occur for students who have experienced a discussion-based, democratic American classroom and then return to a lecture-based, authoritarian Asian classroom (or vice versa).

During reentry, some students also experience reverse culture shock (RCS), the shock that occurs as one attempts to readjust to his or her home culture, and may undergo major identity crises as a result of RCS (Allison et al., 2012; Gaw, 2000). The reverse culture shock (RCS) model mirrors and extends Oberg’s (1960) conceptualization of culture shock (CS) – the shock, disorientation, or cognitive dissonance one experiences when confronting an unfamiliar setting or culture – in the case of reentry, one’s home culture. Unfamiliarity with ‘home’ experienced by reentrants is allegedly a product of the de-culturation (i.e., unlearning of the home culture) they undergo in order to better acculturate (i.e., learning of host culture) and minimize discomfort associated with their initial adaptation to the host country (Callahan, 2010). Lysgaard (1955) illustrated the four step process of cultural adaptation with a U-curve in which an individual: (a) experiences an initial excitement or honeymoon period in the foreign location, (b) undergoes a culture shock after the excitement wears off, (c) acculturates – overcomes

16 Built on the work of the ‘Big 3’—Oberg (1960), Gullahorn (1963), and Lysgaard (1955)—who identified the six components of culture shock (CS; e.g., feelings of rejection from the receiving culture, confusion about role expectations and values) and modeled CS and RCS as U- and W-curves.

17 Callahan (2010) questioned this model, arguing that one did not need to de-culturate or unlearn a home culture in order to learn or fully experience a foreign culture.
the shock and begins to adapt, and (d) achieves stability. This model was extended by Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) to reflect the similar, reverse adaptation, process that occurs at home (a second U-curve) and is called the W-curve. However, this process has only recently been empirically validated despite decades of widespread use (Dettweiler et al., 2015). For instance, Dettweiler et al. (2015) collected reintegration narratives and perceptions from German students (N = 128) who had participated in an overseas educational experience and found evidence that corroborated the second U-Curve stage of the RCS model, with a climax at eight months. They documented an early, “easy” arrival phase followed by a period of “strain and isolation” that culminated in a re-adjustment to “the home culture as a new culture” (p. 86). This final transformation occurred as a result of peer support and personal growth experienced through the period of struggle.

Gray and Savicki (2015) provided additional support that RCS occurs, noting that individuals returning from more culturally distant (undefined in the study but typically referring to how similar/dissimilar two cultures are) countries where more likely to experience RCS. However, the authors could neither confirm nor disconfirm the W-curve model given that they employed a cross-sectional design in their study. Notwithstanding concerns regarding the validity of the U- and W-curve models, the general symptoms associated with reverse culture shock (e.g., physiological strain, compulsive behaviors, sense of loss/helplessness, feelings of rejection, anxiety, and impotence/inability to cope)

have been well documented (Dettweiler et al., 2015; Gaw, 2000; Gray & Savicki, 2015). These crises stem in part from the relationship strain, role ambiguity, and other psychological strains encountered by returning students and part of a reentrant’s impotence/identity confusion may originate from the fact that he or she feels between cultures and, therefore, experiences a cultural identity conflict (Allison et al., 2012; Gaw, 2000). Conversely, in spite of the mounting research exposing the dark side of reentry, Kartoshkina (2015) contends that reentry can be bittersweet. On the bitter side is the loss, frustration, and disillusionment that has already been outlined; however, on the sweet side, individuals are often happy, relieved, and comfortable when they return. Reuniting with loved ones, connecting with other study abroad students, or developing a renewed appreciation for the U.S. may all occur during the reentry process (Kartoshkina, 2015). Seiter and Waddell (1998) also posited that the struggle of reentry can elicit personal growth and transformation in the areas of intrapersonal knowledge, and interpersonal skills and relationships. Thus, in many ways study abroad becomes a transformative learning opportunity through or because of reentry challenges, not in spite of them (see Stone & Duffy, 2015 or Stone, Duffy, Hill, Duerden, & Witesman (2017), for a discussion of the transformative potential of study abroad).

Education scholarship has addressed the topic of reentry programming extensively, highlighting both the need for and design of reentry programs (Kauffman, 2013; Mendelson et al., 2006; Pollis, 2012; Webb, 2013, Young, 2014). Kauffman (2013), for instance, conducted a review of the student services provided at Worcester Polytechnic Institute and pointed out that at least eight different offices/departments were
currently providing reentry related services, many of which were poorly integrated with one another, and all of which were being underutilized by the student population. These services were designed to help students integrate skills, continue learning, maintain cultural competence, improve communication, and experience social enrichment. Some examples of services include but are not limited to career development opportunities provided by the campus career center (e.g., resume development, mock interviewing), student activities provided by the student body association (e.g., service, international fairs), and credit bearing reentry courses offered in the humanities department. Kauffman recommended that a centralized organization and cross-marketing of services was needed in order to better connect students with reentry services. La Brack (2006) proposed 12 activities/approaches to help returning student travelers adjust well. A few of these activities include: letting students review, relive and retell their story; connecting students with peers who have had similar experiences; setting goals with students to help them plan for the future, get involved in local/international issues and organizations, and perhaps return overseas; and ‘un-packing’ the experience as one of many life experiences rather than an isolated, compartmentalized event. These activities create outlets for reentrants to express their changed worldviews, test altered lifestyles, and continue to explore how their transformed identities fit into their home context.

Allison et al. (2012) provided additional support for this practices, explaining that extending the lessons learned during the trip and focusing on the future helps individuals get un-mired from their painful, post-trip present. Additionally, institutions should employ alternative formats for providing reentry support that facilitate active reentry
strategies, such as “social gatherings where students can interact informally, counseling sessions, alumni panels, peer-mentor programs, credit-bearing courses, resume workshops, [and] mock job interviews...” (La Brack, 2006, p. 64). However, engaging [emphasis added] students in reentry programs is not nearly as challenging as recruiting [emphasis added] students to these programs. With this in mind, Mendelson et al. (2006) queried: “How do we get the attention of students so that they will participate in or use reentry services?” In answer to his own question, he recommended that educators avoid pathological and pejorative language like ‘coping,’ or ‘reverse culture shock’ and instead focus on aggressively marketing the social and professional development opportunities associated with reentry services (e.g., future travel opportunities, career planning, and sharing with likeminded peers).

In a similar study, Pollis (2012) highlighted the National Association for Study Abroad’s (NAFSA) mission to help students adjust to their home culture, reflect on their learning, integrate skills into their personal and professional life, and market their skills for future use. She drew attention to Gaw’s (2000) work on reverse culture shock (RCS). Specifically, she noted that Gaw (2000) found that students who used reentry services were more likely to have lower RCS scores. Another interpretation of this relationship is that students with higher RCS scores were less likely to use reentry services. Pollis (2012) confirmed these findings in her own research, but noted that very few students used the services due to lack of awareness, rather than lack of need. Services included a reentry reception, reentry handbook, and reentry website. Interestingly, individuals who engaged in the reentry services experienced lower RCS even if they self-reported that the
event was not helpful. Lower RCS was also most strongly correlated to the reentry reception, emphasizing the social needs of reentrants. Similar work has been done by Webb (2013) who proposed a short, 4-hour retreat as a viable reentry service. He suggests using a reentry survey to simultaneously advertise the event and collect information to tailor the event to the specific needs of reentrants. Likewise, Mendelson et al. (2006) recommended a more extensive day-long or multi-day conference that includes on-site international fairs, career development workshops and opportunities, and extensive sharing and reflection activities.

Finally, Young (2014) drew attention to the critical notion that reentry training focused on reintegration and continuity of transformative learning may not be a cross-cultural aim. In other words, he posited that some collectivist cultures would prefer that foreign custom and ways of thinking be abandoned when students return home and mandating that students engage in the culturally normative routines and behaviors. In a related study, Chang (2010) pointed out that cultural differences can create relationship challenges for significant others during reentry. In his study, for example, Chinese mothers felt uncertain about how to interact with their returned children who had adopted more independent, abrasive, Western ways of thinking and acting. Likewise, Pritchard (2010) found “that the problems experienced by the graduates [a sample of Asian students from Taiwan and Sri Lanka]…were not those of simple emotional readjustment to their loved ones. They were more complex ones of conflicting values between modernism and traditionalism or between individualism and collectivism” (p. 16). While these are just two examples, they highlight the important role of culture in determining
how reentry is experienced and the importance of developing and delivering culturally-sensitive reentry support for students.

**Military reintegration.** All military personnel change as a result of deployment and will eventually return to the U.S. to commence the process of reintegration into civilian life (Danish & Antonides, 2013). However, some military personnel struggle more than others and experience various individual, interpersonal, community level, and societal reintegration challenges (Elnitsky, Fisher, & Blevins, 2017; Elnitsky, Blevins, Fisher, & Magruder, 2017). Military reintegration has been defined as “the process and outcome of resuming roles in family, community, and workplace that may be influenced at different levels of a social ecological system” (Elnitsky et al., 2017, p.114).

At the individual level, military personnel may experience psychological, physical, cultural, demographic, and productivity related challenges. For example, individuals may engage in risky drinking and driving behaviors to cope with combat exposure/PTSD; experience pain, memory loss, reduced day-to-day mobility/functioning, and communication difficulties in conjunction with combat related injuries; feel alienated, disoriented or disconnected from others and fail to seek help due to military culture (i.e., mental health and help-seeking stigma) and loss of military comrades; acquire mental health symptomology (e.g., anxiety, depression, suicidality); have an identity crisis (i.e., in-between military and civilian identities); and experience additional trauma (e.g., sexual abuse) as a product of their racial/gendered experience (Danish & Antonides, 2013; Demers, 2011; Doyle & Peterson, 2005; Elnitsky et al., 2017; Wilcox et al., 2015).
At the interpersonal level, family, friend, and church relationships may affect reintegration. For example, veteran friendships were identified as a critical factor in reintegration success (Elnitsky et al., 2017). Conversely, family conflict and marital difficulties often arise as roles, routines, and responsibilities are challenged; as mismatched expectations are resolved; as children manifest increased behavioral problems; and in response to emotional distance/decreased intimacy (Doyle & Peterson, 2005; Wilcox et al., 2015). Likewise, skills and attributes developed during employment often translate poorly to civilian/family life. For example, a veteran may have developed a habit of accounting for all individuals in his unit at all times (a safety measure), which when done at home is viewed by a spouse as controlling behavior (Danish & Antonides, 2013). Likewise, risk/pain tolerance or aggressive behaviors prized in the field could be viewed as hate, recklessness, and endangerment at home (Danish & Antonides, 2013; Wilcox et al., 2015).

At the community level, community characteristics, workplace environments, schools and healthcare providers all influence reintegration (Elnitsky et al., 2017). Individuals may encounter barriers to quality health care, struggle to maintain meaningful and gainful employment or encounter unexpected job loss despite legal protections for veteran employment, experience financial difficulties tied to employment, or struggle to gain access and acceptance in public spaces or groups within the community (Doyle & Peterson, 2005; Elnitsky et al., 2017). Specifically, veterans may feel a lack of social validation for their efforts; and a lack of purpose and control (Doyle & Peterson, 2005).
At the societal level, the department of defense and veteran’s administration (VA) develop policy and pursue legislation to protect veteran populations, however, many veterans are unaware of or fail to take advantage of the benefits provided by the VA. Reintegration research may assist in eliminating inefficiencies and inequalities in the veteran health care process (Elnitsky et al., 2017). With the social ecological systems theory is helpful for organizing and identifying gaps in our knowledge of military reintegration, Elnitsky et al. (2017) call for theoretical approaches that more directly explain and address reintegration challenges. Moreover, whether military personnel intend to redeploy and are in need of restitution and recovery (for deployment readiness) or have concluded their service, families, communities, and sending organizations ought to be mindful of the reintegration needs of these individuals. By reducing the burden felt by veterans, one reduces the burden felt by the receiving parties (i.e., family, community). Likewise, there appears to be a lack of empirically designed, delivered, and evaluated reintegration programs/interventions.

In some instances, the military has instituted reentry preparation, screening, and response programs to mitigate some of the challenges and consequences of reentry. These programs focus on aligning expectations with reality, providing information about resources such as mental health counselling, and covering topics such as stress management, conflict resolution, bonding/separation anxiety, and balancing military discipline with family fun (Doyle & Peterson, 2005). According to Doyle and Peterson (2005) key elements of a good reentry program include:

- The inclusion of family and community early in the reentry planning process.
- Normalization (rather than medicalization) of reentry distress.
- Ease of access to behavioral health professionals.
- Educating families on available resources and benefits.

Like Elnitsky et al. (2017) other reintegration scholars have endeavored to identify theories and frameworks that explain the process of reintegration and how reentry distress can be minimized. For example, Currie, Day, and Kelloway (2011) investigated how affective commitment (e.g., attachment to and support for an organization) mediated the relationship between independent variables such as: the number of tours one engaged in, reentry program participation and effectiveness, homecoming reception quality, and coworker support, and dependent variables such as: PTSD, Alcohol abuse, and organizational turnover. They found that coworker support and program effectiveness positively related with affective commitment and that as affective commitment increased PTSD and turnover decreased. There was no difference between novice and veteran reentrants in these categories.

Danish and Antonides (2013) proposed a life development intervention (LDI) framework that shifts from a medical model to a psychosocial-educational model. The LDI model moves beyond treatment of illness toward a more holistic model that empowers reentrants by helping individuals set goals, identify barriers to their goals, develop skills to transcend those barriers, and then actualize their goals. They suggest that military personal are heroes (one who gives his/her life to something bigger than him/herself), not patients, and should be given a hero’s welcome and care. Demers (2011) identified three strategies to assist with military reintegration, including: support
groups/story telling; support groups for significant others to learn about the culture, needs, and experiences of their veteran, and cultural competence training (focused on military culture) for health care providers. Sayer, Carlson, & Frazier (2014) similarly reviewed the reintegration literature and recommended a number of present and future actions that could be taken to better serve veterans. Currently the Department of Defense and VA provide systematic outreach programs, national hotlines and screenings, TBI and PTSD specific treatment or care programs, and benefits/services for family/caregivers. Additionally, tele-health and technology to increase access to healthcare continues to be developed. However, a more comprehensive and collaborative approach is needed that joins the government with public and private entities to increasing screening and education practices across the country to subsequently increase access to care and help seeking behaviors, and alters public perceptions of the realities of reintegration.

Elnitsky et al. (2017) contend that spouses or significant others should not only be engaged as a support for veterans but should be viewed and treated as individuals with their own needs and challenges related to reintegration. For example, a spouse may feel a range of emotions (e.g., loss, fear, grief) related to a returned veteran’s behavior or become frustrated as new found roles, autonomy, and confidence are challenged by a returning partner (Yambo et al., 2016). Spouses are often neglected or forced into unrealistic categories that do not align with their lived experience. They struggle to communicate their needs and establish a new normal, especially as their veteran partner returns “different” after every deployment and a new negotiation commences (Yambo et
Interestingly, it is partners of veterans who tend to seek mental health care the most, not the veterans themselves (Wilcox et al., 2015).

The missionary force of the Church is often called the ‘Army of God’, perhaps because of the parallels between military and missionary deployments and reintegration. For example, the culture of the military and of the Church has traditionally stigmatized mental health and help seeking behaviors instead favoring self-reliance or self-sufficiency. Similarly, military personal and missionaries are both typically given hero status, have prescribed roles, routines, and responsibilities, feel attached to a great cause/purpose, and build a band of brotherhood through their deployment. Upon return these statuses, roles, and routines are called to question and friendships, purpose, and identity are lost.

**Missionary member care outside of the Church of Jesus Christ.** Navara and James (2005) suggest that the acculturation patterns of missionaries seem to mirror those of other sojourners; however, they also posit that religious orientations and coping strategies may elicit different responses to acculturation distress. Thus, understanding the experience of missionary sojourners and the role of religion in the acculturation/re-acclimatization process may add to our understanding of reentry and is worthy of study. Missionary reentry is emerging as a niche area of study in the broader reentry scholarship with lines of research investigating topics and populations such as: member care for long-term – “career” – missionaries and short-term humanitarian aid workers, identity issues experienced by missionary ‘kids’ (MKs), and the role of spirituality during missionary reentry (O’Donnell, 2015; Kimber, 2012a/ 2012b, Schwandt and Moriarty, 2008).
Member care refers to:

The ongoing investment of resources by mission agencies, churches and other mission organizations for the nurture and development of missionary personnel. It focuses on everyone in missions (missionaries, support staff, children and families) and does so over the course of the missionary life cycle, from recruitment through retirement. (O’Donnell & O’Donnell, 2002, p. 4)

Though member care, by definition, is supposed to be available during the reentry (or “retirement”) phase of the mission experience (O’Donnell, 2011), these resources and services are primary delivered pre-departure or in the field (Camp, Bustrum, Brokaw, & Adams, 2014). Kimber (2012a) clarified the need for reentry member care services by documenting the experiences of returned career missionaries – commonly operationalized as missionaries serving for four or more years with children. She shared the experience of Joe and Lynn who had served overseas for 20 years with their children:

‘We were unprepared for the transition back to the world we had left nearly two decades ago’ Lynn admitted. Along with reentry shock, grief of multiple goodbyes, and overwhelming changes in lifestyle, both admitted that the greatest difficulty was in their relationships with their home church and mission agency. ‘Our agency didn’t know what to do with us and our friends expected us to be no different than we were before we left. I had difficulty being with old friends, since I had nothing to talk about with them, nor did I enjoy the kinds of activities they enjoyed. It wasn’t long before we realized we had to move to a place where no one knew us and we could start over again.’ (p. 2)

As this and other examples in Kimber’s reflections illustrate, missionary reentry is marked by a host of cultural, emotional, fiscal, social, and spiritual challenges. Likewise, former missionaries report feeling loss and grief associated with their identity/roles, relationships, culture, and ministry, resulting from personal changes, relationship changes, and changes in social structures and norms (Palmer, 1999). Koteskey (2007)
further clarified the need for reentry member care services via a review of frequently searched topics on a high-traffic member care website (www.missionarycare.org). Reentry was 11th on the list (with 703 searches over a three-year period) alongside other semi-related search terms like: time management, stress, sex and sexuality, attrition, burnout, and saying goodbye. Less frequently searched topics shed light on the more painful sides of missionary service and included words like inadequate, guilt, sin, frustration, and loneliness, some of which surface in the broader reentry literature. Similarly, a pamphlet on the topic of “reentry” was the 9th most downloaded pamphlet (2019 hits) compared to the most downloaded pamphlet on “conflict” (20,065 hits).

In cases where reentry services are provided, member care has been shown to reduce mental health symptoms and social alienation, decrease member attrition, and improve overall quality of life (Camp, Bustrum, Brokaw, & Adams, 2014; O’Donnell, 2015). These services can be informal; e.g., letters and expressions of love and support from congregation members (O’Donnell, 2015) or formal; e.g., pastoral visits, individual and family counselling, and debriefings, particularly related to traumatic experiences (Rosik, Richards, & Fannon, 2005). According to Camp et al. (2014) few empirical studies of reentry member care have been conducted, and most of these have focused on the perspectives of church and agency leaders rather than the perspectives of missionaries themselves. To address this gap they interviewed a small group of former missionaries (13) who both confirmed the need for reentry member care (using the word “abandonment” to describe the current state of post-mission member care) and identified specific areas where support is needed. Specifically, these missionaries identified mental
health counselling, cross cultural education and training, and financial, spiritual, and personal support (at the congregation level) as needed services.

Based on participant feedback, Camp et al. (2014) concluded that the gap between missionary needs and member care services could be closed if the following areas were addressed: “(a) agency attunement to missionary needs, (b) agency provision for missionary needs, (c) invested church partnership, (d) the impact of relationships, (e) missionaries’ self-care, and (f) consistency of care across the missionary life-cycle” (Camp et al., 2014, p. 359). Kimber (2012a) added that the health of former missionaries is a “community commitment” involving preparation, planning, communication, and effort from all stakeholders (e.g., missionaries, mission agencies, local churches, and families (p. 3). Beyond effective member care (O’Donnell, 2015), self-care activities such as engaging in daily disciplines (e.g., prayer, Bible study; Kimber, 2012b), understanding one’s identity “in Christ,” (Kimber, 2012a, p. 3) and developing specific family skills (e.g., adaptability), attributes (e.g., affection, closeness), and styles (e.g., authoritative; Schulz, 2012) may also help resolve or minimize reentry concerns.

Palmer (1999) added that many RMs desired more spiritual direction, noting that God initiated the call to serve and ought to be a part of the return. According to Palmer, so-called “spiritual directors” can help support reentrants by (1) listening attentively, (2) pointing them toward God (a stable figure) and away from themselves/their struggles, (3) encouraging them to actively wait and give God time to fulfill his promises, (4) encouraging reflection focused on learning, gains, and growth rather than losses, (5) promoting healthy grieving and forward thinking, (6) helping face and accept present
realities, (7) promoting integration of skills and attitudes acquired abroad into the present, (8) helping discern and make important decision, and (9) praying in their behalf.

Studies of short-term, humanitarian missionaries and missionary kid (MK) reentry have primarily focused on cultural identity issues (Bikos et al., 2009; Stevenson-Moessner, 1986; Walling et al., 2006) but have also investigated other topics such as loss/grief (Selby et al., 2009a; Selby et al., 2011), and dysfunctional mental health outcomes; i.e., anxiety and depression, experienced by reentrants (Davis et al., 2010; Davis, Suarez, Crawford, & Rehfuss, 2013). Studies specifically posited that many returning MKs and humanitarian workers find themselves ‘between’ cultures (Schwandt & Moriarty, 2008). As a result they become “third culture kids” (Bikos et al., 2009, p. 735) and experience a cultural identity crisis, cultural dissolution, marked by theologically created rootlessness or ambiguity toward home (Stevenson-Moessner, 1986, p. 318). Using data from 15 semi-structured interviews with short-term missionary aid workers Selby et al. (2009a) made the case that the characteristics of loss and processes of grief experienced by these reentrants resembled the loss and grief experienced by bereaved family members and proposed the interdisciplinary use of grieving frameworks such as the dual process model (DPM) to manage reentry grieving (Selby et al., 2011). In a different paper studying the same sample Selby et al. (2009b) identified factors that promote resilience for reentering missionaries such as mental health counseling, social support, spiritual connectedness to God, and mentorship from a trusted spiritual leader. Interestingly, resilient missionaries in this study reported many of the same stressors as their non-resilient counterparts, but were able to minimize and cope with them.
Finally, in a quantitative study of 186 missionary kids, Davis et al. (2013) used an experimental design to empirically support prior findings (see Davis et al., 2010) that reentry programming for missionaries can decrease depression and anxiety, though no information was given about the program or how the program may have influenced those outcomes. Similar to Davis et al. (2010, 2013) and Selby et al.’s (2009a, 2009b, 2011) work, Kimber (2012b) explored the relationship between reentry distress and religiosity. Specifically, she studied how one’s perceived relationship/view of God and participation in daily disciplines (e.g., prayer and study) influenced reentry distress. She found that one’s perceived closeness to God and participation in daily disciplines was correlated with reduced reentry distress. In a similar vein, Bjorck and Kim (2009) investigated the relationship between religious coping (both positive and negative), religious support (from one’s congregation, leaders, and/or God), and psychological functioning (trait anger, life satisfaction) with a sample of 98 Protestant RMs.

Regarding religious coping, Bjorck and Kim (2009) found that positive religious coping (e.g., seeking spiritual support, religious purification) was negatively correlated to trait anger while negative religious coping (e.g., blaming God) was positively related with trait anger; neither positive nor negative religious coping significantly impacted life satisfaction. All forms of religious support were positively related with life satisfaction, and the God support was positively related to lower trait anger. Finally, the interaction between support and positive coping increased life satisfaction but did not have a significant relationship with trait anger. Interestingly if positive coping was high and God support was low, anger increased and life satisfaction decreased.
Beyond the scant ‘scientific’ inquiries that have been conducted on the topic of missionary reentry, a number of texts have been published by individuals within agencies or churches based on conclusions drawn from years of observation and experience with former missionaries (see for example Booher, 2015; Jordan, 1992; Knell, 2012). These texts cover a variety of spiritual and non-spiritual topics including how to assess one’s preparation for home, thoroughly debrief field experiences, and establish closure. While valuable and contextualized, the theoretical and empirical contributions of these texts are nominal.

**General.** The general category of reentry is a ‘catch-all’ for other groups of travelers (e.g., Peace Corp volunteers, tourists) or for papers that speak about reentry principles that apply to a wide array of populations. A sample of theories and discussions from these more general perspectives are documented below.

**Cultural identity model.** Beyond the theory of RCS noted above, Sussman (2000) proposed a cultural identity model that reflects the extent to which individuals strengthened or weakened their attachments to home and host countries/identities. Sussman (2000) noted that when people cross cultural boundaries their cultural identity becomes more salient and subject to revision. Her model puts forth four identity categorizations which include: subtractive, additive, affirmative, or intercultural and describe the relationship between cultural transitions, cultural identity, and self-concept. Subtractive and additive individuals are more likely to weaken their home country identity and strengthen their host country identity respectively, thereby increasing their likelihood of adapting poorly to home. Subtractive reentrants for instance tend to feel in-
between cultures or a-cultural and often limit their connections to their cohort of reentrants, while additive reentrants cope by maintaining contact with the geographic host communities they left behind and/or seeking out localized communities/events that embody the values/culture of the host (Sussman, 2000). In contrast, affirmative and intercultural individuals either strengthen their identification with home or develop a more inclusive, open cultural identity which makes transitioning home less difficult. Typically, affirmative reentrants ignore cultural differences while abroad and developed fewer ties to the host culture, so they are able to quickly return to normal routines and behaviors and view home as a “welcome relief” (Sussman, 2000, p. 367). Intercultural individuals on the other hand become global citizens who are able to adapt to new environments, form new social relationships, embrace pluralistic customs/values, and thus navigate reentry with greater ease.

In 2002, Sussman tested this model with American teachers (N = 113) who had sojourned to Japan to teach English and, using correlation and regression analyses, confirmed that teachers rated as either subtractive (estranged from American culture) or additive (attached to Japanese culture) were more likely to experience reentry distress. Sussman (2002) also found that a strong connection to home was the best predictor of reentry success, regardless of one’s experience abroad – which contradicts prior assumptions and data to some extent. Building on Sussman’s (2000, 2002) work, Korne, Byram and Fleming (2007) sought to better understand the pros and cons associated with the development of an intercultural identity and to promote a discourse that celebrates rather than marginalizes cultural pluralism. Using semi-structured interviews with nine
immigrant women, they found that bi-cultural identification resulted in improved cultural competence in areas such as: intercultural communication, self-awareness, and openness/the ability to suspend judgment. However, these skills were overshadowed by stereotypes associated with biculturalism that resulted in reduced bicultural efficacy. By framing biculturalism in a more positive light Korne et al. (2007) hoped to leverage intercultural skills toward improvements in individual and community well-being.

**Significant others.** Significant others (e.g., spouses, parents, or siblings) also play important roles during reentry – supportive influence, antagonist, and victim – though they are often overlooked (De Verthelyi, 1995). In other words, significant others can worsen reentry difficulties by ignoring the signs and symptoms of distress (or appearing to do so), or can reduce distress by listening, adapting roles, accepting changes, and helping reentrants set goals and plan for the future. Likewise, significant others can also experience challenges themselves as a product of their uncertainty about how to act around or interact with the changed reentrant (Chang, 2010). Chang (2010) explored the experiences and uncertainties of Chinese mother’s interacting with their reentrant children and highlighted some compelling dichotomies/questions. For example, are the individuals returning as children or strangers? Are their guardians welcoming them ‘home’ as mothers or hosts? From the perspective of the mother’s in Chang’s (2010) study, reentrant children acted mysteriously, sometimes in positive ways and sometimes in negative ways. They tended to be more independent, self-reliant, and mature. However, they also spent less time at home, were less forthcoming about their experiences, and had adopted conflicting (Western) cultural values. Mothers in the study
longed for closeness and intimacy but typically avoided confronting or confessing their concerns to their children, choosing to withdraw instead. Interestingly, these Mothers adopted patterns of discourse that allowed them to justify their children’s behavior and the tensions in their relationships. For example, mothers used “I feel” and “I thought” statements to minimize the realities they experienced and observed. They also generalized behavior and tried to fit it in some sort of known norm using language like “boys are like that.” Using externalizing language like this protected mother’s from the pains of reentry. This study highlights two keys regarding reentry: (1) cultural discourses and norms play a major role in how experiences are interpreted and internalized, (2) significant others (i.e., social institutions) both influence and are influenced by the reentry process and, therefore, should be included in reentry training and programs.

Tourism. Frey (2004) spoke of the return journey as it relates to human mobilities – the movement of people between and within spaces and places and since that time the links between tourism and migration (via the mobilities paradigm) have been well established (Graburn, 2017; Hannam, Butler, & Paris, 2014; Iarmolenko, 2015; Kannisto, 2016). Citing Adler (1994), Frey added a critical component to the discussion of tourism mobilities, reasserting that the “concern of travel…is with mobility structured to test and sustain [my emphasis] complex cultural constructions of self, social reality, space, time, or even ultimate reality (God, eternal truth, etc.; p. 3). Frey contextualized this argument in a discussion of travel to and from the Camino de Santiago, and added that travel does more than just test and sustain – it also “transforms or change[s]” (p. 90). In that regard Frey noted that one most consider what occurs after the Camino has been walked in order
to fully understand the impact of the experience on the traveler and the world he or she passes through. To better understand this phenomenon, Frey collected open-ended data from Camino de Santiago pilgrims at three, six, and twelve month intervals after their trips. She found that the return to the everyday produced both positive and negative feelings. On the one hand, some pilgrims returned feeling confident, motivated, and transformed by the experience with vivid and recurring memories of it. On the other hand some pilgrims experienced difficulties in their relationships at home and at work, felt dissatisfied with their day-to-day milieu, or felt disoriented in and alienated from their community. Many no longer felt the same sense of purpose and direction they felt while walking the Camino, and were isolated from others who failed to understand the significance of the experience.

According to Frey (2004) returning pilgrims tended to either “integrate [i.e., continue to maintain changed believes or connections] compromise [i.e., make efforts to maintain changes, but struggle to do so when faced with busyness of life, disorientation, or disregard from others] or compartmentalize their experience/ transformation [i.e., make no effort to maintain change, treat the pilgrimage and post-pilgrimage as distinct or disconnected]” (p. 101). She concluded that those who seemed to thrive the most were those who became part of a transnational community through relationships with other Camino travelers, continued contributions to meaningful humanitarian causes, and engaged in critical personal reflection marked by humility and gratitude.

A few lines of tourism scholarship are emerging that draw critical attention to how tourists experience and conceptualize ‘returning’ and ‘home’ (Hui, 2009; Pocock &
McIntosh, 2011, 2013; Walters, 2008). For instance, Pocock and McIntosh (2011, 2013) studied the reentry experiences of 24 travelers who had spent an extended period of time overseas. For their research participants, ‘home’ was neither a uni-dimensional nor exclusively positive construct. For instance, some participants described travel as a means to escape from home, making returning more bitter than sweet. In this line of research, home was characterized spatially – as a place of residence, but also emotionally – as a space marked by discomfort and pain. In other cases, ‘home’ was identified as a source of identity-security and stability, reinforcing that returning is about satisfying intangible needs (e.g., belonging) rather than settling in a tangible, geographic place.

Hui (2009) referring to the complexities of ‘homes’ and ‘second homes’ discussed by Pocock and McIntosh suggests that “changing experiences of mobility provide a challenge to traditional spatializations of tourism” and that “future studies of tourism must be careful to include mobilities that do not fit circular structures” and typical conceptualizations of home and place (p. 208). Walters (2008) similarly noted that home and identity are interconnected and that meanings associated with home must be regularly revised. Taken together, these studies align with the critical turn in tourism studies by identifying pluralistic meanings and alternative renditions of home.

Grabowski and Wearing (2008, 2010, 2011, 2013, and 2014) have also engaged with reentry literature, though from the perspective of voluntourism. Their work focuses more on the transformative potential of voluntourism and frames reentry as a positive experience marked by continued service, international engagement, and identity exploration. Specifically, they posit that one does not recognize identity changes
experienced abroad until after he or she returns home. Home, therefore, becomes the place where sustained reflection occurs, and where identity may be transformation is solidified. Conversely, returning tourists may experience identity disorientation, which fosters feelings of ‘homelessness’ and a state of moratorium (i.e., emotional/social paralysis; Erikson, 1980). Toward this end, Grabowski and Wearing (2014) used emergent, performative methods (e.g., video self-interviewing) in order to capture the visual aspect of conceptualizations of ‘home’ and to give voice/power to the research participant to tell their story.

Other recent studies have explored how return travel acts as a way of “maintaining a transnational identity” (Kaftanoglu & Timothy, 2013, p. 281), investigated the relationship between identity, place, and place attachments during return travel (Li & McKercher, 2016), or considered the role of social media in post-trip reflection and evaluation (Kim & Fesenmaier, 2017). Long before these contemporary strands of research, Cohen (1992) explored the concept of reentry as it relates to the tourist departure from the Center in pursuit of the Other-center. He posited that two types of cultural shock may occur during this process, the first taking place when the host country/Other-center is too similar to the home Center and the second, more traditional shock occurring when one returns to a home Center that is no longer familiar/desirable (Cohen, 1992). These links between tourism and reentry add explanatory power to traditional culture shock models and align with the assumptions of the previously discussed expectation violation theory. Despite these promising lines of inquiry, and the
clear links between mobility, returning, and tourism, there is still a general lack of engagement in reentry research by tourism scholars.

**Reentry in the Church of Jesus Christ**

Serving a full-time mission in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a significant rite of passage and as such incorporates rituals, symbols, and knowledge required to help young members of the Church transition from one state of being in the world, and Church, to another (e.g., adolescent to adult; neophyte to seasoned member). While each RM in the Church has a distinctive reentry experience, he or she also passes by/through common markers, or signposts, which signal to the missionary that his or her service has formally commenced and concluded. These markers are outlined in various handbooks of the Church in order to help leaders and members navigate the reentry process. Reentry distress (or lack thereof) is likely to coincide, to some extent, with these markers, which are presented in chronological order below.

**Before entering the mission field.**

(1) An interview with the Bishop and Stake President to determine readiness and worthiness to serve (Handbook 1, 2010).

(2) A call to serve (Handbook 1, 2010), and

(3) An assignment to labor (Handbook 1, 2010).

(4) A setting apart (Handbook 1, 2010).

(5) A talk in sacrament meeting (Handbook 1, 2010).

(5) A period of language and Gospel instruction in one of seventeen Missionary Training Centers across the globe.
In the mission field.

(6) An assignment(s) to serve in a specific ward or branch with a specific companion.

(7) A release interview with the Mission President (Mission President’s Handbook, 2006)

After returning from the mission field.

(10) An interview with the Stake President and formal release (Handbook 1, 2010).

(11) A report to the Stake Priesthood Executive Committee (Handbook 1, 2010).

(12) A talk in sacrament meeting (Handbook 1, 2010).

(13) A release certificate and letter (outlining accomplishments and appreciation for service) sent to the Stake President and Bishop (Handbook 1, 2010; Mission President’s Handbook, 2006)19.

(14) A calling (Handbook 1, 2010).

In conjunction with these markers, Church leaders have been given specific instruction about how they should conduct themselves. For example, Bishops are to make it clear that missionary farewell or homecoming talks occur as part of a regular sacrament meeting, not as part of a special meeting dedicated to celebrating the missionary’s departure or return. This counsel comes in response to a burgeoning culture/tradition in the Church of treating sacrament meetings as a missionary farewell or homecoming ceremony, which seemed to diverge from the intended purpose of the sacrament meeting by emphasizing celebration of the individual missionary rather than commemoration of the Savior and the symbolic sacrament ordinance. Likewise, families have been

19 These letters are often read by the Bishop from the pulpit, during a sacrament meeting. In addition to drawing public attention to the missionary’s return and accomplishments, this can also address and stymie any issues associated with early returns.
discouraged from having extravagant open houses, sending printed invitations, or forming reception lines in meeting houses after the missionary has given his sacrament meeting talk and is prepared to depart or return (Handbook 1, 2010).

Mission Presidents are given extensive directions regarding how to conduct the preliminary release interview. According to these directives, the interview should be viewed as an opportunity to “bless missionaries for the rest of their lives” (Mission President’s Handbook, 2006, p. 66). Specifically, Mission Presidents are given the following instructions:

Discuss how they can maintain and build on their strengths. Emphasize the importance of daily scripture study and prayer; keeping the Sabbath day holy; participating in temple work; sharing the gospel; obeying all the commandments (including the law of chastity, the law of tithing, and the Word of Wisdom); making goals and plans; and serving faithfully in the Church. Help them set goals that will enable them to enjoy the guidance of the Spirit constantly in their lives and continue the spiritual growth that they have experienced during their missions. (Mission President’s Handbook, 2006, p. 66)

Release interviews should also stress the importance of temple marriage without defining a timeline for pursuing marriage, instead encouraging missionaries to seek the guidance of the Spirit as they strive to become and identify a righteous eternal companion. Missionaries are instructed to continue sharing the gospel, attend institute and Sunday meetings, follow mission rules until released, and obey customs regulations during travel. Missionaries are also encouraged to seek out a calling or assignment from their Bishop’s immediately upon returning. A worthiness interview is often conducted, as needed, to ensure the missionary has a current temple recommend before returning home.
Stake Presidents, like Mission Presidents, are given guidance about what should be discussed in the final release interview. Handbook 1, for example, recommends that Stake Presidents attempt to assess the RMs strengths and weaknesses and develop a plan to build on their strengths, review the importance of maintaining the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost, encourage missionaries to consider and make career plans, and commit them to maintain high standards of dress and grooming while continuing to follow the commandments and serve in the Church. The Stake President (like the Mission President) encourages RMs to prepare for temple marriage, though no set timeline is proscribed.

In addition to ‘required’ benchmarks (e.g., the release interview), Mission Presidents are also taught that a dinner and testimony meeting that focuses on expressions of love, testimony, and counsel can be a meaningful way to help missionaries conclude their service – these events have become commonplace in many missions (Mission President’s Handbook, 2006). Missionaries may also be permitted to attend the temple at the conclusion of their mission if it is within a reasonable distance from the mission home; some Mission Presidents formally schedule a temple trip for the entire cohort of RMs as part of their preparation for separation from the mission. Missionaries are discouraged from traveling home alone and are encouraged to return directly to their home, avoiding other travel unless accompanied by their parents (Mission President’s Handbook, 2006). Missionaries are also expected to maintain the mission decorum and attire until officially released.
After returning, in addition to their interview with the Stake President and report to the Stake Priesthood Executive Committee, missionaries may also be paired with a High Councilman and invited to speak in various wards throughout the stake (Handbook 1, 2010). Other less formal ceremonies and rituals associated with reentry include things like boisterous airport receptions or homecoming parties. These markers vary in situations where missionaries are released early for medical reasons, transgression, or belated confessions. For example, if a missionary returns early by choice or due to transgression or belated confession he or she does not receive an official release certificate. That said, Mission Presidents are explicitly reminded that there are “no categories of release (such as honorable or dishonorable” (Mission President’s Handbook, 2006, p. 66).

In 2014, the Church also announced the development and implementation of a reentry program called My Plan. Grounded in principles of spiritual and temporal self-reliance, My Plan engages missionaries in eight reentry training courses, one at the beginning, one near the middle, and six during the final transfer of their mission. My Plan includes reporting, reading, pondering, watching, discussing, completing activities, and committing. The Plan emphasizes the development of a life vision statement, and encourages RMIs to set goals and make plans that align with that vision in domains such as spirituality, dating and marriage, career and education, and personal and physical development. The Plan also encourages and helps missionaries to identify a mentor and supporting resources that can help them overcome potential barriers in order to accomplish their plan. The Plan is designed to be reviewed with Mission and Stake
Presidents during the missionary’s release interview and is intended to be a reference tool for missionaries, their family, mentors, and leaders as they collectively navigate the reentry process.

**The formal study of reentry in the Church.** The formal study of reentry in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints seems to have commenced in the early 1930’s in response to an invitation from Elder John A. Widtsoe, who was then serving as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve (Madsen, 1977). He asked that Bishop’s and Stake Presidents report on the economic, social, and religious status of RMs in their congregations (King, 1936; Madsen, 1977). The results of this study were printed in an issue of the improvement era (Clawson, 1936), the official publication of the Church at the time. At the same time, a number of case studies were conducted and published by scholars at Brigham Young University’s Provo and Idaho campuses in response to Widtsoe’s invitation (Groberg, 1936; King, 1936; Probst, 1936). Since that time, scholars have covered a myriad of topics, which will be reviewed here alphabetically, by topic, and then chronologically within each topic.

**Academic enrollment, engagement, and achievement.** Four known studies have investigated the impact of the mission on reentrants academic abilities and behavior. The first of these four studies conducted by Dunn (1966) examined the need for a correlation program for LDS college students, noting that more than 80% of RMs enroll in academic institutions and that many of these institutions are failing to meet their academic, social, and spiritual needs. In addition to academic adjustment issues, RMs in this study faced problems related to identity, courtship and marriage, reintegration into the Church
program, maintenance of spiritual habits, goals and objectives, and leadership training. Dunn proposed eighteen strategies to include in the correlation program, such as: incorporating varied special interest groups, facilitating opportunities for meaningful service, and developing a more robust counseling program. Gilbert (1967) investigated whether or not RMs who were on probationary status (n = 152) prior to leaving on their missions improved their GPA after returning compared to RMs who were not subject to disciplinary action by the university (n = 129). Gilbert found that regardless of academic status, GPA significantly increased from pre- to post-mission for probationary (.82 points) suspended (1.31 points) and non-probationary students (.65 points). The increase in GPA was not impacted by mission location/language or time-to-enrollment after one had returned. While the assumption underlying these findings is that missionary service may contribute to improved academic motivation, maturity, and ability, Gilbert noted that reentrants were most likely motivated by the extra attention they received from the office of student affairs and by fear of being expelled from the university.

Palmer (2009) conducted thirteen (13) semi-structured interviews with RMs to better understand the impact of the mission on reentrants’ college experience(s). Drawing on a number of educational theories and human development models, Palmer determined that the mission experience had a positive impact on reentrants academic experiences and influenced, in part, a variety of areas including: bicultural development, interpersonal relationships, self-efficacy, critical thinking, and organizational/goal setting skills. Additionally, the mission altered life choices and degree aspirations and facilitated a culture of life-long learning. Jepson (2014) interviewed RMs (n = 6) at a university in
North Texas to understand the extent to which delaying education for missionary service impacted academic success and retention. He found that Latter-day Saint “delayers” resembled traditional students (i.e., those who do not postpone their education) in that they had similar academic momentum, expectations for timely graduation, and completion rates.

In sum, these scholars found that missionary service, in part, improved academic motivation, performance, and retention and that RMs were able to overcome typical challenges associated with delayed education. Opportunities to reason through difficult situations, study daily, plan and set goals, and reflect in the field may all contribute to these positive academic impacts.

**Cultural adjustment.** Callahan (2002/2010/2011) initiated a line of research to elucidate the cross-cultural adjustment processes of departing and RMs. He found that RMs cross-cultural adjustment experiences aligned better with Kramer’s fusion theory of adjustment than with the unilinear theory of adaptation proposed by Gudykunst and Kim. In a nutshell Gudykunst and Kim’s theory assumes that individuals fully assimilate into a new culture/community when they *learn* (enculturation) and *adopt* (acculturation) norms and values of that group, AND simultaneously *unlearn* (deculturation) their previous held norms and values. In contrast, fusion theory suggests that individuals do not have to *unlearn* (deculturate) in order to *learn* (acculturate) and contends that new cultural norms and values are simply added to the old ones during cross-cultural experiences (what Kramer calls plus-mutation). Where adaptation theory posits that cross-cultural
adjustment is straightforward and has a clear end, fusion theory argues that adjustment is a continuous, complex process.

Ultimately Callahan (2002/2011) concluded that missionaries do not deculturate (i.e., defamiliarize themselves with or lose their home culture), although they may suppress aspects of their home culture for a time. If anything their ties to ‘home’ as a geographic place and social space were strengthened during the mission. Callahan (2010) posited that the lack of deculturation may be tied to (1) insufficient time spent in the host country or (2) anticipation or intention to return to the home country, and further contended that (3) deculturation may not actually occur or be empirically supported. Moreover, while missionaries did not ever seem to assimilate as adaptation theory posits (perhaps because they never deculturate), they did feel “functionally fit” or comfortable navigating the norms, and language of the host culture. Callahan (2011) suggests that missionaries failure to fully assimilate abroad may be tied to their proselytizing focus, which tethers them to a predominate value of their home culture and distracts them from fully immersing in the host culture. Perhaps the most interesting finding is that difficult reentry experiences in these studies were tied to loss of missionary culture, more than loss of host culture. For example, missionaries struggled most with the “loss of structure, routine, homesickness for the mission…and opportunities to share the gospel” (Callahan, 2002, p. 89). Furthermore, RMs who were inactive cited “worldly pressures, a return to bad habits, and transgression as the cause of their inactive status,” not cultural difficulties (Missionaries Active, 1978, p. 3; cited in Callahan, 2002).
**Cultural competence.** A number of studies focused on the cultural attitudes and competence or geographic literacy of RMs. For example, Chu (1974) explored the extent to which RMs had adequately and accurately learned Chinese cultural expectations and norms. Using a Q-sorting technique, Chu compared how RMs (n = 30) and Chinese natives (n = 30) classified 70 statements reflecting six cultural categories (e.g., tradition, language, personal manners). He concluded that the two groups scored significantly different on 4 of the 6 categories and subsequently argued that missionaries were returning with major deficiencies in their cultural knowledge. These deficiencies were attributed to a lack of cultural training/ preparation prior to departing for the host country, an unwillingness to correct misunderstandings in the field by the host, and a lack of observation, time, or willingness to change/learn on the part of the missionaries.

A few years later, Bradford (1986) investigated the experiences of RMs (N = 75) who had served in Latin America or the U.S. to determine (1) the extent to which missionaries’ value systems change as a result of the mission, (2) how accurate missionaries’ assessments of their own and others’ values are, and (3) how religiosity might influence those values. Religiosity in this study was defined as “a measure of the depth of religious belief, religious commitment, and religious behavior. It represents the extent to which a person has internalized or externalized his [sic] religious beliefs” (p. 4). He assumed that each culture has a value system that is distinct from other cultures and that as one comes in contact with another culture his/her values would be subject to change through a process of initial culture shock, subsequent understanding, and adoption of values. He further posited that an RM would undergo a similar process when he or she
returned and may, therefore, experience temporary dissatisfaction with his/her home
culture or disinterest from family and friends who do not understand his/her new values
or ways of thinking. This in part occurs because “the missionary reenters as a minority
(out group) and is defined by those who remained (in group) (p. 2, see also Jansson
1975). Bradford further hypothesized that eventually the RM would settle and retain
values from both host and home country (bi-cultural identity).

To determine if missionaries value systems changed as a result of their mission,
Bradford compared the personal value stances of three groups including Latin American
natives, non-Latin missionaries who had served in Latin America, and non-Latin
missionaries who had served in the U.S. Using a cluster-analytic technique he determined
that there were not clearly discernable value clusters between the missionary groups.
Having rejected this initial hypothesis, he could not answer his other research questions.
However, further analysis revealed that if he looked at how respondents defined ‘Others’
values (as opposed to personal values) that distinct clusters emerged. These ‘Other’
oriented clusters suggest that perhaps missionaries reinforced stereotypes rather than
abandoning them and confirm literature that suggests that contact with the ‘Other’ is
insufficient to produce accurate value perceptions; typically, formal cultural training is
required. Ultimately Bradford concluded that missionaries’ value systems do change as a
result of a mission, but not in the way you might think. Much like Callahan (2011) he
described the change as a religious value adjustment, not a cultural one, which may have
may explain the homogeneity of the groups’ personal value stances.
Smith, Roberts, and Kerr (1996) investigated the impact of missionary service on cultural and racial attitudes in a sample of RMs (n = 273) and a sample of missionary-aged individuals who had not yet served (n = 495). According to the more subjective/conscious measures of cultural attitudes, RMs were more aware and accepting of racial issues and open to contact with minorities; however, the more objective/unconscious measures revealed a subtle bias amongst RMs. Family attitudes and prior contact with minorities were both variables that predicted cultural acceptance in the study. Conversely, there were no differences between the groups on the racial attitudes measure and Smith et al. (1996) concluded that differences in cultural attitudes may be tied to “the mission experience itself, rather than lengthy exposure to foreign cultures” (p. 130). Because there were no differences according to mission language, or difficulties experienced during the mission, one could further conclude that mission/religious culture, more specifically, may have affected cultural and racial attitudes.

Finally, Stahmann (2000) assessed the geographic knowledge and literacy of Ricks College (now Brigham Young University – Idaho) students who had yet to serve a mission (n = 108) and who had recently returned (n = 198). RMs had greater geographic knowledge (i.e., sense of cultural and physical geography of a place(s)) but showed no difference in their geographic literacy (i.e., spatial identification of locations on a map). Stahmann (2000) proposed that given the foreign nature of many Church mission assignments, the Church might be more successful in their proselyting efforts (i.e., missionaries would develop a greater connection and affinity for the local place and
people) if a greater focus was placed on teaching missionaries about cultural customs and spatial geographies. Taken together, these studies emphasize the potential influence of religious/mission culture on missionary attitudes and behavior and suggest that more regional/ethnic cultural training may be needed prior to and during missionary service.

**Dating behavior and styles.** McLaughlin 2000/2007 pursued a line of research dedicated to understanding the dating styles and active dating behaviors of male RMs. She notes that while in the field missionaries are prohibited from dating and pursuing romantic relationships; however, when missionaries return they are expected and encouraged to begin chaste, same-faith courtships that will lead to marriage. After interviewing a group of male RMs enrolled at BYU (n = 15) she concluded that missionaries have a mixture of dating desires and styles. Moreover, when these desires and styles were in alignment, relationship satisfaction often increased (McLaughlin, 2007). The four primary desires of RMs in this study included: desire for marriage, desire to avoid rejection, desire to be personally prepared for marriage, and desire to obey Church doctrines regarding dating and marriage (McLaughlin, 2007). These desires were a product of intervening conditions (i.e., religious, academic, and national cultures), antecedent conditions (i.e., family culture, prior dating experience, or mission) and subsequent, socialized intrapersonal conditions (i.e., courtship beliefs, relationship confidence; McLaughlin, 2000).

Four dating styles also emerged including: romance dating, minimal dating, friendship dating, and commitment avoidance (McLaughlin, 2007). Romantic dating was marked by excitement, anxious anticipation, and a single-minded, almost frenetic desire
to pursue romantic relationships (typically with disregard for the responsibilities and consequences associated with committed relationships). Minimal daters were those who experienced dissatisfaction, fear, or disinterest in dating and needed a dating hiatus. These missionaries were focused on emotional, financial, and spiritual barriers rather than the opportunities and blessings associated with dating and marriage. Friendship dating was marked by a desire to increase one’s dating pool through low-key, fun dating experiences. Typically, these missionaries had greater dating confidence and competence but also had lowered their expectations regarding the outcome of their relationships. They were interested in natural as opposed to forced romance and unlike style four daters, they do not actively avoid commitment. The majority of RMs studied, experienced the first three styles in sequence; that is, they typically returned home excited to date and marry, slowed down or took a break after a few failed or disheartening dating relationships, and then adopted a more relaxed attitude toward dating moving forward (McLaughlin, 2000). Interestingly, despite being characteristically unprepared for serious martial commitments, did not stop dating altogether. Instead they actively pursued frequent, short-term relationships that were focused on physical intimacy or fun.

To a great extent this desire to date and marry had been internalized early on in missionaries’ lives via Church doctrine/experiences and was cemented through the repeated dissemination of these doctrines as missionaries (McLaughlin, 2007); however, missionaries in this study reportedly felt no pressure to date and marry derived from parents, peers, or Church leaders (McLaughlin, 2007).
Identity or role changes. Two studies of missionary reentry found that reentry distress was associated with the shock of adjusting from one identity/role (i.e., missionary) to another (i.e., ordinary Church member; Dunn, 1966; Dunn & Heffelfinger, 1987). Specifically, Dunn and Heffelfinger (1987) drew upon role theory to describe how roles – “behaviors that are expected or prescribed for an individual occupying a specific position or designated status…in a specific group” (p. 22) – were learned or socialized before and during the mission and subsequently challenged after the mission. They posited that during the post-mission adjustment process, missionaries must work to bring their sense of self into alignment with new environments and expectations, which can result in role conflict and ambiguity. They found that as missionaries (n = 40) transitioned into their role as ordinary Church members, they experienced problems of identification that culminated in a sense of loss, fear, ambivalence, anxiety, and/or confusion.

Madsen (1977) clarified this finding, suggesting that “while in the mission field a missionary knows who he is and what he represents. His immediate goals and purposes are clearly defined. However, upon his release, there is a sudden loss of purpose… [and] status” (p. 8; see also Dunn, 1966). Chadwick, Top, and McClendon (2010) also noted that there seems to be a great interest in the Church regarding whether or not someone is RM. They posited that identification as a RM may be tied to expectations of academic, career, familial, and spiritual success and stability. Missionaries in Dunn and Heffelfinger’s (1987) study reported that other’s think RMs should “be very spiritual, close to perfect, scriptionians or gospel scholars, fully active in the Church and role
models” (p. 49). Similarly, when asked about their own expectations they reported a desire to “continue to live the missionary lifestyle, to have a high degree of spirituality, to have a strong testimony of the Church, perfection and to have a chosen career and educational goals” (p. 49). The authors argued that these idealistic expectations could be a positive source of motivation on one hand, and a source of discouragement on the other.

**Infectious disease.** One proposed study aimed to determine the prevalence of LDS missionaries who returned from their missions with clinical symptoms of infectious diseases (Green, Maza, Stewart, & Stoddard, 2012). Though the study never seemed to have come to fruition (or at least not in a published format), the authors explained that Mission Health Service (MHS) did not currently conduct parasitic disease testing with RMs and proposed that a survey of approximately 100 missionaries be conducted to identify the percent of missionaries returning from West Indies missions who were manifesting symptoms of parasitic infections. Further study of the rates and spread of infectious disease by RMs is an important and apparently underdeveloped area of study.

**Language competence and retention.** In addition to a line of research initiated by Hansen (1995/ 2011/ 2012), a number of scholars have investigated the extent to which RMs acquire and retain language competency via their mission (Cottrell, 2008; Kirk, 2014; Wyatt, 2013). Hansen’s (2012) work notes that “in mission language research to date, more attention has been given to loss of the language following the mission than to its learning while abroad, with the RM population cited in a recent review of the second language (L2) attrition literature as one of the…most frequently studied groups of L2 attriters” (p. 2). Hansen also documented how factors such as “motivation, aptitude…and
language distance (European languages are retained better than Asian)” influenced loss of language (p. 2). Languages, according to Hansen (2012) were more likely to be retained if they relearn or receive formal language training immediately after returning.

Cottrell (2008) investigated the language proficiency of RMs (n = 12) who had served in Spanish speaking countries and were enrolled in Spanish 321 at Brigham Young University, a language course designated for RMs. Specifically, she explored how Spanish proficiency (via written and oral tests assessing the accuracy of their use of preterit and imperfect tenses) differed based on one’s gender, mission location, and whether or not one had applied to the Spanish major/minor. Cottrell reported that men scored higher than women on the written test and scored equally well on the oral test; International missionaries scored higher on both tests than domestic missionaries; and Spanish majors/minors performed better on oral and written tests than non-majors/minors. Statistical significance was not reported in the study, however, using data provided, a t-statistic and p-value was calculated for each of the between group tests. These statistics demonstrate that the differences between men/ women, mission locations, and majors/ non-majors were not significant and, therefore, may have occurred by chance. More likely, the study was underpowered due to small sample sizes so real differences between groups could not be detected.

Wyatt (2013) evaluated the objectives and outcomes of an RM-designated Spanish course at BYU. Approximately 421 of the 638 students registered in the course completed surveys addressing their perceptions of, satisfaction with, and experiences in the course. Additionally, interviews were conducted with department admin and faculty
regarding the evolution of the course and its objectives/outcomes. Initially the course was intended to “build on returned missionaries’ enthusiasm for the culture” and function as a general education course with cultural, literary, and composition elements (p. 21); however, it was largely perceived as a grammar class. All things considered, students were satisfied with the course but were interested in more time in-class to practice speaking the language. RMs in the class were more motivated and had better academic outcomes than their peers (i.e., native speakers, heritage speakers); however, few were enrolled in other language courses despite their interest in continuing to speak the language. Admin and instructors were concerned with inconsistency in learning objectives across courses, calling for better “horizontal articulation” and implementation of the course as designed (p. 60).

Kirk (2014) investigated the Spanish language proficiency, cultural aptitude and cultural assimilation of RMs (n = 103) who had served in Spanish speaking missions for the Church. He found that these missionaries’ motives for learning Spanish were comparable to traditional language learners (i.e., individuals who learn a second language for the first time with no immediate cultural connection to the language) but their linguistic abilities were comparable to heritage language learners (i.e., individuals who speak Spanish as a second language and or who have a strong cultural connection to the language). Despite living in Spanish speaking regions for some time, becoming fluent in the native language, and professing an attachment and identification with their mission region, RMs had limited/superficial cultural knowledge (Kirk, 2014). Kirk posited that the lack of cultural awareness was a product of the missionaries’ structure (i.e., isolated
from popular culture and regional media) and purpose: “Their goal is to spread the LDS faith, not to learn about culture and not to assimilate the second culture” (p. 11).

According to Gale (1977), it should also be noted that in addition to maintaining their second language abilities, some RMs struggle to regain mastery of their native language, taking as many as four months to feel proficient again.

**Early return – stigmatization and mental health implications.** Sellers (1934) documented the mental health concerns of missionaries during the pre-entry, in-field, and reentry periods. During the return period in particular, he noted that the greatest influences on mental health were dating pressures and guilt associated with not being busy, followed by academic demands and poor family/friend relationships. These influencers contributed to unhealthy mental states (i.e., guilt, loneliness, and insecurity) and were tied to pre-entry and in-field experiences. Thus recommendations to address mental health concerns of exiting missionaries focused on the whole process, not just reentry, and included ideas such as pre-mission mental health screening (which currently exists), professional counselling during and up to two years following the return, easing the demands and sanctions placed on missionaries, increasing recreational time and opportunities, and creating a release culture that does not stigmatize early returns.

Building off this early work Doty et al. (2015) used a mixed methods design (interviews, questionnaires) to investigate the impact of returning *early* from a mission on missionaries’ mental health, identity, and transition to adulthood. Drawing on the work of Erikson (1950), Marcia (1966), Arnett (2000) and others (Nelson, 2003; Smith & Snell, 2009) they posited that during and immediately following their service, missionaries
engage in traditional developmental processes (e.g., exploration and commitment) in order to establish a more secure identity. Though members of the Church experience late adolescence and the emerging adult life stage differently than their peers (i.e., they typically have shortened period of exploration with clearer markers of adulthood and engage in fewer risky behaviors with a less individualistic worldview), they still share some of the same challenges (e.g., identity ambiguity and insecurity). Because the mission functions as a long-anticipated and celebrated rite of passage in the Church, it usually concludes with recognition and identification as a RM and with a clear understanding of what is to come (e.g., career, marriage, family). However early return missionaries often feel as if they have failed or as if the rite of passage is incomplete.

Perhaps because early returns are so sudden (i.e., like “ripping out an IV”) and sometimes shrouded in mystery (i.e., unclear if the return was due to health or sin/disobedience) early reentrants are regarded with skepticism and subsequently feel unsure about their status and confused about their role in the Church and in life. They may feel stigmatized, ostracized, and unworthy of the title ‘RM.’ In response to the needs of this vulnerable population, Doty et al. (2015) outlined seven protective strategies that, when employed by healthcare providers, may help ERMs return with greater confidence and peace, including: (1) allowing ERMs to share their full story, (2) promoting empowerment, (3) teaching communication skills, (4) encouraging use of spiritual strategies learned in the mission, (5) encouraging coping strategies (e.g., reject shame/embarrassment), (6) counsel parents/leaders to avoid encouraging missionaries to return to the mission, and (7) consider promoting localized/service opportunities as an
option to returning to the field. As ERMs are able to embrace their status and disregard external judgment, they may feel more secure in their identity and more comfortable pursuing other traditional identity markers (e.g., temple marriage).

Doty et al. (2016) continued this research by comparing the experiences of ERMs (n = 271) and full-term RMs (n = 1,673). First Doty et al. (2016) noted that the rate of early returns seems to be increasing, likely due to trends such as the general increase in missionaries, the lowering of the missionary age, increased social pressure, and higher mission standards. Second, ERMs were more likely to have a negative post-mission adjustment and pessimistic outlook on life as well as greater anxiety and feelings of unworthiness when compared to their full-term counterparts. Interestingly, sisters and missionaries who served stateside were more likely to return early (Doty et al., 2016). Sisters were also more likely to experience the negative aspects of reentry (e.g., negative post-mission adjustment, anxiety, etc.) but also more likely to stay positive and feel worthy in spite of it all. Perhaps because a mission is not as obligatory for sister missionaries, the stigmatization and guilt associated with ERM status as a female is lessened.

Doty et al. (2017) conducted a mixed method study (focus groups, questionnaires) focused on the experience of parents of early return missionaries, validating their feelings of grief and what Boss (2004) describes as ambiguous loss. Ambiguous loss describes situations where an individual is “psychologically present but physically absent” or vice versa “as in the case of military deployment, incarceration, missing persons, or presumed death without a body” and these losses “typically have no defined end point and no
established rituals to provide closure” (p. 52). Early return missionaries often come home suddenly for reasons related to health, personal choice, or transgression. Moreover, parents typically feel that the medical treatment provided and communication of early release/ prognosis are subpar. Doty et al. (2017) presented seven (7) assumptions about ambiguous loss that may provide healthcare providers the tools they need to help parents and subsequently ERMs feel validated, experience closure, and receive appropriate medical care. These assumptions include: (1) both psychological and physical presence or absence of a missionary child influence feelings of loss and grief, (2) increased ambiguity results in increased stress and decreased closure, (3) cultural beliefs and norms may decrease parents’ tolerance for ambiguity, (4) questions often remain unanswered in cases of ambiguous loss, (5) ambiguous loss is interpersonal not intrapersonal, (6) families are resilient and can overcome ambiguity, and (7) though difficult to measure, ambiguous loss is observable and should be identified and validated when observed.

**Physical fitness.** In 1971, Hoglund conducted a study to determine the physical fitness levels of recently RMs (n = 59) compared to prospective missionaries (n = 50) in order to determine if the Church should implement a Church wide exercise program to missionaries during and at the conclusion of their service. He argued that physical fitness is linked to spiritual fitness, and crucial to the success of the missionary effort. RMs reportedly had lower “total” strength (including arm, leg, and back strength) and total endurance (including run time and short-term pulse rates), resulting in a significantly lower composite fitness score. In contrast, RMs possessed greater grip strength than prospective missionaries in both their right and left hands (presumably via hand-shaking,
carrying books and briefcases, etc.). Hoglund (1971) recommended that an
individualized, Church wide exercise program be implemented to address these physical
fitness disparities that aligns with the schedule, resources, and needs of missionaries. The
not necessarily a reaction to this study, the current missionary schedule does include time
set apart for the purpose of exercise.

**Religious activity.** Just over 100 years after the Church’s first missionaries
returned from their missions, Clawson (1936), Groberg (1936), King (1936) and Probst
(1936) reported findings from their research investigating the economic, social, and
religious status of RMs in various Stakes of the Church (representing the Church as a
whole; Wayne Co., Utah, n = 74; Bear River, Utah, n = 62; and Bannock Co., Idaho, n =
57 respectively). In general, their findings supported Clawson’s (1936) opening
commendations regarding the missionary program of the Church and its impact:

> Clearly, missionary service has a most excellent and lasting effect upon the
missionary from a spiritual and temporal point of view. It is probable that no other
group of like size can show greater adherence to gospel principles, more loyal,
active service within the Church, better Latter-day Saint influence, or higher
success in the temporal affairs of life. (p. 594)

These studies documented the standing of RMs in their communities and measured
everything from income levels and current occupations, to their commitment to pay
tithes, obey the word of wisdom, and adhere to other personal religious devotions. The
general conclusion both from the perspective of the missionaries being studied and the
authors of said studies, was that the missionary program of the Church should certainly
continue, if not for its proselyting impact (and subsequent impact in terms of Church
growth), than for its impact on the missionary (“real” growth) in all life domains.
Madsen (1977) surveyed 224 RMs (from a list of 2,500) who had served since 1965 regarding their religious activity prior to and following their mission. Madsen concluded that serious and chronic reentry distress did not appear to be a concern for the majority of RMs surveyed. On the contrary, post-mission activity resembled prior mission activity and most RMs regularly attended Church meetings (at a higher rate than the general membership of the Church), married in the temple, possessed current temple recommends, served in Church callings, and actively participated in private religious behaviors. Prior Church attendance, participation in a missionary preparation course, and opportunities to serve in leadership positions as a missionary were all predictive of post-mission religious activity. Interestingly, higher personal, financial investments in missionary service did not predict activity. With these findings in mind Madsen recommended that Church leaders do the following:

1. call RMs to responsible church positions immediately upon their release from full-time missionary service, 
2. interview returned missionaries at regular intervals during the first year following their release, 
3. provide recognition and fellowship to returning missionaries beyond the "welcome home," and 
4. encourage returned missionaries to set realistic goals (spiritual, educational, professional, etc.), to continue personal prayer and regular gospel study, and to become involved in the Church program for single adults. (p. 113)

Madsen also recommended that Church leaders notify parents of the resources available to their returning children, that leaders consider instituting classes or seminars targeted to the needs of RMs, and that leaders regularly evaluate the effectiveness of reentry support programs and processes.

McClendon (2000) and McClendon and Chadwick (2004) reported results from a cross-sectional survey evaluating the spiritual, familial, and educational success of RMs
(N = 4,884) who had been back from their missions for as few as two and as many as seventeen years. RMs reportedly had a greater socioeconomic status, lower divorce rates, and larger family sizes compared to national averages. Furthermore, a high percentage (almost 90%) of the sample was still active in the Church, with minimal variation in religiosity between the recently retuned missionaries and those who returned nearly two decades prior. The authors noted that these findings “refute the notion that there is an emerging pattern of inactivity or secularization among [returned missionaries]” as hypothesized by the sociologist Lechner (1991) and others (p. 152). The authors also found that RMs were more likely to persist in their religious commitments if they developed a pattern of private religiosity during their high school years, avoided inappropriate media, had positive mission experiences, and were participated in religious activities with their family. Moreover, religious commitments and behaviors (e.g., prayer, study, Church service and attendance) were touted as buffers to reentry distress across multiple domains (e.g., culture shock, dating, and education).

Chou (2013) conducted a qualitative study exploring the reentry experiences of RMs in the State of Utah (N = 342) and the impact of those experiences on their religiosity. Specifically he used interviews to query missionaries about their motivation for serving, positive and negative mission experiences, mission success (in terms of convert baptisms), and the impact of the mission on religiosity. Regarding motivation, Chou found that the members served missions in response to commitments developed in their youth, a desire to see the world or escape from home, and/or to conform to social norms and pressure associated with missionary service. Missionaries most enjoyed
building friendships, helping people, and experiencing personal growth during their missions. Challenges included companionship difficulties, rejection and people falling away from the Church, as well as homesickness, difficulties adjusting to the culture, and mission rules and activities (e.g., knocking doors). Overall, missionaries in Chou’s study experienced greater religiosity (understanding of doctrine, commitment to Church) as a result of their mission, and many argued that nothing else could have produced this effect to the same degree. Only eleven (11) respondents reported decreased religiosity tied to companionship difficulties and interactions with “good” non-Mormons. Five (5) respondents disaffiliated. These individuals had shared characteristic of serving out of obligation, without really buying in OR they felt like members/missionaries were hypocritical and overzealous; however, the mission improved their religiosity to the extent that they had a stronger relationship with God.

Chou also identified differences in responses based on gender and place. For example, Women experienced less pressure to serve, served at a later age, had a shorter length of service, and had fewer opportunities for leadership. They also had fewer converts and reported feeling rejected or had more companion problems than male missionaries. Overall they had higher religiosity levels but were more likely to engage in private devotion than to attend Church meetings. Missionaries who served in Latin American countries had higher conversion rates, lower rejection rates, and higher pressure to succeed, and ultimately had higher post mission religious levels compared to those who served in Asia, Europe, or the US. Those who served in Europe or Asia were most likely to be rejected or experience companion problems respectively. Interestingly,
missionaries who served in their home country, speaking their native language had lower levels of religiosity than other RMs who may have had to rely more on the Church and God in response to cultural shock and rejection. Ultimately Chou concluded that RM religiosity is a function of minimizing social rejection(s) and maximizing social acceptance among various social groups, be it a host culture, missionary companions, or the home community.

Mormon missionary reentry has become a growing concern among missionaries, their families, members, and leaders (Chadwick, Top, & McClendon, 2010). A number of studies have been published that shed light on the ‘what’ (i.e., the impact of the mission experience on individuals) and to some extent, the ‘how’ (i.e., theoretical explanations for why those impacts occur) of reentry; however, further investigation of this phenomenon and the process of adjustment itself is warranted. Furthermore, two themes reached across these studies that merit further study, including: (a) the role that religious/mission culture may play on the anticipation/preparatory, overseas/field, and reentry experiences of missionaries, and (b) the role that reentry plays on the emerging adult trajectories, identities, and their transition to religious and social adulthood (i.e., how it affects roles, career and education decisions, religious commitments, etc.); however, to date, these discursive and developmental processes/phenomena have not been explicitly studied.

**Doctrine, Culture, Power, and Discourse in the Church**

According to Decoo (2013) religion “draws its identity from a combination of beliefs (i.e., doctrine, history, commandments, expectations) and practices (i.e., rituals, liturgy, ceremonies, sacrifices)” (p. 25). Religious beliefs and practices (i.e., culture) have
significant impact on the human experience and influence everything from individuals’ psychology, sociology, and medical health, to their communication practices (Croucher, Sommier, Kuchma, & MeInychenko, 2015; McNamee, 2011). Regarding the religion-communication link, for example, McNamee (2011) noted that three speech codes: (1) “keep the faith,” (2) “secular thinking,” and (3) “business as usual”, may shape the discourse of a religious meeting, and that leaders may use one speech code (i.e., keep the faith) to trump uncomfortable or conflicting codes (i.e., secular thinking). With this example in mind, this section explores the identity, culture, and discourses within (and about) the Mormon Church as a precursor to understanding how power dynamics and discourse may influence reentry in the Church.

**Discourses about the Church.** In light of increased media attention focused on the Church during Mitt Romney’s run for POTUS, Baker and Campbell (2010) developed a 5-factor model documenting broader media portrayals of the Church and their role in shaping the Mormon identity. Historically, the Church has been viewed negatively and struggled to overcome bad press due to elements such as the Church’s early isolationist behaviors, social and political control of the West, engagement in Polygamy, and rocky policies on race and the priesthood. Later, social discourses became more accepting of pluralistic values and identities, the Church adopted more socially permissible policies, and respect for both the Church’s humanitarian contributions and the academic, social, and economic success of its members grew. In sum, the Church seemed to undergo a period of “high tension, assimilation and rapprochement, and retrenchment” where in the end they became less concerned with being in the limelight.
and more internally focused on maintenance of religious dogma (Baker & Campbell, 2010).

Given the increased access to technology and challenges to religious freedom and ideals of the 21st century (e.g., redefinition of gender and marriage, ease of access to Anti-Mormon literature), the modern Church has had to step back into the limelight and take a more proactive and public role (e.g., increased transparency and publications about its rocky history, issuing public statements on social issues) and will likely experience another identity shift as a result. According to the factorial model proposed by Baker and Campbell (2010) this identity is shaped not just by the Church’s reaction to societal changes but to the following five factors: Media factors (e.g., framing of stories, accuracy), Mormon factors (e.g., Mormon behavior, rituals, social stances, and public relations), Other Religion factors (e.g., rhetoric and resistance to or support for Mormonism, evangelic opposition), Secular factors (e.g., non-religious perspectives and activities associated with Mormon related issues, Anti-Mormon literature), and Political/Governmental factors (e.g., political power, relationship between Mormon Church and politics, separation of Church and state). These factors may influence how members perceive and experience the Church and lead to greater affiliation or disaffiliation. For example, in a recent conversation between myself (the author of the study) and a member of the Church in a North American branch (who wishes to remain anonymous), I was informed that four young, previously active families had left the branch due to its stance and policy on homosexuality, which departed from the liberal values of the community in which that branch was located (i.e., Secular Factors). The five factors are interrelated and
while each influences how the Church is perceived and received in society and by its members, for the purposes of this research Media factors and Mormon factors will be given the greatest attention below.

Chen and Yorgason (1999) dissected an article in Time magazine titled *Mormon, Inc.*, to argue that the corporate Church is often framed by the pejorative “model minority discourse” (p. 108). They noted parallels between how Time described Mormons and how U.S. media has historically described Asian Americans; i.e., industrious, persecuted, resilient, capable. While seemingly innocuous and even generous in its portrayal, this discourse is problematic, according to Chen and Yorgason, because it often generates *models* or “ahistorical…frozen, static representations,” of *minorities* who are inherently positioned “in opposition to the majority” as a smaller and culturally distinct (i.e., strange, other) group. This misrepresentation occurs through *discourses* that are complex, “confining,” and coopted (p. 108). According to Chen and Yorgason (1999) these discourses undervalue the Mormon presence in and contribution to American society and puts a timestamp on the Church’s future growth and impact. They call for more heterogeneous portrayals of the Church and its members by all parties (i.e., the Church, media, and scholars).

Langlois (1983), observing the “phenomenon of Mormon typicality mixed with Mormon peculiarity” (i.e., Mormon’s are both similar and dissimilar to broader society) described how the dualistic Mormon identity is both helpful (shaping a distinctive destiny) and harmful (putting strain on the Mormon community). He notes that this paradoxical Mormon subculture (the simultaneously normal-peculiar dichotomy) puts
strain on its members in the following two ways: first, the subculture produces conflicting views about non-Mormon’s as potential converts to befriend on one hand and as threatening antagonists to be avoided on the other, and second, the subculture creates a sense of superiority that is quickly deflated when one simply looks around at the members within the Church and sees their worldly appetites, imperfections, and hypocrisies (Langlois, 1983). In some ways, these subcultural strains set members up for failure and may lead to disaffiliation. Specifically, members who demonize non-members (and simultaneously, self-righteously elevate themselves) may one day be shocked be the reality that non-members can be good, happy, even God-fearing people (and that members can be total jerks). After their core subcultural beliefs and assumptions are challenged by these realities, some members begin to question and eventually part ways with the Church.

On a lighter note, Brubaker, Boyle, and Stephan (2017) explored how religious institutions such as the Church and entities affiliated with the Church used memes (n = 852) to create and reproduce shared religious cultural experiences. Memes – “replicable forms of signs that can be copied…repackaged, or mimicked” – originated as a casual form of communication, but have since become a powerful form of resistance to mainstream media, a rhetorical and discursive tool with the ability to shape opinions and beliefs, influence a community’s social values, and impact the construction of social identities and realities (p. 69). Considering the content, form, and stance of each meme Brubaker et al. found that official or Church sponsored memes all had a more serious tone and focused on inspirational content (i.e., spiritual and emotional help) via nature-
based images and existing quotes; unofficial memes had both serious and light-hearted tones and were focused on spiritual content (i.e., the Churches religious beliefs); and user/member generated memes tended to have a more humorous tone and were focused on Mormon culture and pop cultural references, with more varied referent material (e.g., TV shows, religious leaders, etc.) and creative linguistic content. Interestingly unofficial memes were more positive than official memes (which had more neutral messaging), though none of the memes reviewed in the content analysis were categorized as negative. In many ways unofficial sources seemed to have a more proactive and expressive approach to disseminating Church culture and beliefs. Given that memes often indicate how an organization sees itself or wishes to be seen by others, Brubaker argues that perhaps the Church’s official use of this form of communication should adopt mainstream meme culture’s ‘humor’ obsession and more proactively put forth doctrinally based content; i.e., take more control of the discourse.

Decker and Austin (2010) explored how Mormon culture has been represented on the stage, on the screen, and in text. As an example, they highlight Tony Kushner’s Angels in America which positions Mormons as the embodiment of the “reactionary American conservative” (a pejorative label; see Decker, Austin, & Samuelson, 2014, p. 213). The authors also cite examples such as the HBO series Big Love or Krakauer’s Under the Banner of Heaven to document the lingering perception of Mormons as both a peculiar and polygamist people. This language is particularly interesting given that the contemporary Church has worked hard to separate itself from and justify its polygamist roots, while maintaining its members position as a ‘peculiar’ people (i.e., chosen, set
apart, distinct from the carnal world). As a final example, Decker and Austin (2010) note how Mormon missionary images have been appropriated in film where “proselytizing characters…are often patterned after Mormon elders: young men in pairs, clean shaven, wearing white shirts and ties. This pattern occurs even in cases when the characters are not specifically depicted as Mormons but instead appear as general evangelists” (p. 113). Missionaries are also depicted as sectarian (i.e., particularly stringent and intent on conversion), evangelical (i.e., with crosses on their name tags, though the cross is not a familiar symbol in Mormonism), and conservative (i.e., in dress and grooming). Film has also been used to describe contemporary issues and discourses in the Church surrounding topics like race and sexuality. The film Latter Days, for instance, documents the experience of a gay Mormon missionary who develops romantic feelings for a boy down the street and his struggle to balance doctrine with passion. These raw, real, and challenging discourses are encountered both in the field and during reentry by missionaries and are difficult to navigate without support.

**Discourses within the Church.** A number of scholars have documented the unique history, culture, and discourse of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Decoo, 2013; Givens, 2007). Carpenter (2007) for example compared the religious culture of the Church to an ethnic culture given that the Church has emic language and practices that are distinct from other religious and non-religious groups. Shepherd and Shepherd (1998) documented the discursive socialization practices that are common in the Church and that help sustain its lay ministry in an increasingly secular world. For instance, reinforcing missionary work as “one of the greatest priorities” of one’s life is a
discursive strategy used to monopolize individual commitments and loyalty to the Church in later life (Shepherd & Shepherd, 1998, p. 22). To be successful in this effort requires that parents, family members, peers, ward members and leaders, all share the Church’s vision, attitudes, and expectations and reinforce them through consistent modeling and teaching. Church programs, publications, initiatives, and activities must also be integrated in order to successfully socialize its members and make behaviors and rites, such as missionary work, “normative features of Mormon culture” (Shepherd & Shepherd, 1998, p. 22).

These anticipatory socializing processes and practices create what Shepherd and Shepherd (1998) refer to as “career paths” or “status sequences” where Church membership becomes the most desired status in life, eventually claiming priority on the majority of one’s time and commitments (p. 24). McGuire (2010) further referred to this socialization process as “spiritual labor” or “the commodification, codification, and regulation of organizational members' spirituality” (p. 74). Taylor, Young, Summers, Garner, and Hinderaker (2015) used a job-transfer framework to describe socialization into the Church in later life (as opposed to the early childhood socialization described above). First, Taylor et al. (2015) noted that late socialization is complex in that one is socialized into the institutional Church (intangible worldwide Church, doctrine) and the local Church (tangible congregation, culture). He found that shared beliefs and desires to serve made the socialization process easier for converts (at the institutional level, a.k.a. the metamorphosis stage of the job-transfer model), while expectation violations regarding social acceptance and status made it more difficult (at the local level, a.k.a. the
encounter stage of the job-transfer model). Specifically, new members simultaneously encountered counter discourses of unity (shared beliefs at an institutional level) and division (exclusionary social cliques at a local level) as part of their experience, with the former positive transcending the latter negative, ultimately leading to retention (Taylor et al., 2015).

Decoo (2013) describes six evolving and interactive perspectives of ‘Gospel’ culture and how they help define the boundaries of the Church’s identity. This approach to understanding and depicting Church culture stresses the role of discourse in defining insiders and outsiders, and clarifies to some extent how the discourse of the Church is internalized. Moreover, if these perspectives are accurate, they certainly function to simultaneously glorify Church dogma and demonize ‘worldly’ social doctrine. These perspectives include:

1. **Antagonistic isolation from the other**: The enclavic separation of the Church from ‘the world.’ Members of the Church reject and distrust social morals and doctrine and take retreat in their Zionistic stakes.

2. **Exemplary impact on the other**: While distinct and set apart from ‘the world’ the Church seeks to emulate Heaven and draws to it “every good thing” (p. 14). It sets itself up, to some extent, as the model social structure.

3. **Selective appreciation in the other**: The Church acknowledges that it does not have a monopoly on all things good and recognizes that truth can be found (mixed with error of course) in other religious and secular traditions. The
Mormon Church “is still superior, as it claims to possess the fullness, while others only have ‘a portion.’” (p. 16).

4. Selective exclusion in the other: The requirement that in accepting or becoming converted to the Gospel, one must abandon all prior, incompatible cultural practices and traditions.

5. Broad inclusion of the other: Whereas perspective four is negative in its approach, principle five is positive and encourages converts to retain those cultural traditions that are good and in alignment with the Gospel. In other words the Church has a common higher level world view but permits lower level adaptation to localized realities.

6. Sublimating universalism of it all: The message and mission of Christ, the Spirit of the Lord, transcends all differences in ethnic and material culture.

The juxtaposed distinctiveness and entwinement of these six perspectives reflect an ambiguity that has made it difficult for ‘the world’ to classify Mormon’s as either an integrated Church on one hand or a separated sect on the other. As Decoo (2013) notes the Church similarly struggles with its own self-identification sending a normalizing message to ‘the world’ (e.g., via the “I’m a Mormon” campaign) while continuing to internally communicate the message that Church members are a ‘peculiar’ people (the so-called Mormon Paradox). Regardless, these perspectives on Gospel and Mormon culture may affect the extent to which members of the Church adhere to doctrines of the Church v. doctrines of ‘the world’, and suggest that members are likely skeptical of all things worldly (and thus deeply entrenched in and adherent to Church discourse). To stress this
point, in an auto-ethnography documenting his separation from the Church after his mission, Long (2017) argued that the Mormon Church “effectively guards against faith transformation and works to prevent it from occurring. As a result, the Church retains spiritual authority over RMs at the expense of their own spiritual development” (p. v). In other words, Long (2017) contends that the Othering of non-members does not occur organically; instead it is a tool to maintain control over members and perpetuate the socialization process.

Decoo (2013) also distinguishes between ‘Gospel’ culture and Mormon (a.k.a., Church) culture. The former is strictly religious, while the latter encompasses a range of activities and behaviors that have become normalized in the Church despite their lack of doctrinal importance or foundation. As an example, the Sacrament is a ritual practice in Gospel culture that celebrates the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Mormon culture in some congregations of the Church has co-opted and militarized this ordinance in an effort to add respect to the ritual, ultimately distracting from its intended purpose. In other words, some congregations have become so focused on the dress and appearance, militaristic march, and somber demeanor of those delivering the Sacrament bread and water to the congregation that they have forgotten who those emblems (i.e., the bread and water) represent (i.e., Jesus Christ). Furr, Woestman, Farrell, Goodwin, and Jensen (2007), likewise differentiated ‘Gospel’ culture (i.e., doctrine) from Mormon culture (i.e., culture), and explored the effects of Church doctrine v. Church culture on self-esteem. They found that members who were exposed to doctrine-based stimuli v. culture based stimuli reported greater self-esteem. In my own observations and in multiple accounts
from Church history, members who have taken issue with the Church typically focus on culture more than doctrine (in fact many who disaffiliate express firm commitments to the doctrine, while desiring to separate from the culture/people). Thus, it is unsurprising that Church leaders have stressed that Gospel culture is the essence of the Church and made efforts to discourage Mormon culture from muddying the Gospel waters (Decoo, 2013). That said, Mormon cultural norms and expectations abound. These norms are reproduced, in part, through members’ social interactions but also through the consumption of unofficial texts (those outside of the Church canon) that are often still regarded as ‘scripture’ by Church members (Taylor, 2003).

A number of scholars have also documented power dynamics generally and in relation to gendered experiences in the Church (Carpenter, 2007; Lee, 2015; Shepherd & Shepherd, 1998). For example Lee (2015) applied Hofstede’s cultural dimension power distance to Utah Mormon culture, where power distance is regarded as “the extent of how power is accepted and expected to be distributed” (p. ii). Using the Power Distance Index (PDI) as the indicator of power distance, Lee was surprised to find that Utah Mormon culture (score of 24) ranked lower in power distance than the general US culture (score of 40) and other religious cultures, such as Catholicism (score of 60), Protestantism (score of 30), and Atheism (score of 80). However, Lee also noted that power distance is fluid and contextual, and that Hofstede’s index had not been used in a religious setting (though Hofstede originally classified culture as homogenous), factors that ought to be considered when interpreting these results. That said, the findings seem to resonate with power with v. power over conceptualizations of power and the idea that hierarchies are not always
oppressive (Karlberg, 2005). Examining this result more closely, Lee posited that because of the Church’s leadership organization (i.e., a lay, transient ministry of peer-leaders; decisions made by informed councils, not by individuals; local autonomy), styles (i.e., shared, participative, servant, and distributive leadership styles), and beliefs (e.g., service, charity, honesty, self-reliance, personal revelation and adaptation), leadership is often viewed as “equal and differs only in the area of duty) despite its many rules and admittedly hierarchical (i.e., ‘top-down’ or rather ‘God-down’) structure (p. 35).

Notwithstanding Lee’s findings, power and power distance may not manifest equally in the Church. For example, Shepherd and Shepherd (1998) noted that women’s role in the Church is still somewhat uncertain in that women often engage in performative rites (i.e., missionary service) and adopt significant leadership positions in the home and the Church, but are still not ordained to officiate in ordinances and are perpetually bound to “ideals of marriage, motherhood, and home making” (p. 23). Early in the Church missionary program, the role of “lady missionaries” (now called Sisters) was vastly different from that of Elders (Lelegren, 2009). Lady missionaries were called to preach to other Christians (rather than ‘gentiles’) and to paint a picture to the world that modern Mormon women were strong, independent, and involved (in contrast to the oppressed polygamist images that had previously plagued the Church).

As another example, Carpenter (2007) noted that in the 80s and 90s there seemed to be a shift in Church culture regarding female involvement in missionary service. Specifically, the shift put forth the idea that “women who turned 21 without any obvious romantic attachments were assumed to be preparing for missions, especially at Brigham
In other words, marriage was regarded as the ideal and missionary work as the option of last resort, with sister missionaries being viewed, at this time, as a cluster of outcasts who were not fit for marriage or had passed marriageable age. While this view has shifted again in contemporary Church culture, with sister missionaries being held in higher esteem and female missionary work receiving greater notoriety, remnants of this discourse linger.

Beaman (2001) explored how women in the Church negotiate these discourses and differential roles in and out of the home and the Church. She categorized women in her study (n = 28) into three groups Molly Mormons, feminists, and moderates indicating the diversity of perspectives and reactions to the patriarchal structure of Church and family. Ultimately, these perspectives represent the varying levels in which women seek agency/autonomy while toeing the line or staying within the boundaries of Church culture and doctrine, with Molly Mormons adhering to the more traditional female roles and structures of the Church and feminists embracing more egalitarian family structures and rationalizing their relationships with men and authority in the Church. For example, a discourse that men ‘need’ the priesthood in order to stay ‘in-line’ has emerged among these women, whereas women are more easily able to bridle their passions and do God’s work without needing a proscribed priesthood role and title.

In sum, culture and discourse have a subtle meaningful impact on behavior and may influence how experiences are regarded or how power, knowledge, and resources are distributed during reentry in the Church (Hjelm, 2013). Thus an exploration of missionary reentry experiences and discourses is warranted.
Summary

While reentry is a critical period in a traveler’s journey and central to conceptualizations of tourism, this period has been neglected in both tourism and religious studies scholarship. Moreover, missionary travel and reentry is generally characterized by motivations and experiences that simultaneously parallel and run perpendicular to other forms of travel. For example, missionary travel and reentry share characteristics of military travelers who are often deployed with a specific cause, build a long-lasting ‘brotherhood’, war story about past experiences, and serve/ repatriate alone rather than with a significant other. Likewise, missionary organizations often share the aims and concerns of corporate institutions focused on member retention and skill transfer.

In contrast, the discourse in religious organizations, religiosity, and mindfulness of one’s relationship to God may add nuanced opportunities and challenges to reentry, specifically for missionary populations. Thus, missionary reentry may be better understood in terms of how it mirrors other more commonly studied forms of reentry on one hand, or it may provide new avenues for understanding how traveler’s experience and make meaning of reentry on the other. Specifically, understanding how discourse operates during reentry in a missionary context could clarify how discourse operates in other settings (i.e., military reintegration, government repatriation). In sum, this dissertation research weaves together various bodies of scholarship to investigate the reentry experiences and discourses of returning missionaries in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in an effort to help leaders, in and out of the Church, better manage
the reentry process. To effectively execute this task requires a thorough critique of the Church and its role in perpetuating or directing discourses in and about the Church. Thus, this dissertation research joins a growing body of critical reentry scholarship concerned with understanding the nuanced experiences of niche sub-populations and wide-ranging conceptualizations of ‘returning’ and ‘home’ (Pocock & McIntosh, 2013; Walters, 2008).
CHAPTER 3

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL CASE STUDY OF THE REENTRY EXPERIENCES OF RETURNING MISSIONARIES

Abstract

The aim of this constructivist case study was to examine the process of reentry and lived experience of U.S. returning missionaries in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Specifically, the authors used thematic analysis of in-depth interviews conducted with a cohort of returning missionaries, and other case data, to clarify why some missionaries flourish and others flounder. Mirroring the work of Austin, reentry dilemmas in the Church were considered a product of challenges encountered at each stage of the missionary cycle (i.e., recruitment, training, departure, field work, and return). While most returning missionaries described their fieldwork as transformative and their reentry adjustment as manageable, many struggled to find meaning, integrate changed attitudes and behaviors, or maintain their religious practices and relationships with God. In addition to traditional explanations of reentry distress (e.g., cross cultural adaptation theory, expectation theory), the authors posit that place attachment theory, nostalgia and reminiscence, social comparison theory, and religiosity may help elucidate the reentry process for returning missionaries. Practical and theoretical recommendations are offered to address issues at each stage of the missionary cycle.

Keywords: Case study, missionaries, reentry distress, religiosity, phenomenology
Introduction

Introductory scene from the 2003 Halestorm Entertainment film “The RM” produced by Dave Hunter, Screenplay by John E. Moyer and Kurt Hale:

– Begin Scene –

INT20. AT MISSION HOME/PRESIDENT'S OFFICE
President Homer (age 60) sits in his chair, poised for an obviously prepared lecture. A placard on the desk reads “Service = Blessings.” Across from him sits a good-looking, clean cut young missionary, nearing the end of his service as a full-time proselyting missionary for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

PRESIDENT HOMER (to Elder Jared Phelps): You’re a handsome young man Elder, and I encourage you to date…But don't go overboard. Don't get greedy... I guess what I’m trying to say is – don’t be an octopus with a testimony.

JARED: You don’t need to worry, President. My girlfriend waited for me. We're planning on getting married.

PRESIDENT HOMER: Good for you Elder... But remember this: ‘by the sweat of your brow’ you’ll live your life.

JARED: My old boss said I could have my job back.

PRESIDENT HOMER: …But…never underestimate the value of an education.

JARED: My application to BYU [Brigham Young University] is already in.

PRESIDENT HOMER: Well Elder – that’s superb. It sounds to me like you’ve got everything figured out.

JARED: (nodding and smiling confidently) Yah, I’ve got a pretty good idea of how things will be…

20 In a screenplay, the annotation “INT” refers to a scene that is being filmed in an interior or inside location as opposed to “EXT” which refers to an exterior or outdoor space.
INTERCUT: DREAM SEQUENCE – Jared walking off the jet way, dressed like a rock star, strutting down a red carpet. A huge crowd lines the carpet, cheering him on, welcoming him home, and asking for autographs. At the end of the carpet stands his proud family and his girlfriend dressed in a modest, white wedding gown. He mouths the words “I love you” to his smiling bride to be…

INTERCUT: BACK TO PRESIDENT HOMER AT HIS DESK.

PRESIDENT HOMER: Well Elder, you’ve spent two years on the Lord’s errand…you will be blessed for that service.

JARED: (sighs; nodding agreement): Yah…I think it will all begin at the airport…

– End Scene –

Contrary to what he had imagined or anticipated, no one was waiting for Jared – the returned missionary (RM) depicted in this scene – at the airport. In fact, the remainder of the film portrays how the realities of post-mission life stood in stark contrast to the fictitious return Jared had hoped for. For instance, he was not given a hero’s welcome at the airport like he had dreamt and when he tried to call home to let his family know he had arrived, no one answered. After catching a bus to his former address, he was surprised to find that his parents had sold their house and were not expecting him home for another month. At the new house, his younger siblings (all named after Book of Mormon characters) had either forgotten him or were so busy with life (e.g., band practice, school projects, etc.) that they did not have time or interest in reuniting or connecting with him or his mission stories. Jared’s old bed had been commandeered by a Samoan foreign exchange student and his car had been sold, leaving him with a makeshift bed (propped up by food storage items) and his sister’s pink bicycle as the
primary modes of sleep and transportation, respectively. Jared’s girlfriend did not wait for him (and was engaged to someone else), his prospective employer’s company had been sold (leaving Jared jobless), and a Brigham Young University (BYU) rejection letter was waiting for him in the mail. On top of all these challenges Jared found himself surrounded by friends who had turned their backs on the Church, who tempted him with worldly (i.e., sinful, amoral) pursuits, and put him in a position that required him to pause and reconsider his beliefs and whether or not to uphold them. Just about everything that could have gone wrong during this time did.

During the resolution of the film, Jared gives a belated homecoming talk where he refers back to his interview with his mission president (depicted in the opening scene of the film, described above). He recalls, with a touch of humor and humility: “I learned a lot of things on my mission…and even more since I have been home, it seems. My mission president said I’d be ‘blessed for my service,’ and I guess in a lot of [unforeseen] ways I have been.” After the talk, we learn that a more settled and confident Jared has enrolled in night classes with plans to reapply for BYU, took the moral high road when tempted by friends, and is engaged to a new love interest, Kelly – the daughter of a regional Church leader.

Though Jared’s post-mission struggle/ story is resolved somewhat quickly and with a happy ending no less, the manner in which his experience comes to an end may not align with the norm or reality of reentry for the broader missionary population. In fact, there is some evidence to suggest that RMs in the Church may struggle to find stability and purpose, never marry, question their faith, develop mental health conditions,
and/or end up withdrawing from family, friends, and the Church as a result of reentry distress (Brigham, 1978; Doty et al., 2015; Perry, 2001). With these issues in mind, the purpose of the present study is to document the experience of reentry for returning missionaries in the Church and look for patterns in the data that may help explain why some returning missionaries flourish and others flounder.

**Literature Review**

Reentry (i.e., returning, repatriation) has become an interdisciplinary concern, touched on by a wide range of scholarly perspectives (Szkudlarek, 2010). However, the majority of this research has built on the work of Austin (1983a) and Austin et al. (1988) who reviewed, annotated, and categorized reentry scholarship into the following topic areas: Corporate and government repatriation, international education, military reintegration, general travel, and missionary work. This section briefly reviews literature in these topic areas and ways in which reentry in the Church likely aligns or diverges from the literature in these areas.

**Corporate and government repatriation**

One of the foundational concerns of corporate and government repatriation research is retention and return on investment (Gregerson, & Mendenhall, 1992; Chew & Debowsk, 2008; Medatwal, 2014; Szkudlarek, 2010). According to (Medatwal, 2014), approximately 25% of employees ‘jump ship’ to (a) pursue employment with organizations that appreciate their newly acquired skills and attitudes or (b) leverage their international experience to negotiate a higher position or pay rate. Many of these employees feel out of place, underappreciated, and under resourced in their current
organizations (Chew & Debowski, 2008). Hence, contemporary research investigating corporate repatriation has aimed to identify organizational support practices such as the implementation of reentry training programs and overt signs that overseas experience will be rewarded and utilized within the organization (i.e., promotions, pay raises, or role changes; Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001). Like corporations and governments, the contemporary Church acknowledges its failure to adequately support its returning members, and seems equally interested in retaining and subsequently re-enlisting missionaries into its lay ministry (Parry, 2001; Poffenbarger, 2015, Teachings of the Presidents, 2011).

**International education**

Research on reentry in international education settings has been concerned with understanding how to best integrate and coordinate disparate campus offices, programs, events, and resources to better meet the needs of students who experience varying levels of cultural and learning shock (Gaw, 2000; Griffiths et al., 2005; Kauffman, 2013). Most of the programs focus on helping students unpack their experience, find a social supportive and understanding peer network, and translate their new skills and attitudes into relevant coursework (i.e., foreign language courses) and career pursuits (i.e., career or volunteer pursuits with an international orientation; Allison et al., 2012; LaBrack, 2006). The Church’s efforts to support returning missionaries, to date, have been comparably inconsistent and uncoordinated despite the built in system of coordination at all levels of the Church (i.e., councils). Called ward councils, localized coordination meetings bring leaders from all the quorums and auxiliaries of the Church together –
under the direction of the Bishop – on a by-monthly basis to discuss the needs of the
ward and its members and may be the best place to discuss reentry concerns and
implement supportive reentry practices.

**Military reintegration**

Military reintegration literature underscores the need for an ecological systems
approach to understanding reentry, acknowledging that reentry not only affects military
personnel but their spouses, children, and receiving communities, all of whom have
altered their roles and routines in the absence of deployed persons and must renegotiate
those roles and routines during reentry (Danish & Antonides, 2013; Elnitsky et al., 2017).
This literature also draws attention to the physical and mental health challenges
experienced by returning military personnel, the stigma attached to seeking appropriate
medical care by this population, and the highly politicized nature of military repatriation
(i.e., reentry is affected by attitudes towards the current conflict; Demers, 2011; Doyle &
Peterson, 2005; Elnitsky et al., 2017; Wilcox et al., 2015).

Missionary and military service share many features that may shed light on the
missionary reentry process. For example, both groups have historically stigmatized
mental health issues and health seeking behavior, citing personal weakness as the source
of mental health concerns, and relying on masculinity (in the military) and faith (in the
Church) as the primary solutions to those concerns. Likewise, the missionary collective is
often referred to as the Army of God in the Church and, like the military, involves
distinctive and sometimes high adrenaline/combative/traumatic experiences, rigid rules
and guidelines, and clearly defined roles, identities, and responsibilities. As a final
comparison, missionaries often use familial labels to describe one another such that the
term band of brothers has been colloquially used to describe the deep relationships forged
in both military and Church contexts. In sum, missionaries may face some of the same
social and mental health issues as reintegrating military personnel, feel the same need to
war story with other reentrants, and/or seek to maintain the same level of purpose or
adrenaline experienced during deployment.

**General travel**

General travel scholarship functions as a catch-all category covering a wide range
of reentrants such as Peace Corps volunteers or tourists and a wider range of theories
regarding reentry (Grabowski & Wearing, 2014; Lean, 2016; Pocock & McIntosh, 2011/
2013; Sussman, 2000/ 2002). In brief, this literature has documented the development of
cultural identity models, which explain the extent to which individuals strengthen or
weaken their affiliations to host and home (Sussman 2000/ 2002), explored new and more
inclusive or nuanced conceptualizations of home and returning (Pocock & McIntosh,
2011/ 2013), acknowledged the transformation that crystalizes during reentry (Grabowski
& Wearing, 2014), and provided non-Western perspectives on reentry and the influence
of globalization (Chang, 2010). Because of its transformative nature, missionaries often
describe their missions as “the best two years” (Pepper, 2014). Moreover, like general
travelers, they may also find themselves between cultures or may have internally
relocated their ‘home’ to the geography, culture, or relationships of their missions.
Missionary work

Missionary reentry literature has predominately focused on the responsibility of congregations to help care for returning missionaries (i.e., member care) who (a) often experience theological and cultural rootlessness and (b) must reconsider or redefine relationships with their religious community and their God (O’Donnell, 2015; O’Donnell & O’Donnell, 2002; Stevenson-Moessner, 1986). This research has also considered the experiences of career missionary families and missionary kids who find themselves engaged in familial conflict and/or feel in-between and alienated from both host and home (Bikos et al., 2009; Davis et al., 2013). This research also provides evidence that religiosity can act as a buffer against reentry distress, which is often exacerbated by the perceived failure of mission agencies to communicate realistic reentry expectations or provide meaningful post-mission preparation and support (Kimber, 2012a/2012b, Schwandt and Moriarty, 2008). Austin (1983b) also noted that reentry dilemmas take shape or emerge during all stages of the missionary cycle (i.e., recruitment, training, departure, fieldwork, and return) and opened the door for a more comprehensive understanding of reentry.

Notwithstanding, missionary reentry appears to be the least studied of Austin (1983a) and Austin et al.’s (1988) categories, despite the unique religious and cultural nuances associated with reentry in this setting. Likewise, early work in this area consisted primarily of short, empirically weak, non-refereed reports with limited readership. Furthermore, missionary reentry scholarship has historically neglected the reentry experiences of returning missionaries in the Church of Jesus Christ whose missionary
program is arguably more distinct and robust (and also appears to be contributing to greater religiosity and religious commitment in young adults in the U.S.) when compared to other Christian denominations and mission agencies (Smith & Snell, 2009).

**Reentry in the Church of Jesus Christ**

The challenges of reentry in the Church were documented in Church publications as early as 1913 and by 1936 the Church had commissioned a large scale research project (including multiple cases in the Northwest U.S.) to explore the experiences of returning missionaries (N = 19,880). In brief, they concluded that about 4% of the Church’s membership at the time was comprised of returning missionaries, who were considered to be ‘pace setters’ in terms of religious belief and behavior, and socio-economic success (Austin, 1983; Clawson, 1936; Groberg, 1936; King, 1936; Probst, 1936). Perhaps because of these early findings, concern for returning missionaries on the part of both Church leaders and scholars seemed to wane (i.e., nearly four decades of silence on the topic). However, beginning in the late 60s and early 70s there began to be an incremental increase in scholarship in this area, which began to gain real traction about a decade into the 21st century. This resurgence in scholarship may have come in response to (a) increased media attention focused on the Church, (b) an increased focus on institutional critiques in academic research, mirroring broader social movements to this end, and, (c) broader trends making international service a more central part of young adult identity, and (d) changing policies and practices in the Church such as the formalization and growth of the Church’s missionary program, the lowering of the age of missionary
service, and a shifting view of the mission as a potential socialization agent in the Church (Shepherd & Shepherd, 1998).

Since its revival in the 60s/70s, studies of reentry in the Church have covered a range of topics including: academic enrollment, engagement and success (Gilbert, 1967; Jepson, 2014; Palmer, 2009); burnout (Bordelon, 2013); cultural adaptation and re-adaptation (Callahan, 2002/2010/2011); cultural competence and geographic literacy (Bradford, 1986, Chu 1974; Smith, Roberts, & Kerr, 1996; Stahmann, 2000); dating behavior (McLaughlin, 2000/2007); economic, social, and religious activity (Chou, 2013; Madsen, 1977; McClendon, 2000; McClendon & Chadwick, 2004); identity (Dunn & Heffelfinger, 1987); the prevalence of infectious disease (Green, Maza, Stewart, & Stoddard, 2012); language competence and loss (Cottrell, 2008; Hansen 1995/2011/2012; Kirk, 2014; Wyatt, 2013); mental health and stigma associated with early returns (Doty et al., 2015; Doty et al., 2016; Doty et al., 2017); and physical fitness (Hoglund, 1971).

These studies predominately focus on outcomes associated with missionary service, with few studies paying homage to the lived experience, process, and context of returning in the Church. Understanding these experiences and processes across the missionary cycle (i.e., recruitment, training, departure, field work, and return) could help Church leaders to provide more targeted and effective member care to this population, thereby increasing individual well-being and/or organizational retention. With those outcomes in mind, the purpose of this study is to identify the lived experience(s) of
returning missionaries in the Church (in the U.S.) across the missionary cycle, and increase understanding of the process of reentry.

**Methods**

The present study is guided by constitutive phenomenology\(^ {21} \), a theoretical/philosophical/epistemological approach that informs the contemporary constructivist paradigm (Cibangu & Hepworth, 2016). Phenomenology generally emerged as a reaction or response to three dominant ways of understanding how individuals experience and make meaning of their world: Cartesianism, psychologism, and solipsism. These three perspectives “were premised on the belief of duality in that there exists two worlds: the internal world (the self, soul) and the external (reality, body)” (Cibangu & Hepworth, 2016, p. 149). The external world was regarded as unreliable such that “true knowledge had to be independent from it” and predominately “reside[d] in the self or soul” (Cibangu & Hepworth, 2016, p. 149). Conversely, phenomenology is guided by three opposite principles, namely intentionality, intersubjectivity, and reduction or bracketing, which were based on the premises that the self does not hold “the monopoly of certainty and knowledge,” that “consciousness…is open-ended, contextualize, and connected,” and that researchers ought to reflexively consider their internal world and check their taken-for-granted beliefs, biases, assumptions, and relationships (Cibangu & Hepworth, 2016, p. 150).

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\(^{21}\) Cibangu and Hepworth (2016) argue that there are six “trails” of phenomenology and that the constitutive trail is the most commonly used in the social sciences. They also recommend that a researcher consistently pursue one trail per line of inquiry.
Constitutive phenomenology is interested in “description…detail… [and] depth” surrounding personal or lived experience, as it occurs in context (Cibangu & Hepworth, 2016, p. 150). In other words, phenomenology is interested in “the idea that lifeworld (external) and consciousness (internal) interact with and influence one another, and are thus mutually and originally constituted through a variety of forces (e.g., culture, organization, economy, person, technology, art)” (Cibangu & Hepworth, 2016, p. 151). Herein lies the foundations of constructivism, which essentially posits that knowledge is socially constructed, co-created, and contextualized (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). Taken a step further, Berger (1969) posits that religion constitutes a socially constructed world that helps distinguish between the sacred/ordered and profane/chaotic. In that sense, the social function of religion has often been and continues to be the establishment of meaning, personal significance, stability, and security. Thus, to some extent, this study explores how, and to what extent returning missionaries’ social constructions of reentry in the Church reflect an ordered or chaotic experience/process.

Constructivist Methodology, Case Study Research, and Emergent Design

Case study research is often aligned with the constructivist paradigm because, as Baxter and Jack (2008) note:

This paradigm recognizes the importance of the subjective human creation of meaning, but doesn’t reject outright some notion of objectivity…One of the advantages of this approach is the close collaboration between the researcher and the participant, while enabling participants to tell their stories (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Through these stories the participants are able to describe their views of reality and this enables the researcher to better understand the participants’ actions (Lather, 1992). (p. 545)
In other words, case study research, brings the researcher in close proximity to the person or phenomenon to be studied and allows the researcher to study it/him or her in-depth (Merriam, 1998). Similarly, case study knowledge is “concrete…contextual…[and] developed by reader interpretation – readers bring to a case study their own experience and understanding which lead to generalizations when new data for the case are added to old data” (Merriam, 1998, p. 15). These generalizations are “part of the [socially constructed] knowledge produced by case studies” (Stake, 1981, p. 36).

**Case Study Rationale.** According to Yin (2009) a case study approach is most appropriate when three criteria are met: (a) A ‘how’ or ‘why’ question is being asked, (b) about a contemporary set of evens, (c) over which the investigator has little or no control. Case studies are particularly suited to situations where the researcher wants to understand the ‘contextual conditions’ of a phenomenon recognizing that the boundaries between the phenomenon and context being studied are typically blurred (Baxter & Jack, 2008). In that regard, case study research has been dubbed “interpretation in context” (Cronbach, 1975, p. 123).

Merriam (1998) posits that the end product of the research should also determine whether or not a case study methodology is fitting when compared to other approaches. For example, a case study is likely to be preferred when the end product is intensive description of a single unit rather than a statement of cause and effect. Generally speaking, the purpose of a case is “to arrive at a comprehensive understanding [emphasis added] of the groups (case) under study” and “to develop general theoretical statements about regularities in social structure and process [emphasis added]” (Becker, 1968, p.
Given that my goal in this study is to better understand the reentry experiences of RMs in the Church of Jesus Christ (and the how/why of their experience) a case study methodology, as outlined here, seems appropriate.

**Defining a/the Case.** Determining what constitutes a case has historically been problematic due to inconsistencies in the term’s use (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Merriam, 1988). For example, the term case study has been conflated with instructional methods and scholarly tools such as “case history, case record, and case method” (Merriam, 1988, p. 5) and has also been mistakenly equated with field research, ethnography, and other qualitative approaches (Merriam, 1998). According to Yin (2009) and Merriam (1998) definitions of a case study are usually either topical—concerned with identifying the ‘case’ or unit of analysis such as a decision, process, program, individual, or institution to be studied; or design-oriented—concerned with the manner or process by which the research is conducted. In the latter regard, a case study is defined by Yin (2009) as,

> [An]… empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon *in depth within its real context*… especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not evident. (p. 18)

More simply, Smith (1978) describes a case as an intrinsically ‘bounded system.’ A case is intrinsic in that it has objective bounds—limits that exist apart from the research. Whereas, ‘the field’ in ethnographic research, for example, is extrinsic or an artefact of the research process and, therefore, arbitrarily defined by the researcher (Katz, 1994). Baxter and Jack (2008) suggest that “once you have determined what your case will be, you will have to consider what your case will NOT be” (p. 546). Merriam (1998) likewise stated that “delimiting the object of study is the most defining characteristic of
case study research” (p. 27). Baxter and Jack (2008) recommend setting boundaries on a case in order to narrow the scope and keep the project manageable, by delimiting one or all of the following aspects: (a) Time and place (see Creswell, 2007), (b) Time and activity (see Stake, 1995), or (c) Definition and Context (see Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Yin (2009) suggests that multiple case studies are more compelling and robust; therefore, he endorses the use of at least two cases where possible. However, he also gives five examples of when a single case would be appropriate:

1. It is a critical case and therefore allows you to test, challenge, or extend an a priori theory
2. It is an extreme or unique case and therefore exhibits some rare traits, processes, or behaviors
3. It is a representative or typical case and therefore can help describe and present an exemplar
4. It is a revelatory case in that it highlights a previously unavailable or under identified case
5. It is a longitudinal case, examining causal elements, transitions, and processes over time

The case or ‘bounded system of interest’ in the present study is a ‘typical’ or representative case and includes (a) RMs who are members of a single, specified

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22 Multiple case studies have their own considerations. For example, the selection of cases should follow a replication logic rather than a sampling logic (which usually assumes randomness) and should include the search for rival cases, with the intent to confirm/disconfirm. Scholars would then report on each individual case and the study in its entirety.
Southeastern stake (approximately 2,600 members) in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (b) who started the process of returning no earlier than January 1, 2015 and no later than December 31, 2016, and (c) who are NOT service missionaries or senior mission couples (as these missions and the individuals who participate in them are systematically different from the ‘typical’ missionary in the Church). Finally, missionaries may have been assigned to either domestic or international locations and will NOT be excluded if they returned early from their mission. Within these parameters, twenty-five potential participants were identified in the selected stake. Four of the prospective participants are females and twenty-one males. Thirteen RMs served internationally and twelve domestically, all outside of the southeastern United States, where they originate. As a final note, there are a number of different types of case study: explanatory, exploratory, descriptive, multiple-case studies, intrinsic, instrumental, and collective. The proposed case study is instrumental (in that it will ultimately help address an issue or problem) and descriptive (in that it aims to describe the experience of reentry for RMs).

**Emergent Design**

Case studies have four features. They are,

- **Particularistic** – meaning that case studies focus on a particular event, program, or phenomenon. In other words, the case itself is intrinsically important.

- **Descriptive** – meaning that the end product of a case study is a rich, thick description of the phenomenon under study. Complete, literal or verbatim
description is important. Interpretation is influenced by the meanings and norms of the population being studied.

- **Heuristic** – meaning that the case study illuminates the readers understanding of a phenomenon under study. The case extends our understanding, uncovers new meaning, or confirms what is already known about a phenomenon.

- **Inductive** – meaning that for the most part the case study relies on inductive reasoning. Concepts are *emergent in the data* [emphasis added]. One can have working hypotheses but they are tentative. (Merriam, 1998)

The first three features have already been discussed up to this point; therefore, I will focus on the fourth feature: emergent design.

Emergent design is an inductive approach that allows for flexibility and responsiveness throughout the research process (Given, 2008). Rather than isolating the tasks of data collection and analysis, emergent design unites them in a cyclical and discursive process (Given, 2008). That is, as new data are collected they are analyzed and interpreted in an effort to amend subsequent data collection. The researcher is then permitted to adapt research questions, interview protocols, and procedures as he or she is confronted with new information (Given, 2008). Emergent design encourages discovery and challenges the notion that science is a rigid process (Charmaz, 2008). The consequence of employing an emergent design approach, however, is that there are often many rounds of data collection and analysis as ideas are revisited and the purpose of the research refined.
In many ways, emergent design is akin to grounded theory in that it is inductive, uses purposive and theoretical sampling strategies, and data collection and analysis occur simultaneously (e.g., constant comparison analysis; Cutliffe, 2000; Corbin & Strauss, 1990); however, it is not bound by the same rigid guidelines as grounded theory approaches (e.g., in grounded theory each interview is treated as a unit of analysis that must be fully analyzed before proceeding with the next). The inductive nature of emergent design supposes that themes and theories are derived from empirical data, whereas deductive approaches collect data to support a priori hypotheses. Theoretical sampling, in emergent design, describes the process of pursuing new respondents or topics to ensure that saturation is reached (i.e., the majority of relevant perspectives have been represented) and that emergent ideas are revisited with prior subjects. Finally, emergent design allows for analysis to begin before all of the data has been collected so that gaps can be identified and future data/data points acquired. Whereas methods rooted in grounded theory (i.e., emergent design) are typically concerned with theory development, Lowry et al. (2015) introduced a social constructivist approach to grounded theory that was as much focused on uncovering new meanings as on developing theory. This approach incorporates the elements of grounded theory (e.g., memo-ing, theoretical sampling, and constant comparison) but, as in the present study, has a different aim – generation of understanding/meaning.

**Data Collection**

Case studies draw from multiple sources of evidence in order to triangulate perspectives and converge upon an idea. According to Yin (2009) the case study
approach is not reserved for qualitative researchers only and, therefore, can include quantitative data as one of the multiple sources of evidence. Yin (2009) specifically identified six types of data that, if available/attainable, should be collected, including:

1. Documents such as letters, emails, diaries, notes, news clippings, or formal studies,
2. Archival records such as public use files (e.g., census data), service records, organizational or membership records, maps and charts and survey data,
3. Interviews,
4. Direct observation,
5. Participant observation, and
6. Physical artifacts such as tools, photographs, and other physical evidence.

In my study, I collected documents in the form of formal peer-reviewed studies and any referent material provided by the participants (e.g., emails, texts); archival records in the form of membership record data, sermons, histories, and the scriptural cannon; semi-structured interviews with the participants; and requested physical artifacts (e.g., photos or items associated with reentry, or photographs of referent items). I also describe my own experience as an RM as a form of participant observation and utilize my field notes as a record of direct observations made in the field. In some cases, social media materials were included to give voice to alternative/unheard perspectives (e.g., unaffiliated members) or if referenced by participants (e.g., news stories, videos, or research studies).

The semi-structured interviews make up the core piece of data/text for analysis, whereas the other materials give form to and contextualize the interview responses.
Semi-structured interviews and observations. The primary form of data collection was semi-structured interviews with RMs, supported and contextualized by documents and other materials from Church archives and reviews of relevant literature. Each interview lasted approximately 43 minutes; the shortest was just under 30 minutes and the longest, just under 60 minutes. This interview length could have been extended but seemed to provide sufficient time and depth to address the core topics with room to deviate within each interview. Semi-structured interviews are semi-emergent, and allow for reflexivity, reciprocity, and co-construction of meaning(s) (Jennings, 2005). They also allow for in-depth, rich description and participant guided narratives to be uncovered (Baxter & Eyles, 1999; Jennings, 2005).

Semi-structured interviews in case study research are typically more open; and, interviewees in case study research are considered informants, in that they shed light on the topics discussed, but also direct the interviewer to additional sources of evidence and provide access to those sources (Yin, 2009). The advantage of interviewing (contrasted with other forms of data collection) is that interviewing is typically face-to-face (allows one to read body language, observe physical setting), adaptable (allows for probing), and relational (one can establish rapport). Semi-structured interviewing can also generate experiential data, contextualize responses, provide structure for inexperienced interviewers, and allow for comparability across interviews (Phillimore & Goodson, 2004). Challenges to semi-structured interviewing are tied to the awkwardness, time-intensity, and difficulty associated with replicability. Likewise, interviewers can unconsciously steer the interview, solicit large amounts of extraneous data, and if
imbalanced power dynamics are perceived, can stimulate distancing or dishonesty (Phillimore & Goodson, 2004).

Interview questions were informed by my personal experience and observations as a member of the Church and RM, Church sermons, and academic literature. Interviews were also guided by a protocol (Appendix B) that consisted of banks of open-ended questions and potential probes based on the missionary cycle proposed by Austin (1983); i.e., pre-mission (inclusive of recruitment, training, and departure), mission, and return. For example, in the pre-mission question bank informants were asked: “what was your motivation for serving a mission?” In the mission question bank informants were asked: “How would you describe your mission experience overall?” And, in the post-mission question bank informants were asked: “What has your life/experience been like since you returned from your mission? Have there been any surprises?” The questions evolved over the course of the interviews as responses triggered new lines of inquiry or broached unanticipated topics. For example, one of the first informants described the expectations or characteristics of a “perfect” RM and I incorporated a question on this topic at the tail end of subsequent interviews. Specifically I asked: “what do you think a perfect RM looks like?” Initial questions were reviewed by both missionaries and non-missionaries to ensure breadth, depth and clarity, and a handful of practice interviews were conducted with acquaintances that had recently returned from missions but did not meet the criteria to be selected for participation in the study (e.g., not originally from the study site, returned outside of the study timeframe). The purpose of these exercises was to ensure critical questions were being asked and answered in a way that was reflective of the
broader research questions. Questions were refined and retested with new participants until they were deemed ready for the field.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, in two stages. In the first stage, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim by a transcription service company in order to expedite the transcription process. In the second stage, I re-listened to the audio recordings, corrected transcription errors, de-identified transcripts, and added more refined annotations based on field notes and interview memos I had collected during the research process. These memos included notes regarding the participant’s demeanor, mannerisms, and language as well as reminders about interesting lines of inquiry or compelling responses. Data were kept in a secure location and assurances were made that agreement to participate in the study and data collected during the study would not be shared with Church leaders. Identifiable information was removed from all direct quotations; otherwise, data was presented as an aggregate representation of the group’s collective experience. Informants were also notified that participation was voluntary, that there were few risks/benefits to participate, and that they could terminate their participation at any point during the research process per Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocols and codes of ethics.

**Participants or other data sources.** Twenty-five RMs were identified who met the inclusion criteria for the study; i.e., members of the stake, returned for two years or less, who had served a traditional full-time mission. Four RMs could not be contacted and five refused to participate or missed scheduled appointments, leaving sixteen RMs who were interviewed. The hope was to include as many of the twenty-five qualifying RMs as
possible (a census) in order to adequately capture the experience of RMs in the chosen stake. Despite the smaller number of missionaries contacted, saturation was reached fairly quickly during the interview process.

That said, the four individuals who were unable to be contacted and, more likely, that the five who refused to participate may have provided a slightly different perspective or rival explanation that did not arise in the study. In other words, it is possible that individuals refused to participate because they were no longer active in the Church and felt guilt, shame, or anger towards the Church. It is also possible that individuals refused to participate because they had a negative experience and wanted to show deference or respect to the Church or its leaders rather than provide an honest critique. In at least one case, I was made aware that a mental health diagnosis may have prevented a potential informant from keeping an appointment. Regardless of the motivation, four additional perspectives were acquired from various social media sources (e.g., blogs, news reports, Reddit forums) using Radian6 social median monitoring software.

To contextualize interview responses, a number of official Church documents and sources were also cited including websites, handbooks, teaching curriculum, and sermons. Websites included lds.org, mormonnewsroom.org, mormon.org and their subsidiaries. Handbooks included texts such as Handbooks 2: Administering the Church resources that outlines the purposes, roles, and responsibilities of various Church organizations and leaders; the 2006 version of the Mission Presidents Handbook which details the duties of mission presidents; the Missionary Handbook which outlines the schedule, expectations, and protocols for missionaries; and Preach My Gospel, the
primary missionary teaching tool of the Church. Curriculum and sermons were reviewed if they either directly or indirectly addressed the topic of missionary reentry. These sermons were typically derived from the Ensign, the official periodical for adult members of the Church, or from Annual and Semi-annual general conferences of the Church, which are worldwide broadcasts from Church leaders that address spiritual topics, report statistics of the Church, and announce policy or organizational changes. Certain documents that may have provided additional detail such as Handbook 1: Administering the Church or more contemporary versions of the Mission President's Handbook are not made publically available, and access is reserved for those who are called to serve in specific positions where the handbook would be needed to guide them in their duties (e.g., Mission Presidents, Stake Presidents, Bishops). Where possible, unofficial versions of these texts were referenced and used to contextualize this study.

**Recruitment process.** A non-random purposive, convenience sampling approach was used to identify a representative case that was accessible to the researcher – a southeastern stake of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The sampling frame was identified via publically available lists provided at the stake’s annual conference and confirmed via a snowballing approach. Participants were recruited through multiple contacts via phone, email, and/or Facebook over a two month period. A variety of contacting approaches was utilized because many of the participants had dispersed for education, relationship, and employment opportunities after returning from their missions and, therefore, local Church directories may not have had updated contact information for the individual. Further, because the research was not officially approved
by the Church, and out of respect for policies identified in the Church’s Handbooks, the researcher avoided recruiting directly at meeting houses or during Church meetings.

I assumed that my insider status – shared experience, as a member of the Church and RM – would lead potential participants to accept my invitation to participate without the need for incentive. This may have been an incorrect or overconfident assumption that failed to account for the fact that RM s who 1) struggled with the transition, or 2) felt compelled to leave the Church after returning may have chosen not to participate due to feelings of embitterment, frustration, disinterest, or guilt/shame. To alleviate some of these concerns, participants were informed that the purpose of the study was to understand the adjustment experience of returning LDS missionaries and that all perspectives were welcome. They were also informed that participation was voluntary and that their personal involvement and information would not be released to Church leaders, and thus, would not affect their relationships with the Church.

**Participant selection.** Non-probability purposive and convenience sampling techniques were utilized to select the initial participants for the study. All participants were, at the time of return, members of a southeastern stake of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. A stake was chosen, as it typically has a shared, albeit evolving culture. Members of a stake are likely to hear similar sermons and be exposed to similar discourses, programs, and adaptations to broader Church directed initiatives. Stakes also have clear bounds and, therefore, have the potential to be easily compared to other stakes within the Church at a later time. The specific stake chosen for this study was picked because of its proximity to the researcher and the access to participants.
created through the researcher’s social network and status within the stake. Individuals were included in the study if they had returned to the identified southeastern stake, after serving a traditional full-time mission, between January 1, 2015 and January 1, 2017. The two year time period was intended to 1) be inclusive enough to generate enough participants to allow for a satisfactory quantity and variation in responses, and 2) to reduce error associated with recall/retrospective self-report data. Service missionaries and senior couples were excluded from the study since their experiences and resources are vastly different from traditional full-time missionaries; however, traditional full-time missionaries who returned early for reasons related to health, transgression, or personal choice were included in the study. Interviews were conducted in person and over the phone during the months of December 2016 and January 2017 at locations designated by the participant.

Interviews were predominately conducted in participant’s homes or over the phone, with one interview conducted in a restaurant of the participants choosing. All at home interviews were conducted one-on-one without family present; however, family may have been in the home and aware of the interview taking place. The interview in the restaurant was held in a more secluded part of the establishment where voices could not be heard and privacy was more likely to be preserved. If necessary, I followed up with participants via email and phone to clarify background information and responses. Likewise, I took notes during each interview, documenting reflexive moments (i.e., how I felt about or viewed the informant and how that may have influenced the interview) and other factors relating to the environment, recording equipment, etc. that may have
influenced the research process. Other data (documents, websites, etc.) were selected based on their topical relevance regardless of date of publication.

Theoretical sampling was used to identify four additional, alternative perspectives; specifically, I was looking for post-mission accounts of people who had disaffiliated from the Church and/or could provide a counter-discourse. Social media monitoring via Radian 6 software was utilized to identify these counter-discourses and occurred during the summer of 2016. Due to the nature of the software utilized, data were collected in three month blocks of time (e.g., January 1, 2015 – April 1, 2015), which resulted in approximately 400 hits per time block. Data points were excluded if they did not directly represent the RM experience or contextualize the reentry process in some broader Church or societal discourse, leaving about 75 useable articles, news stories, or other data points per three month time block. Interestingly, of these only about 6 (8%) in each time block reflected accounts of disaffiliation or adverse reactions to the reentry experience that led to a loss of faith and activity in the Church. From these, the four accounts selected were chosen because they provided the most clear and comprehensive accounts of reentry. Given that these accounts were typically anonymous and individual driven they may represent a more genuine account (i.e., researcher removed); however, the accounts are also limited in terms of topical coverage and depth of response in some areas since I was not able to interview and probe these individuals with follow up questions.

**Researcher-participant relationship.** Prior to beginning the research project, I had met and had some familiarity with five of the sixteen research participants.
Specifically, I had served in a leadership capacity over these five individuals for anywhere from three to nine months. This leader-follower relationship may have created a sense of obligation to participate, a need to provide socially desirable responses, or an unwillingness to disclose information fearing certain responses would jeopardize their membership status. That said, in all but one of these cases, I felt the responses were genuine as evidenced by the existence of ‘negative cases’ or responses that either admitted personal difficulties or critiqued the Church and its members (contrary to expected desirable responses). These participants also provided lengthy responses that expanded beyond the initial questions and seemed more than willing to divulge solicited and unsolicited information. Moreover, all of these participants were given multiple opportunities to opt out of the study via IRB requirements and were permitted to choose an interview location/setting that was comfortable for them.

All of the participants were made aware that I was a member of the Church and a RM as well; however, I clarified that I was not representing the Church and was under no obligation to report research findings to the Church as part of the study. Regardless, my connection to the Church and status as a married, active RM may have been one reason that some of the twenty-five potential missionaries chose not to participate. In fact, in one of the interviews a participant commented that one of his friends, a recently returned sister missionary may have been struggling with her transition and relationship with God and the Church. She had repeatedly missed scheduled interview appointments and may have done so out of feelings of guilt or discomfort with meeting with someone in my position. For example, I consider myself to be a “member in good standing” and someone
who feels on the margins of the Church may feel that a member like me could not understand or would judge her for having doubts/struggles. Additionally, as a male member of a patriarchal Church that has very defined views about gender and gender roles, both male and female participants may have felt varying levels of discomfort in an interview setting. For example, female participants are under different obligations to serve a mission or to initiate post-mission courtship practices. They also have different roles and opportunities to serve in the Church which contemporary groups such as Ordain Women have challenged. For these reasons, female participants may have felt disempowered in the researcher-participant relationship or felt a need to respond in a way that aligned with contemporary discourses. Male participants may have felt they needed to report success in certain areas such as Priesthood duties, employment/education, or courtship as these are expectations associated with their gendered roles in the Church.

**Data-Analytic Strategies**

The qualitative, thematic analysis approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was utilized to identify patterns and themes in the interview data. Braun and Clarke (2006) contend, with others, that the term thematic analysis is inconsistently used and typically a vague, underdeveloped catch-all. Studies that employ the term are often unclear about the steps taken to get from here (the research question) to there (the conclusions derived from the data). Conversely, Braun and Clarke (2006) outline a six step guide for conducting thematic analyses at either the semantic (surface) or latent (deeper) level. These steps include: *familiarizing, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report.*
Familiarizing yourself with the data involves reading and re-reading the data and arguably begins with transcription, which Braun and Clarke argue should be viewed as an interpretive act, not a mechanical one. Transcription becomes especially important in subsequent discourse analyses where punctuation, pauses, and non-verbal cues can interject meaning that might otherwise be lost in the typed transcript.

Generating initial codes is the process of identifying, highlighting, and organizing segments of raw data that are interesting to the researcher in light of the question being asked and whether or not the study is inductive (data driven) or deductive (theory driven). Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend coding be exhaustive, inclusive, and flexible and most importantly that coding “retain accounts that depart from the dominant story” (p. 89). In line with this thinking, I personally re-listened to each interview on multiple occasions, added notes, and deliberately sought out and reported divergent accounts.

Searching for themes is a process of collating codes and texts that share common features or that reveal patterns in the data. Though likely to change, development of a thematic map – a literal, visual representation of the umbrella themes and the codes they shelter – can be helpful at this stage. During this stage, each interview was broken down into smaller units of analysis, typically about a paragraph in length, demarcated by the start and end of a cohesive, singular train of thought. These units were input into Microsoft Excel and organized under the broader questions/topic areas they were intended to address. Each unit was assigned primary and secondary representative codes as well as a dichotomous semantic label where applicable (i.e., positive or negative,
helpful or unhelpful). Data, codes, and notes were organized in Microsoft Excel so that I could sort and cluster codes into related categories and potential themes.

Reviewing themes is a process of evaluating whether or not a proposed theme has enough support from the data to remain a theme, or whether a theme ought to be divided into two or more themes/sub-themes based on the diversity and scope of data the themes represents. This is a two-step process that involves reviewing codes in relation to themes, and reviewing themes in relation to the data set to ensure they reflect the data and to provide an additional scan of the data in order to pinpoint any additional codes or extracts that may have been missed. Given the emergent design guiding this study, this step is ongoing throughout the research process as new codes are identified, themes developed and refined, and data revisited. A single coder, the interviewer, developed the codes and themes and presented the codes/themes to both the participants and three external reviewers for questioning and authentication. Codes were developed from the analysis, however, they were influenced by a priori assumptions regarding expected responses, knowledge related to the language use and practices of the Church, and a robust body of relevant reentry literature (sensitizing concepts; Bowen, 2006).

Naming and defining should be aimed at providing clarity, accuracy, and parsimony. According to Braun and Clarke (2006) this involves identifying the story each individual theme and the collection of themes tells about the data.

The report write-up should include sufficient evidence (i.e., representative quotes) to support and explain the proposed themes and address the research question in a compelling way. Important here is that the themes come together to represent a cohesive
narrative and not just a string of codes/extracts. In order to accomplish this I included both an individual narrative for each informant (Appendix C), which included key quotes and experiences as well as aggregate analyses of shared or divergent experiences across informants, which are presented in the findings and discussion of this article.

Braun and Clarke (2006) also identified a number of pitfalls such as using the interview questions themselves as thematic categories, mismatching themes and extracts, or mismatching the thematic strategy employed with the research questions guiding the study. To avoid these pitfalls Braun and Clarke recommend using a 15 point checklist at the transcribing, coding, analysis, and report writing stages of the research process. These points include things like “ensuring each data item has been given equal attention in the coding process” or “themes are internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive” (p. 97). By following these recommendations this study improves the quality and rigor of an overly used, poorly applied analytic technique.

Findings

Of the twenty-five RMs who met the inclusion criteria for the study, four could not be contacted and five refused to participate (e.g., said “no”, or said “yes” but missed scheduled appointments), leaving sixteen RMs who were interviewed. Of the 16 RMs who chose to participate in the study, all had served full time missions (i.e., 18-24 months) in various regions of the United States (n = 8), Central and South America (n = 5), or Eastern Europe (n = 3). RMs had been ‘home’ for as little as one month and as many as 21 months, 11.6 months on average. Three were converts and all but one self-identified as fully active in the Church at the time of the interview. Two RMs were
married, two were engaged to be married, and the remaining twelve were single, never-married at the time of the interview. The RMs were predominately White, non-Hispanic (n = 14) and Hispanic (n = 2) aged 20 to 27 years old. Approximately three RMs had attained a high school diploma, eleven had completed some college, and two had attained an Associate’s degree. Ten RMs were employed either part or full time at the time of the interview (all in service industries), while six were not employed. As previously noted, to account for alternative perspectives (particularly those represented by the nine participants who could not be contacted or refused to participate), four additional viewpoints were acquired from blogs and other social media. Two of these additional informants were male; two were female. Only one of the four was still affiliated with the Church. Table 2.1 provides individual level demographic information for both interview and social media informants.

For many of the informants the mission was a positive, even transformative experience notwithstanding the rigid structure and repeated trials; for others, the mission was a time of disillusionment and doubt. Likewise, the mission reaffirmed faith and clarified life trajectories for some informants; conversely, the mission also “opened eyes” to alternative, often liberating ways of living that diverged from the Church and its teachings. Because of these mission experiences, all of the informants faced unanticipated realities and hardships in conjunction with reentry; however, the effect of these hardships varied between individuals. In sum, reentry is best understood as a product of all phases of the missionary cycle (Figure 1.1; Austin, 1982).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Membership Status</th>
<th>Mission Location</th>
<th>Mission Language</th>
<th>Time Returned</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Employment</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
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<td>Never married</td>
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<td>Spanish</td>
<td>12 months</td>
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<td>22</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>Employed</td>
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</table>

Notes. The term unknown was used in cases where demographics were either unavailable or unreported.
Table 2.1 Cont’d

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Membership Status</th>
<th>Mission Location</th>
<th>Mission Language</th>
<th>Time Returned</th>
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<th>Age</th>
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<td>Not employed</td>
<td>Engaged to be married</td>
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<td>Unknown</td>
<td>24 months</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Disaffiliated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harper</td>
<td>Disaffiliated</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. The term unknown was used in cases where demographics were either unavailable or unreported.
Figure 1.1. Thematic Map of Reentry.
**Pre-Mission**

Prior to entering the field, informants were recruited in a number of different ways, illustrating the varied and mixed motivations for service. For example, informants acknowledged that missionary service was an expectation or norm, particularly for males in the Church, and that peers, family, and ward members reinforced that norm by putting pressure on them to serve. While most informants felt their decision to serve was made independent of these pressures, they still acknowledged that the expectation was consistently present. Internal motivations for serving included a desire to help others, specifically to help others experience the transforming power of the Gospel that informants had personally experienced. Additionally, informants hoped to secure blessings for themselves, their future converts, and their families. A handful of informants entered the field hoping to reaffirm their faith, gain a witness of the Church that they were lacking, or otherwise resolve doubts.

Beyond their lifelong training (in primary, Sunday school, and priesthood/auxiliary classes), all missionaries entered the highly structured missionary training center (MTC) where they received training in missionary rules, teaching curriculum, and languages. In many ways the MTC was regarded as a “buffer zone” to transition missionaries from civilian life to mission life, thereby minimizing the shock of the mission experience. In that case Carter recalled entering the field for the second time was more like being “thrown from the pan, into the fire” (he had returned early and was redeployed without the buffer of the MTC). Before entering the field, most missionaries felt somewhat comfortable with their language skills and familiar enough with the Preach
My Gospel lessons they would be teaching, but many still felt like the time spent in the MTC was not long enough to prepare them for the full brunt and shock of entering a new culture and lifestyle. Michael also expressed that his particular MTC group seemed different from others, older and less inclined to adhere to all the rules, which impacted his stay there in a negative way.

**The Mission Experience**

Overall the informants, including those who disaffiliated, felt positively about their missions and returned to their community of origin with few regrets. Specifically, informants (1) developed enduring attachments to people and places, (2) felt a sense of purpose and joy while serving, and (3) experienced and observed positive changes in themselves and others as a result of their service. Conversely, positive mission experiences and emotions were hard to replicate or integrate during reentry, and consequently became an additional source of reentry distress.

**Theme 1: Informants developed enduring attachments to people and places; these attachments had potential to evolve into post-mission support networks.**

Generally, informants developed attachments to mission people and places, which influenced post mission relationships, emotions, and behaviors. Informants commonly cited beautiful landscapes, good food, agreeable climates, missionary activities, interesting cultures or customs, friendly people, and meaningful relationships – formed with investigators, members, missionaries and leaders as sources of attachment. Place attachments acted as a motivation for informants to attend mission reunions, maintain mission relationships, and revisit their mission areas after their release. Mission reunions
were typically held in Utah (a central hub for the Church and home to one of its three private universities) and allowed informants to reconnect with mission leaders and friends and/or to revisit the past. Jayden pointed out that he while he would have liked to have attended a mission reunion, he could not afford the cost to travel to Utah (on the opposite side of the country) where these reunions are typically held. As a result, he had a smaller support network and felt somewhat isolated from his mission.

While mission reunions were typically viewed through a positive lens, they also facilitated unhealthy social comparisons and pressures to conform to stereotypical ideals. For example, Sophia described how “sweet” reuniting with her Mission President and hearing his voice again was, but noted that one of the first things out of his mouth was an unsolicited query about her dating life. Moreover, she acknowledged the difficulty of seeing others’ successes (e.g., graduating, getting married, having kids) without feeling like she was somehow failing or falling behind because she had not accomplished those tasks.

The relationships developed during the mission were often perpetuated outside of formal reunions. For instance, Ava and Luke used social media to stay in touch with and track the status of converts and former companions, and other informants lived with or near enough to former companions that they could easily stay in touch. These relationships often acted as a buffer against post-mission difficulties; however, they were difficult to maintain. Staying connected seemed easier for those who either boarded with former mission companions or who had served in the states and could more readily visit
their mission areas in person. In contrast, those who used social media to stay connected reportedly got busy and lost track of people easily.

Informants who were able to stay connected to former mission contacts felt they had people they could turn to who understood their plight, whom they could relive better times with, and with whom they could commiserate. In contrast, reflecting turned to pining for people and places of the past, which ended up being detrimental (i.e., created sadness or withdrawal). For example, informants like Grayson and Jayce experienced sleepless nights, rumination, or isolation and occasionally struggled to connect with people in the present (as they continued to relive and focus on relationships from their missions).

Not all mission experiences were positive, at least not at the start. For instance, some informants struggled to adjust to the mission life and culture, or felt disillusioned by, disgruntled with, and/or detached from the experience. Michael and Ryan, for example, had difficulties acclimating to the culture and customs of the host country (i.e., culture shock associated with new food, clothing, and social norms) and Benjamin, Liam and others had difficulties tackling the mission language. Liam got caught up in comparing himself to others and felt that he was not keeping up with the language, which proved to be a perpetual stressor throughout his mission. Regardless, while challenging, informants generally viewed cultural and linguistic hardships as temporary, humbling, learning moments.

Similarly, as a convert, Ava was unfamiliar with the vernacular, structure, and pace of the mission and had to adjust to the culture of the mission (and exhaustion of
mission life) more than the culture of the host country. Many informants, like Ava, experienced unanticipated interpersonal difficulties during their missions such as rejection, ‘trunky’ mission companions (i.e., their trunks/luggage were literally and metaphorically packed; they were mentally checked out), or peer conflict. For example, Owen, Liam, and Sophia were saddened when individuals choose not to accept and live by the message of the Gospel – especially those who had expressed initial interest or belief in the Church. In fact, Liam and Sophia felt that as missionaries they had been blessed with an added capacity to love and connect with people, which ultimately made rejection harder to bear. Owen even felt that rejection during his mission caused him to be more introverted and withdrawn after his mission, perhaps fearing continued social dismissal.

Sophia found that despite her good people skills, she had contentious relationships with companions (i.e., did not work well together, did not establish a friendship). Carter and a handful of other informants also felt like they were assigned to “babysit” companions who struggled with homesickness, lacked independent living skills, or were demotivated and disobedient. In Owen’s case, his companion actually passed away during the mission – and this loss was naturally disorienting and difficult to endure. In fact, were it not for a compassionate Mission President, Owen likely would have left his mission early. Despite the grief and pain associated with missionary companionships, most missionaries looked back at these relationships with fondness or continued these relationships beyond the mission (e.g., became roommates, attended reunions together). Conversely, Liam felt that most of his mission relationships were superficial; he longed
for the deep, lasting friendships that came, for most people, as a natural byproduct of their service. However, the forced companionship and prescriptive social guidelines of the mission made the forming of natural and fulfilling social relationships difficult for him.

Theme 2: Individuals felt purpose and joy as missionaries that was difficult to recreate or replicate in their post-mission lives. As missionaries, informants felt like they were part of a greater cause with a clearly defined purpose and schedule. The mission also required informants to work hard (to the point of exhaustion) and step out of their comfort zone (into a liminal space) which was both challenging and rewarding. While some struggled with the rigidity of the schedule (and subsequent lack of autonomy/control - Sophia/Ryan), most agreed that the regimen allowed them to interact with, teach, serve, and love other people in meaningful and enjoyable ways. As RMs, however, informants were unsure of what to do each day and no longer had a clear vision for their lives. For Grayson, and others, this lack of purpose and direction caused anxiety and even a cognitive paralysis such that they could not make decisions or move forward. Others felt less accomplished or productive because they did not have clear expectations; a set, busy schedule; or plainly outlined, achievable goals. Even those who had concrete plans often felt like what they were doing (e.g., school, career) did not measure up to or conjure the type of spiritual and personal fulfillment they had experienced as missionaries.

Sophia felt this loss of meaning occurred because RMs are no longer imbued with power or authority (lost the “mantle”) and are no longer immersed in living and teaching
the Gospel. Taken together, informants seemed to feel alienated in and from their country, work, social life, and post-mission purpose. Ryan confirmed this feeling and expressed that once his tag was removed, he felt estranged from the spirit and his missionary service. In contrast, for Owen and Bella, the lack of constraints and lifted burden described by these informants was liberating; they felt they could do what they wanted instead of relying on external direction and sources of happiness. Finally, particularly for those that left the Church, the mission confirmed religious doubts rather than reaffirming religious faith. Johnny, for instance, felt the service he was asked to provide as a missionary was not addressing the basic needs of the people (i.e., reducing poverty), or otherwise fulfilling the purpose he felt he had been called to fulfill and, consequently, he became disillusioned (and depressed) by the experience and returned home early. Like Ryan, he felt alienated from his missionary service but for vastly different reasons.

**Theme 3: Informants experienced compelling transformations, which typically led to challenging integrations.** Individuals were able to see positive changes in themselves and others, some of which were difficult to incorporate into their lives or resulted in identity ambiguity and/ or strained relationships. RMs viewed the mission as transformative in that it: strengthened commitments to the Church and its teachings, contributed to the development of new knowledge skills, and abilities (KSAs), facilitated identity development, and altered relationships.

Benjamin, Caden, and Ryan noted that, prior to serving a mission, the Church took a back seat in their lives. Afterwards, Church service and attendance became a
priority. Carter felt that his mission helped draw him closer to the Church, because he was able to better understand the Church, Church doctrine, and their value to him.

Likewise, Michael found that after teaching others about principles such as the importance of marriage and family for so long, his adherence to normative Church practices, including his desire to get married in the temple, increased. Informants also observed changes in others, which added fulfillment to their mission experience. For example, Liam felt that sharing his testimony had touched people’s hearts and caused them to change; in light of experiences like these, Liam felt he would be content to do missionary work for the rest of his life. Though he determined early in his mission that the Church was not “true”, Braxton also saw how missionary service transformed lives; i.e., the hungry were fed and family bonds were strengthened.

Missionaries developed KSAs through their service, which are listed below:

(1) Increased Christ-like attributes (e.g., charity, patience, diligence, lightheartedness, and perseverance). For example, Mason noted that as an older missionary he had the unique opportunity of working with companions who were significantly younger than him and at a noticeably different stage in their life and development. He learned to be patient with their questions (e.g. how do I do my own laundry) and learned to take life a little less seriously based on their lighthearted examples. Mason also felt like he had become more inclusive, open and accepting of change in himself and others as a result of these generational companionships.

(2) Increased understanding of Church doctrine. Informants like Sophia and Michael developed a more clear understanding of doctrines related to the nature of God and the
role of marriage in his plan, while Luke identified himself as a better scriptorian as a result of his mission.

(3) Improved interpersonal skills (e.g., confidence, communication) and emotional intelligence (e.g., discernment). Jackson noted that after contacting complete strangers day after day, he was better prepared to get a job or talk to people when he returned home. He also felt like he learned to observe and discern people’s moods and needs, what Caden similarly described as the ability to “read” people. Conversely, a few missionaries felt their interpersonal skills actually declined after their missions. For example, Owen and Jayce felt like they became more introverted after their missions.

(4) Increased maturity and responsibility (e.g., cleanliness, financial responsibility, ability to do hard things). During his mission Luke learned how to create and maintain a simple budget, control his emotions, and be more agentic (i.e., empowered to act, not be acted upon). Though they did not see changes in themselves, Caden’s family felt like he “grew up” and Jayden’s family noticed that he transitioned from being a rebellious teen to a helpful young adult.

(5) Improved academic ability and motivation; improved thinking skills (e.g., better grades, improved time management). Oliver noticed a drastic change in his academic performance. He had left for his mission on academic probation but, upon returning, earned “the best grades of [his] life” for four consecutive semesters. Braxton also experienced cognitive development in that he developed critical thinking and reasoning skills, which led him to the conclusion that the Church was not true. In contrast, Liam
struggled with his ability to focus, a problem that not only affected his educational experience, but other parts of his life as well (e.g., relationships).

(6) *Improved foreign language skills; and decreased materialistic attitude* (e.g., anti-consumerism, minimalism). Jayce, who had previously sworn off Spanish and was actively learning German, was called to serve a Spanish speaking mission. Despite his initial indifference towards the language he became both fluent and fond of it. Braxton decided to stay on his mission (despite growing concerns about the validity of the Church), in part, in order to take advantage of the language training opportunities. Caden, in addition to adopting a new language, acquired new cultural values and practices that shaped his attitudes towards Western consumerism. He came home and purged his possessions, condensing everything into two boxes of essentials.

Armed with newly acquired skills and abilities, Jackson felt that he was better prepared to tackle life and his transition home. Jayden similarly felt that he had received gifts from God, that he could now use in his career and life to continue to bless the lives of others.

Jackson also felt that he “found himself” on his mission and others similarly saw the mission as a time for self-discovery and an exploration of their identity and autonomy. Luke, for instance, felt like he had become free from the cares and opinions of “the world” and only had to live by the standards that he (and God) had set for himself. Sophia, who had a rough start as a teenage convert, similarly grew more confident in her identity, specifically referring to a strengthened religious character and a clearer vision of what she would do for a career. Caden felt like he had developed a greater openness to new experiences and became less inhibited by fear of the unknown. Owen also felt like
he had greater opportunities to explore his identity during and after his mission, where he experienced increased autonomy and decreased accountability. He used this newfound autonomy to partially withdraw from the Church and do what he personally wanted to do rather than what the Church/Church culture proscribed.

Despite his doubts about the Church’s doctrine and history, Braxton continued to attend Church but as a “non-believing Mormon”, a salient part of his identity that was essentially hidden from the rest of the world (including his family and congregation). Johnny, after disaffiliating, adopted a post-mission identity as a “recently enlightened ex-Mormon.” Like Owen, he felt a weight had lifted from his life and like Braxton, he could not reconcile the dark/dissonant things he had learned about the Church with the positive experiences he had as an active LDS youth.

Some RMs felt like their perspective toward and relationship with significant others had changed as a result of their mission. For example, Ryan and Jackson developed an increased respect and gratitude for family. Similarly, Jayden, who described himself as a rebellious teen felt more inclined to listen to, talk with, and serve his family. Jackson felt that his relationship with and attitude toward God and Jesus Christ were deepened and enriched. He felt that he was closer to God, better able to communicate with Him, and more inclined to trust and follow his direction through the Spirit. Likewise, Carter felt like he drew closer to the Savior during his mission which strengthened his conviction. Sophia, who also strengthened her relationship with Christ felt like she could not have developed such as strong relationship had she not served a mission.
The Last Days in the Mission

During their final days in the mission, informants returned to the mission home to debrief their experience, reunite with other RMs, and prepare for their return. Most notably RMs participated in (1) a group and meeting that included the bearing of testimonies and training on adjusting to post-mission life, and (2) a personal release interview. RMs also indicated that this was a time (3) marked by anxious anticipation about their return.

Theme 1: Group training’s had minimal, albeit variable impact on the reentry preparedness of returning missionaries. Group training meetings in the mission home covered a wide array of topics such as career preparation or dating and marriage, and usually involved opportunities for debriefing/framing experiences. In some cases, these group meetings moved beyond traditional lecture or discussion formats, to allow for more practical, hands-on experiences and training. For example, in regards to career preparation, one mission facilitated mock interviews led by a set of senior missionaries (i.e., an elderly couple assigned to support the mission) while another mission had informants take a personal strengths-career inventory and set career goals. Regarding dating, some missions reminded missionaries that after two years of dating restrictions, they now had permission to step out of their “bubble” and date again. This reminder was accompanied with the admonition to obey the law of chastity, which emphasizes that sexual relations are reserved for marriage between a man and a woman. In one mission, leaders had provided workshops with a dating coach, but the trainings
were discontinued because missionaries did not take them seriously or feel like the training material had any merit.

To help debrief/ frame the mission, one mission president helped orient missionaries back to the purpose of their mission. He called the mission a consecration camp (contrasted with a concentration camp) suggesting that while their mission was likely challenging, the purpose was not to suffer (concentration camp) but rather to sacrifice (consecration camp). Individuals also had the opportunity to share a final witness related to their mission, the Gospel, and the validity of God, His Son, and the restoration. A number of missionaries also mentioned that they were permitted to attend the temple right before returning home. These acts provided closure and formally demarcated the ending of their mission.

Theme 2: Mission Presidents conducted release interviews with each missionary focused on the provision of counsel, reflection and affirmation, and planning. Counsel from Mission Presidents focused on both temporal and spiritual concerns. Specifically, counsel focused on topics such as: self-care; spiritual identity development and religiosity; career and education planning; and dating and marriage. Relating to self-care Ava’s Mission President encouraged her to avoid negative influences, knowing she would likely be discouraged from maintaining her spirituality at home (where her family were not members of the Church). Likewise, other informants were encouraged to avoid “dangerous” anti-Mormon literature and to surround themselves with positive friends and uplifting media. Likewise, Sophia was warned against taking on too many tasks, thereby overburdening herself. Regarding spirituality,
Luke was encouraged to become a “priesthood man” – someone God could rely on; other informants were encouraged to keep changing and developing Christ-like attributes (e.g., humility, integrity, or charity), attend their Sunday meetings, study the scriptures, accept callings, seek opportunities to serve in and out of the Church, work with the missionaries, and attend the temple. The gist of these messages was “put God first” (i.e., before education, career) and focus on the “primary answers” (i.e., prayer, study, meeting attendance, and temple worship) and everything else will fall into place.

Career advice largely related to making employment choices that would produce useful skills in addition to generating income, and included reminders that hard work breeds success. A few informants acknowledged that marriage was a central topic and positioned as the “next horizon” or next most important task to be completed now that their mission was over. Missionaries were encouraged to focus on themselves by developing the qualities they hoped to find in a spouse, and then to pursue a spouse with similar standards or qualities. While there was certainly an expectation to get married, most Mission Presidents encouraged missionaries to “do the right things” (e.g., keep studying and praying) assuring that marriage would naturally come to pass. Other mission leaders encouraged missionaries to actively look for a spouse but to let marriage come in its own time.

In addition to providing counsel, Mission Presidents used release interviews to review missionary assignments and to reflect on what was accomplished or gained as a result of missionary service. Mission Presidents used that time to express trust and confidence, and in some cases affirm that missionaries had served an ‘honorable’
mission. The mission president also prompted the missionaries to set short and long-term goals and make plans related to staying healthy, obtaining a career, continuing education, maintain spirituality, and getting married. In one mission, this process of visioning was called the “success formula” and missionaries were required to detail their long term goals and specific plans to achieve those goals.

Many missionaries described a deep love and respect for their Mission President. As a result, the interview seemed more personalized, and the counsel more relevant. For example, Ava’s Mission President had remembered she was returning to a potentially toxic home environment and catered his counsel to helping her navigate that environment. Mason, who had worked closely with his mission president for 9 months, felt like they were able to have an intimate conversation about their work together. Conversely, Jayden, felt like the Mission President (because he was new) did not know him and therefore could not provide meaningful counsel or reflection. Interviews with Mission Presidents who had not developed rapport with the missionary tended to be short and underwhelming. In other words, the perceived relationship with the Mission President influenced the perceived value and real impact of missionary exit interviews.

**Theme 3: Returning missionaries experienced anxiety and anticipation about the return.** Missionary anxieties seemed focused on three aspects of post mission life: relationships, obligations and next steps, and loss of authority/spirit. Many missionaries anticipated that they would experience social difficulties (e.g., inability to talk about “normal” life) or be viewed/received and treated differently because of their RM status and personality/identity changes. For example, Owen left for his mission as a very
outgoing individual and returned more introverted. While he was sure his family expected changes of some kind, he was nervous about whether or not they would accept him as a more introverted character. He wished he could stay in the mission rather than having to tackle these relational difficulties. Informants also acknowledged that at the end of their mission they began to think and worry about what would happen next in life. Where would they go to school? When would they get married? What career would they pursue?

In addition to establishing a life trajectory, informants also knew they would need to start working, managing their own personal finances, and otherwise “adulting” without the structure of a mission and support of a companion. For instance Jackson realized that while he developed independent living skills as a missionary, he was now going to have to “start a life,” with little support from family or mission personnel. As a final thought, many missionaries had heard and were concerned with the fact that they would eventually be released, their tag removed, and consequently their “mantle” or daily dose of the spirit would dissipate or withdraw entirely. They understood that without built in study time and a constant teaching-service orientation, feeling close to God and the Church would be more challenging.

The Release

Most informants explained that (1) their release interview was short and somewhat anticlimactic, (2) the removal of their tag was a tangible symbol of their release, (3) involving family in the release helped smooth the transitional process, and (4)
in some cases, the release put missionaries in a limbo state, a state in between the mission and full adjustment home.

**Theme 1: Unlike the call to serve, the release was typically viewed as short, anticlimactic, and therefore unhelpful.** Many informants felt like their release interview was disappointingly unceremonious, especially given that many of them had essentially been looking forward to a mission their entire life, their mission calls and departures were celebrated with greater fanfare, and they had just completed a major (not to mention time-consuming, taxing, and transformative) milestone and rite of passage, well worth some pomp and circumstance. Specifically, Luke and Owen felt “cheated” and had hoped for more substantive counsel and reflection from the Stake President during this interview. Instead the President simply stated “You’re released. Take off your tag” …and there was “no great prayer, no unsetting apart.” Sophia expressed that she felt her Stake President was even less prepared to release and provide counsel to a Sister Missionary, likely given that Sisters have different experiences, roles and expectations in the Church. Finally, those who knew their Stake President (i.e., had a prior, personal connection) before departing were more likely to have a meaningful release interview or positive reconnecting experience, though this was not a guarantee.

**Theme 2: The removal of the tag was a tangible symbol of the release, which solicited feelings of loss and grief.** Time and again informants indicated that they did not feel that they had been released until their name tag had been removed. They noted that the tag (also referred to as a “plaque”) was a recognizable sign (both outside and inside the Church) that identified their uniqueness as a Mormon missionary. The tag removal
seemed to signify that a symbolic and literal responsibility and power had been lifted – a moment that brought some informants, like Ryan, to tears. Informants, like Sophia, noted that without the name tag, they did not feel like they could do missionary work in the same way or with the same success. They seemed to lack authority or power to “walk up to random people and talk to them about Jesus” and for Sophia, that was “life-changing, and eternity altering.” Ryan, similarly noted that as a missionary he was accompanied by a “special spirit” and when the tag came off he felt that spirit “leave.” Ryan further noted that his release/transition was quite abrupt – “for two years [he was] serving the Lord, and one day, the very next day, [he was] not a missionary.” He acknowledged that he could still serve the Lord but that without the formal calling and status, he did not feel the same. Ava felt the distinction between the full-time and member missionary identity was solidified after she went out to serve with the local full-time missionaries. She, like others, recognized that she no longer had the “mantle,” calling, or spirit of a fulltime missionary and felt that she could no longer approach a stranger or teach in the same manner. In contrast, Jayden argued that you cannot just take off the tag, and stop being who you are. In other words, once a missionary, always a missionary, tag or not.

Theme 3: Involving family in the release helped facilitate the transition from the mission to the next phase of life. Informants who had a more positive release incorporated family into the ritual. For example Benjamin had his mother remove his name tag. He also had an opportunity to invite his family into the release interview and was able to share meaningful memories and stories from the mission. This period of reflection occurred in a safe setting, where family desired and in some ways were
obligated to listen. The act of sharing built connections of understanding between the missionary and his or her family.

Theme 4: Following the release, some informants felt they had entered a Limbo state. While many informants viewed their release as anticlimactic, most could at least point to a defining moment (e.g., removal of the tag, serving with local full-time missionaries) when they felt that they had ‘arrived’ or fully transitioned out of the missionary state. Other informants like Benjamin, however, felt in between states, or between their missionary and civilian lives and identities. For these informants, the post mission period was a “limbo” state that seemed to indicate that one never stops returning or fully ‘arrives.’ As Benjamin noted, “I’m still wondering if I’m here or what… where am I?” When asked to distinguish between a ‘returned’ and ‘returning’ missionary, these informants indicated that “you never stop returning”.

Life after the mission – Challenges

Informants experienced a number of social, cultural, spiritual, and psychological difficulties during reentry. These challenges are organized into seven (7) themes that discuss everything from the difficulty associated with maintaining spiritual behaviors to problems resulting from reverse culture shock.

Theme 1: Informants experienced difficulty maintaining daily spiritual habits. Worldly influences and concerns distracted from spiritual priorities.

Informants, many in a tone of self-approbation, expressed that they were not maintaining their daily spiritual habits (e.g., prayer, scripture study, and/or missionary work) at the level they had hoped. What had been hours of study time on a mission became 10
minutes for Carter, and what Mason identified as 60 prayers a day as a missionary became fewer than 6 as an RM. As a missionary, informants had very few concerns or worldly obligations. That changed after they returned. More often than not the responsibilities of independent, adult living overwhelmed them and the pursuit of a good job, education, and marital companionship consumed their time and attention, leaving little room for Gospel study or communion with God. Some informants, who had kept very busy as missionaries, were surprised at how demanding life could be when trying to balance work, school, and a social life. For example Sophia had developed a theme for herself – “steadfast and immovable” – which she recalls “quickly fell to the wayside,” as other, less important things (e.g., school, work) demanded her immediate attention.

Finding or creating time to maintain spiritual habits was much more difficult than anticipated and informants found that their study and prayer was sporadic at best. The majority expressed a desire to maintain these habits (and “go back to the Lord”) and many pointed to the blessings (e.g., peace, stability, and inspiration) that came when they did make them a priority. Some, like Liam, expressed embarrassment and shame, because they “knew better” than to let these habits slip and had pushed their investigators to be more diligent in these same areas. Grayson also pointed out that without the mission as an incentive, he had little motivation to do or be good. He no longer had something he had to prepare or be “worthy” for. Informants also noted that while they wished to achieve the same level of spirituality they possessed as a missionary, they felt this was not realistic given their limited time and loss of power and purpose. Those who were not meeting the standard they had set for themselves often felt like they were not “progressing.” Media
also proved to be a distraction and missionaries found themselves consuming too much media or being overexposed to “bad” media. In other words, they were constantly bombarded with news, media, etc. whereas, as missionaries, their sole focus was on teaching and serving.

Some informants had been very critical of members who were RMs who did not help with the missionary effort. Now, finding themselves in the same situation with the same harried schedules they developed more empathy for members who had failed to engage in missionary work. Many also felt guilt knowing that they were falling into the same pattern, and wished they could engage in missionary work with greater ease and frequency. For these informants, the missionary label was an identity they were not prepared to part with. They wanted to be known as people whose number one priority was to share the gospel. A few informants who were attending school in Utah Valley felt that they were limited in their ability to do member missionary work because of their location. In other words, Utah Valley is predominately Mormon, so who would they preach to?

Aside from ‘worldly’ distractions such as dating and education, some informants were influenced by anti-Mormon literature, which altered their perspective and priorities. These informants gave up their daily disciplines in order to fill their time with what they believed were more truthful, productive and authentic pursuits. For example, Johnny felt his discoveries about the Church (via the famed CES letter) were transformative and resonated with his concerns regarding the Church’s doctrine and history. Harper and also left the Church after being exposed to anti-Mormon literature during and after her
mission; in addition to leaving the Church Harper, like Bella, embraced alternative lifestyle choices (e.g., drinking, liberal sexuality). Other informants saw the appeal of anti-Mormon sentiments, but stuck with the Church. They argued that leaving the Church was the easier path. In other words, living the gospel is hard and often creates feelings of guilt; by embracing anti-Mormon ideals one might be liberated from the guilt and work associated with Gospel living. Braxton, for instance, had sought multiple sources of information about the Church and concluded that the Church was not true (even if the Church produced good works and was guided by sincere leaders); however, he chose not to tell his wife or ward members in order to preserve his social world and identity. Seeing friends who had served missions leave the Church because of anti-Mormon literature made the pressure to give in even more potent. Taken a step further, Sophia also discussed how, in her experience, when members indicate that they have doubts in the Church they are often stigmatized or their concerns are swept aside (easily overcome through more faith and prayer) not validated and explored. Others who have been confronted by anti-Mormon literature, in contrast, actually found that their testimony and commitment to the Church was strengthened.

**Theme 2: Informants experienced Reverse Culture Shock and subsequent reentry distress, related to communication, diet, ideology, and language.** A few informants experienced difficulties related to differences in interpersonal communication styles between cultures. For instance, Benjamin noted that people in the U.S. are not as friendly as the people in his South American mission. Michael who had served in an Eastern European Country had the opposite experience. He described the people in his
mission as cold, so upon his return he felt like he was not very nice to people. He had to work extra hard to be friendly to people at the grocery store, for example, and had to monitor his speech to ensure he was not being rude.

Informants also experienced unanticipated challenges associated with changes in diet, food related etiquette, and the inability to find familiar ingredients. Benjamin, for instance, felt that the foods in the U.S. were so different they were no longer palatable and refused to eat for weeks. Benjamin also noted that he had developed different etiquette and expectations surrounding food and consumption. For, instance as a missionary he had learned to always say “yes” when offered food so as not to offend, whereas missionaries in the U.S. often say “no”, to be polite. Grayson was quite irritated by the limited ingredients in the states. He had hoped to prepare and serve his favorite dishes from the mission but did not feel like he could create and authentic meal given the ingredients at hand. He became even more frustrated when his family said the food was fine, because he personally felt the food was not representative of his ability or the cuisine of the culture.

Jackson rightly acknowledged that everyone’s experience is different, and that both the country you are leaving, the country you are returning to, and the differences (i.e., cultural distance) between them influence reentry. Cultural differences related to materialism/consumerism created distance and disillusionment. Benjamin was particularly attentive to the excess in the United States. Driving into the country he noted the large houses, surplus of restaurants, and general abundance of wealth. He was shocked by the cleanliness of the streets and the number of amenities that were available.
He had adapted to a simpler, minimalist life and became repulsed by the consumptive culture that exists in the U.S. He felt that his countrymen did not know the true value of their possessions. Jayce had seen so many people who “had nothing” in his mission, where he said 80-90% of mothers were single, heads of household.

Informants also experienced temporary language difficulties such as loss of vocabulary or differences in pace and style of speech. Caden felt like he was speaking English the way he spoke Spanish, phrasing things “backward” or using Spanish words thinking they were English words. His language difficulties created confusion on more than one occasion. Similarly, Grayson noted that his accent was particularly thick, to the point that people told him he talked “weird.” Jayce had a somewhat different experience. He felt like the way people thought and talked was simpler in his mission (language aside), so when he returned to Church in the U.S. he felt like everyone was trying to outdo the other with their extensive vocabularies and speech. Benjamin noted that none of his family or friends spoke Spanish and the Spanish friends he did have preferred to speak English, so he felt his ability to maintain his language abilities were limited. Likewise, Liam felt that he had enough friends in the area to keep up his “Gospel Spanish” but felt like his overall fluency was slipping.

**Theme 3: Informants struggled to build new relationships and communicate with significant others, let alone strangers; as a result, informants felt isolated and alone.** Like other reentrants, RMs in this study found that people did not understand or seem interested in their mission experience. This was particularly difficult given the singular focus of missionary life. Informants, like Owen, felt crippled by their inability to
converse about anything but their mission, which had been the focus of their life for two years. Ryan had a similar experience trying, and failing, to connect with people at a Church dance. Both Ryan and Owen were unprepared, even unable, to move on with life so quickly and abandon the feelings and experiences they had had as missionaries. This conflict resulted in a lack of acceptance/belonging for some. For example, Benjamin recalls attending his first single adult dance as an RM. Everything about the environment from the music to the people seemed foreign and un-relatable to him. Eventually he found some familiar faces but the initial thought of engaging with people he did not know was uncomfortable (despite the fact that he had contacted strangers for the two years prior). Jayce similarly felt uncomfortable in his new environment. He was overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of people at Church and school, all wanting to give him attention. Jayce quickly realized that things that seemed so important in the mission, meant nothing to the people at home. This dissonance was hard to grasp. How could something that mattered so much in one context, matter so little in the next? Even though he preferred to be alone, Jayce felt pressure to build social interactions and that the first few weeks would either “make it or break it” for him in that regard. Unlike others who were anxious to open up about their missions, Jayden (due to trust issues) felt like the number of people he could talk to was limited. Many described this period as the “missionary awkwardness” and had anticipated that they would be “weird” at the beginning of their transition home. Benjamin wondered if he would ever be “normal” again.

In addition to having communication difficulties, many informants reported that their relationships with significant others (i.e., family, friends) had changed. Sometimes
this manifest itself in the form of changed family dynamics, rituals, or traditions. Ryan, for instance, recalls coming home expecting the same Christmas traditions (e.g., the whole family wakes up together to open presents), only to find that his older sibling who was married with children had changed the timing and format. The change in this long awaited family ritual resulted in disappointment and frustration. At times informants, like Grayson, had unmet or unexpressed needs (like a desire to be alone, to ponder) and family members expressed concern that this isolation was unhealthy (e.g., “are you depressed?”). In these situations there seemed to be a failure to communicate expectations and therefore a lack of understanding of one another’s needs/perspectives. Ava experienced this with her mother who was somewhat new to the mission culture and did not know what her daughter needed. Ava’s mother wanted to dote on and spoil Ava, to give her time to rest. This is the last thing Ava wanted, as she was anxious to keep working and serving the Lord.

Strained relationships were sometimes dissolved, particularly with old friends. For example, Oliver had not worked hard to maintain friendships while he was away so most of his time was spent with family or in isolation. Owen stopped going to Church because he did not know anyone there. He realized that the social aspect was a crucial part of his religious observance and that in many ways he came home from the mission more introverted than he had been prior. Another point of stress between informants and significant others arose when informants perceived that family members were not living up to their high spiritual standards. For example Ava and Mason both found that their families were not where they wanted them to be spiritually. They struggled to strike a
balance of loving and patient correcting/encouraging v. respecting their agency and
giving them room to live their lives as they see fit.

Most of these social difficulties had a common result, withdrawal/retreat and
subsequent isolation/loneliness. Loneliness was also connected to the fact that informants
no longer had a 24/7 missionary companion to hold them accountable or keep them
company. Maintaining contact with friends was difficult due to communication
limitations during the mission, and many informants reportedly had few friends upon
returning. Some informants were greeted like celebrities initially, but after the novelty
wore off, no real, deep relationships persisted. This loneliness was debilitating for Liam,
who spent months in prayer, asking God to help him find genuine friends with whom he
could build meaningful relationships.

Theme 4: Internal and external pressures to date and marry created stress
and anxiety. Whether in the home, at Church, or even at a mission reunion informants
expressed that they felt bombarded by questions about their relationship status or
expectations to date and marry. These questions/expectations created pressure to find an
eternal companion quickly and in some cases fostered self-doubt, guilt, or shame because
this ideal was not being achieved. Sophia recalled attending a mission reunion and one of
the first questions out of her mission president’s mouth was about whether or not she was
dating. She also recalled an uncle who, knowing she was attending BYU, blamed her for
her lack of dating prospects given that there were so many good RM boys at BYU who
should have been asking her out on dates. She drew attention to the gendered experience
of dating in the Church (and perhaps society) where women have less power and
normative ability to initiate dating relationships. In some places informants did not have a large pool of members of the Church to date and therefore, chose not to date at all. Ava noted that many RMs used marriage as an indicator of progress (while others measured post-mission progress in terms of their ability to study and pray consistently). Like Sophia, other informants attended mission reunions and upon seeing friends and former companions married and completing other markers of success (finishing school, getting full-time jobs), they felt that they were failing at life (at least in the arena of dating and marriage). Some informants were deterred from dating either due to anxiety and low valuations of self-worth or due to the discomfort interacting with members of the opposite sex without the restrictions and protections of the mission rules and guidelines.

**Theme 5: Informants experienced feelings of loss related to their mission purpose, procedures, places, and people.** Many informants indicated that after their mission they felt a strong urge to be ‘productive’ yet, for a short time, they had little to do. Benjamin recalled that as a mission you are always “going, going, going” and that as an RM sitting or being still can be difficult, even when talking with family or friends. He also noted that shifting from a position of feeling “needed and that you’re helping in a noble cause” to one in which your cause is no longer so clearly defined is difficult. Sophia noted that shifting from missionary to RM also challenged her identity. She struggled to figure out who she was without the missionary purpose and label and struggled to reconcile her former life. She adamantly opposed her family’s protests that the two Sophia’s were the same and is still working on merging the two identities into a cohesive, recognizable, new version of herself. Jayce recalls feeling excruciating
boredom watching movies, reading books, or engaging in other passive forms of leisure. He kept thinking to himself “what do I do now?” and eventually started to set goals oriented toward what he viewed as more productive leisure participation (e.g., running, joining the Church choir, etc.). Liam similarly felt like he was wasting away his newfound free time with sleep and overconsumption of media on his phone, and felt the same pull to do something useful like allocating that time for prayer and study.

Caden noted the harried pace of the mission (“you’re going like a million miles an hour” and work from the early hours of the day, late into the night); he found himself constantly asking “Now what? Now what do I do?” Jayden described the challenge of having a set schedule as a missionary (e.g. wake up at 6:30am, study for three hours, go out and do something you love) and then coming back to the “real world” and having a completely different schedule. Moreover, maintaining daily habits was much harder without the schedule in place. Jackson added that he did not have a phone or car, and so he felt isolated from the world and potentially productive pursuits. In contrast, Mason made efforts to stay busy and fill his time. He was constantly moving between jobs, relationships, and even regions of the country. Benjamin added that finding a job quickly was crucial to helping him stay sane and feel productive. In sum, the loss of purpose, schedule, and structure associated with their missions created feelings of anxiety, boredom, and guilt for most missionaries. That said, Owen felt like the lack of schedule and autonomy was liberating and he enjoyed having more say in terms of what time he would wake up, whether or not he would attend Church, etc. Similarly, Jayce felt that he
was eventually overworked (asked to teach, visit, etc.) and became fatigued by Church service (which felt like an unwanted extension of his mission).

Informants also missed and in some cases pined for the culture, relationships, and experiences they had grown to love as missionaries. Jayden described a longing to go back to his mission, and yet he had not returned to visit even though he lived in driving distance. Sophia recalled wishing she could just go get a certain type of food or visit a certain place in her mission on a whim and felt frustrated when these desires where left unmet. Jayce indicated that the more physically/temporally distant the mission became, the more he missed it and desired to reconnect with people he knew in the mission. Because he lived near Utah Valley, where a large number of RMs attend school, he was able to go and visit with people from his mission, and did so regularly to satisfy his nostalgic needs. Interestingly, Jayce felt like mission relationships meant more or were deeper and more authentic than any other relationships – this relational quality is part of what made his longing for the mission so profound. As noted in Grayson’s account he, like others, spent sleepless nights regaling themselves with memories of their missions. For some, this reminiscing was positive and restorative. For Grayson and Michael, this ruminating was more paralytic. Michael said he “thinks about [his] mission every day” and though he does not miss the responsibility of being a missionary, he does miss the people. Informants experienced challenges staying connected with their past (i.e., missionaries, converts) but also struggled to fully connect with people in the present (i.e., family, friends). Ava and her husband, both RMs, tried to stay connected on social media (i.e., Facebook) but even that was difficult to do. For Luke, part of the difficulty had to do
with the diversity of cultures represented in his mission. He had companions from multiple countries, speaking multiple languages, which made communication a struggle. Jayce, similarly experienced challenges communicating cross-culturally via social media. He felt Latin American’s did not post interesting material (e.g., marriages, engagements) as frequently as people do in the states.

**Theme 6: Lack of contact and support from local leaders and members left some informants without the tools needed to actively cope with reentry distress.**

Owen indicated that he was not contacted by ward leaders for months after returning from his mission. To this day he is unsure if they know he is an RM. Likewise, due to the lack of training, some Bishops neglected to connect RMs with existing resources such as the Church’s My Plan program for RMs. Missionaries are supposed to share their plan with their Mission President during a formal exit interview and follow up with local leaders, parents, and others after returning to their home community (Poffenbarger, 2015). However, this follow up does not appear to be happening. Grayson, wished he had received more training on how to translate mission behaviors to civilian life – exactly what My Plan aims to do – but was inhibited from doing so because his Bishop was not familiar enough with the program to implement it at the local level. Mason had a similar experience, and had even brought his My Plan materials (started in the mission) to discuss with his local leader, but the leader never followed up.

Leaders, particularly in large young single adult wards, often failed to reach out to RMs. Carter felt that there was a need for constant contact with RMs in young single adult wards where their peers were going through the same issues and, thus, it was easy
to disappear in the crowd. Some leaders did provide support in the form of accountability, counselling and friendship but this was scarce. Likewise, while some missionaries were greeted warmly by ward members both at the airport and in the weeks that followed, informants generally felt that ward members could have provided better support in the form of callings, outreach and fellowship, or employment. A few of those who disaffiliated (Bella, Johnny) not only felt unsupported but outright rejected by ward members who they characterized as critical, judgmental, and unable/unwilling to understand the choice to disaffiliate, or the underlying experiences that led to that choice.

Theme 7: Returning early and returning twice added additional burdens such as lack of preparation or lack of support networks to the equation. Only two missionaries (Carter, Johnny) had returned early. Carter eventually ventured back into the field (a rare, somewhat challenging feat). In his experience, returning home early was not as challenging as he had anticipated because he came home to a familiar, loving support network (his ward and family) and his Church leader clarified that he was returning to resolve health issues and not because he had sinned or voluntarily abandoned his post (which likely would have produced a less welcoming response from ward members). The return was still hard for Carter, primarily because it was involuntary; however, the harder reentry for Carter came the second time, because his parents had moved to a new town and he no longer had ward friends to welcome him home and ease his transition. He was unknown and also in a young single adult ward, surrounded by other shell-shocked RMs focused on their own needs and concerns. Johnny returned home early to receive treatment for his depression, however, the underlying doubts/disillusionment associated
with his diagnosis were not adequately resolved. Thus, unlike Carter, Johnny ended up disaffiliating after returning and subsequently lost the support of his family and fellow students who were members of the Church.

Life after the mission – Advice, Successes, and Sources of Reentry Support

In addition to the challenges they encountered, RMs noted a number of factors that helped them navigate those challenges and have a reasonably successful transition. They also offered advice to those who would soon be returning. This counsel and these factors were categorized into five themes, outlined below.

Theme 1: Informants warned future RMs to be prepared, reentry is harder than you think. A number of informants acknowledged that reentry was harder than they anticipated – reinforcing that many reentry challenges are a function of the expectation-reality gap. Liam, acknowledging the difficulties of reentry, recommended that RMs start working immediately to maintain their spirituality. Grayson also felt strongly that RMs need to explain their needs and expectations to significant others, since family members and friends experience an expectation-reality gap as well. In contrast, Mason noted that even though he was not prepared for some of the challenges of reentry, adjusting after the mission was still a “good” experience/ process. He encouraged RMs to think of reentry as the “next transfer,” believing that God will still guide them. Similarly, Oliver and Caden acknowledged that reentry was going to be “weird” but invited missionaries to focus on what is under their control, and to avoid stress, worry, or regret. Jackson suggested missionaries take a little time to unwind and process before immediately starting work or school. Owen expounded on these sentiments and encouraged RMs to leave reentry
“open to interpretation.” He explained that every missionary should do what feels personally fulfilling regardless of expectations set by God or mankind.

**Theme 2: Informants felt staying busy in spiritual and non-spiritual pursuits helped them to maintain spirituality, sociality, and sense of purpose.** In general, informants reiterated the importance of staying busy after one returns, whether that takes the form of employment, education, travel, or spiritual enrichment. In other words, it does not matter what you do, just do something. Informants encouraged future RMs to start the next chapter of their life rather than passively waiting for life to happen to them. Many drew on the scriptural invitation to “be anxiously engaged in a good cause” (D&C 58: 26-27) as they identified spiritually grounding behaviors such as going out with the full-time missionaries, witnessing in their everyday interactions, making time to study and pray, attending religious classes at university, and serving in the temple. These habits were all deemed worthwhile endeavors, which provided stability and strength, even if they did consume time that could be spent studying, seeking employment, dating or pursuing other next steps in life.

All of these recommendations were wrapped up in the idea of maintaining or continuing the spiritual attributes (e.g., charity) and behaviors (e.g., service) acquired during the mission and in a few cases following through on goals and plans generated during the My Plan program. Grayson felt that after the mission God expects missionaries to be more independent/self-reliant in their lives (whereas they had constant structure, support, and guidance as missionaries). In other words, he felt they should be prepared to make decisions without constant direction from God. Caden, Liam, and Oliver added that
RMs should also take the time to try new things, enjoy the moment, and have fun…advice one might receive right after leaving high school (as if the mission was an extension of adolescence and the post-mission period an extension of the young adult exploration period). Jayden for example, made time to practice and play the guitar rather than filling all his time with “productive” pursuits. Caden further explained that even simple activities like eating familiar food or going for a drive could lessen reentry distress and occupy his time/mind in a meaningful, leisurely way.

Theme 3: Informants felt greater well-being when surrounded by uplifting people, media, and environments. Informants were most successful when they were surrounded and supported by strong social networks in the form of friends, family, ward members, ward leaders, and prior missionary colleagues. Those who were more isolated or who had toxic roommate and friend relationships tended to have a more pessimistic outlook and a less clear life plan and purpose. RMs also indicated specific things that ward members, family, and friends could or did do to help with their transition. For example, ward members and leaders can provide support by helping missionaries find employment (Oliver, Caden, Liam, Michael) and giving missionaries meaningful Church callings or assignments (Jayce, Michael). Informants were also called to serve in a variety of new capacities, some that resembled the mission (e.g., instructors, ward missionaries, and temple workers) and some that were very different from the mission (e.g., boy scout leader). In addition to providing employment and service opportunities, Benjamin and Liam’s local leaders took the time to check in with them periodically, offering advice and helping him set goals and make plans. Similarly, Owen felt that if ward leaders had a
system in place that motivated them to contact every new member within a certain time frame, RMs might be better supported, rather than fall through the cracks. Mason, who was more proactive about seeking support from leaders, regularly scheduled meetings with his local Bishop to seek counsel or guidance, which he found immensely helpful. Grayson felt that missionaries would fare better if members treated RMs like normal people and attempted to build genuine friendships rather than treating them like heroes (i.e., offering praise, and then forgetting about them when the novelty of their return and status wore off). A number of informants also felt that attending a YSA ward helped to establish a sense of normalcy by putting them in contact with peers who were having similar life experiences and challenges. Some of these wards held dinner groups and other social gatherings that facilitated the development of new, supportive social connections.

Informants also seemed to have better outcomes when a parent or sibling had served and could empathize and understand their experience to some extent. In these cases, significant others were able to anticipate and warn the RM about challenges or provide a compassionate and interested sounding board. Many informants noted that quality time with family whether at home or travelling together helped them to reconnect and reestablish bonds with loved ones. However, proximity to family also created conflict, where parents did not understand or respect RMs need for space or accountability. Mason found that if he was willing to communicate openly and listen, his mother had great advice and helped him to recognize how he was being guided by God. Ryan was also able to influence his family and help them re-engage with spiritual habits.
(e.g., family scripture study). Regarding friends, Liam chose to associate with people who would motivate him to get to the temple or otherwise maintain his standards – “choose to be with people you want to be like” he said. He actively prayed for, sought, and found new friends that helped him feel a much-needed sense of belonging. Jayce wrote dutifully to his friend group while he was on his mission so rather than creating new friendships he was able to maintain existing ones. Ryan explained the benefit of having an RM friend who helped him “break out of [his] bubble” and who provided an example/ encouragement to continue to be “righteous.” He recommended this type of mentoring relationship to other RMs. Jackson and Ava had similar experiences, only their RM friends eventually became their spouses. Carter chose to attend BYU-I where he had ample peer support from RMs who had similar circumstances, desires and standards. Conversely Michael, who was also surrounded by RMs (though to a lesser degree) often felt lonely because the other RMs were just as busy and anxious as he was.

Connecting with other RMs outside of one’s mission or staying connected with converts, missionaries, and leaders from within one’s mission also cultivated an understanding and empathetic support network for RMs. For example, Sophia was simultaneously surprised and pleased that so many of her post-mission friends were people she had knew from her mission. These connections were facilitated through formal/organized events such as mission reunions or through personal contacts via social media or return visits to mission areas. Visiting mission areas, particularly with family helped provide closure and facilitate the transition to a new stage in life. Many missionaries also attended schools where they could room and associate with former
mission colleagues, many of whom had become long-term friends. Johnny, who disaffiliated after his mission, joined an online group/forum for ERMs and was able to find much needed information and validation. In contrast, he felt abandoned by family members and friends who did not take the time to understand or respect his decision to leave the Church. Bella and Harper similarly went to online forums for support after disaffiliating (after being rejected by family and Church members) and were met with compassion, an indication according to commentator that Mormons do not have a monopoly on “generosity of the spirit.”

Theme 4: Informants provided ideas about how to ease into dating and lessen the pressures associated with dating and marriage culture in the Church. Informants acknowledged that there was pressure to date and marry from multiple sources. For most of the informants this pressure aligned with personal goals and desires to start a family, but seemed to inhibit their ability to do so genuinely and confidently. In order to alleviate some of this pressure and make the dating process more enjoyable informants suggested that RMs 1) get actively involved in social relationships that allow for a variety of relationships to emerge (friendship, courtship) and 2) lower the stakes. Some informants recommended attending a singles ward and activities soon after returning. While these events and settings are daunting (socially awkward, uncomfortable, even scary) at first, they seemed to transform into fun environments where individuals can start to feel “normal” again. Attending a young single adult ward also creates more opportunities for meeting people who have the same standards and desires related to dating and marriage and who are in a similar life stage. To lower the stakes, informants recommended you
start by going on dates with friends or people you know. The idea is that these
relationships already existed and in most cases will not turn in to dating relationships, but
can give RMs opportunities to interact with members of the opposite sex in a non-
threatening environment.

Theme 5: When they used the skills they learned as a missionary, informants
felt a greater sense of purpose and direction in their life. Missionaries are constantly
setting goals, making plans, and then assessing the extent to which their goals have been
achieved. Missionaries also learn life skills such as time management and budgeting.
RMs who were able to recognize and transfer their new skills to their post-mission life
seemed to cope and transition with greater success. Moreover, a few of the RMs had
engaged in the Church’s My Plan program and set specific goals in multiple aspects of
their life such as dating, career and education, or spirituality. These individuals found this
structured planning and prayerful preparation very helpful, though few actually referred
to these materials on a regular basis after their mission. Though some people did not like
having to think about home during the last transfer of their mission, they valued that a
time/space was created to do so (especially individuals who were inclined to
procrastinate). Sophia and Mason saw value in reviewing their plans with family and
Church leaders respectively (as recommended in the program) and felt the Plan provided
closure (which many missionaries felt was lacking during the release interview). Some
individuals drastically altered their life course as a result of the My Plan process. Even
Liam, who did not find My Plan personally helpful, acknowledged that the program
would be a good tool for the general RM population. The crucial component of My Plan,
for those that used it, was the personal vision/mission statement. Informants valued the opportunity to define their identity, a potential future outcome of their life, and the guiding principles that would lead them to that identity/outcome. Crafting these statements allowed missionaries to reflect on what they had learned or how they had changed and incorporate those changes/knowledge/values into a statement of purpose that would define and guide their post-mission life.

Discussion

Reentry is best understood, and subsequently addressed, in relation to the missionary cycle, which includes the pre-mission (i.e., recruitment, training, and departure), mission (i.e., fieldwork, exit interviews), and returning stages (i.e., homecoming, release). Missionary agencies, and the Church more specifically, ought to consider how to adjust each of stage of the missionary cycle if they hope to have a realistic and long-term impact on returning missionaries. Furthermore, reentry scholars ought to look beyond traditional explanations of reentry to understand and better serve diverse reentrants.

Implications for the Church

Based on the findings above, there are a number of changes that could be made by Church leaders across the missionary cycle. Here I discuss a few of those changes and attempt to provide examples of specific, reasonable actions that could be taken to address the proposed change:

Pre-mission. Before sending missionaries into the field, parents, Church leaders and missionary trainers may wish to consider the following recommendations.
Reframe the Conversation. Given that most informants acknowledged that they felt subtle and overt pressures to serve, Church leaders may wish to address this issue more explicitly in sermons and training. Specifically, they may wish to establish a discourse that frames missionary service as a desirable choice rather than an obligatory commandment by focusing on the positive outcomes of missionary service for individuals and society rather than on the negative consequences of not serving. If young people in the Church are intrinsically motivated, they are presumably more likely to prepare for and serve a mission, less likely to cause problems in the field, and more likely to remain committed to the Church after their service (as noted in the findings of the present study).

According to Ryan and Deci (2000), self-determined (i.e., intrinsically motivated) individuals need to feel competent, autonomous, and relational all of which can be accomplished via the current structure of the Church. For example, youth can be provided with mastery experiences thru mini-mission activities, role plays, and high impact teaching, speaking, and ministering opportunities. Church leaders can make it a priority to call relatable and reliable youth leaders and encourage them to build relationships of trust with youth outside of the normal touch points (i.e., Sunday meetings and Wednesday night activities). Leaders can also teach parents how to relate and open doors of communication with their children, making conversations about the missionary imperative more of a dialogue than a demand. The Church has provided some materials to this end on certain topics (i.e., talking with teens about sex) but these materials are not widely advertised or utilized. Bishops can meet more regularly with youth and interact
with them in more casual and fun settings to lessen the authoritative perceptions attached to their callings. Bishops and parents can regularly counsel with youth about their goals and respect their paths to achieve them. Families can continue to use family home evenings and impromptu opportunities to share mission stories and boost excitement about missionary service, but ultimately and honestly allow the child to make that decision for themselves without relational repercussions.

**Adjust training time and content in the MTC.** Church leaders may also wish to consider re-extending the timelines of the MTC (i.e., making training time longer) and adding a cultural dimension (beyond language) to the training model. Specifically, training on culture shock (Oberg, 1950), reverse culture shock (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963), and the nuances of a specific destinations (particularly more culturally distant locations) could help minimize the effect of the new culture on the missionary and streamline their transition to the field. Educating convert-missionaries about the nuances and unique language of missionary life may also be an appropriate addition. This particular subset of missionaries (i.e., recent convert-missionaries) ought to be given additional attention and targeted training. In essence, they experience both ethnic and religious cultural shocks and should, therefore, be prepared for both.

**Mission.** Mission leaders have a number of opportunities to influence and prepare missionaries for reentry throughout their service. A few specific ideas include:

**Ensure that missionaries feel their service is meaningful.** While missionaries are instrumental to God’s work, their designation instruments in his hands often inadvertently objectifies them in a way that minimizes their needs and desires. Many missionaries
choose to serve hoping to make an impact on the world through their service. Often their expectations of missionary service (miraculous conversions day in and day out, strangers knocking on their door looking for the Gospel, helping individuals recover from disasters in their lives) do not match reality (tracting and “pushing religion” day in and day out with limited success), which may result in discouragement, disillusionment, and despair.

Regularly counselling with missionaries about their goals and desires, and helping them identify actionable ways to accomplish those desires, may help them to feel more successful in their work. Furthermore, as Mission Presidents counsel with missionaries, they may wish to help them reflect on and identify ways in which they have made meaningful contributions via their mission. That is, missionaries should constantly be asked to reflect on and record ways in which they have personally grown or developed or ways in which they have helped a companion, investigator, or ward/community member to do so. As one more actionable example, some missions in the Church are currently implementing a “creative finding” strategy that allows missionaries to inventory their strengths (i.e., athletic, musically inclined, or bilingual) and use those strengths to find people to teach, rather than just tracting or relying solely on members to do find people. These types of approaches increase autonomy and may help missionaries to connect their efforts to the outcomes they observe or hope to observe.

As an additional note, informants expressed that the missionary name tag was a symbol of their title and status such that removal of the tag symbolized a loss of authority, power, and meaning. Minimizing the importance of the tag (or making the tag an optional part of missionary attire) may help missionaries to focus on intangible
sources of spiritual power in their lives (i.e., the Atonement, the Holy Ghost). These intangibles are things they can carry with them after their missions are complete.

*Preparing significant others, a systems approach.* While missionaries are serving, little is being done to prepare their families or wards for their return. Inevitably, missionaries experience anxiety, concern, and distress as they anticipate the prospect of integrating their changed selves into their families and wards. For example, the ‘you’ve changed, I’ve changed’ mantra documented in the broader reentry scholarship was reflected in Owen and other’s perspectives, as was the fear of regressing to a prior, often undesirable state during reentry (Allison et al., 2014, Lean, 2016). Their remarks indicate, to some extent, that while the mission can be a liminal space, the post-mission period can also be liminal in that it becomes an in-between, exploratory space with ill-defined boundaries (Turner, 1984). Without the proper support this liminal space could lead to regression rather than transformation. Preparatory Sunday meetings that coincide with a returning missionary’s arrival focused on educating members about the challenges of reentry and the needs of reentrants could reduce some of the high expectations placed on missionaries and relational friction between missionaries and significant others.

Local leaders could make identity and role negotiation a central topic of the release interview and hold follow up meetings with the entire family to help them communicate and navigate the challenges of integrating a changed family member backed into a changed family system (or refer them to LDS family services for expert counselling in this area). Helping families think about what traditions, practices, and routines are most important to individuals and trying to maintain some of those rituals or
create new rituals together could also help establish relational cohesion and continuity as missionaries reach out for familiar and safe buoys during the reentry process. Involving family members in more aspects of the release and reporting process can also establish mutual understanding about the mission experience and why it was meaningful. Preparing a printed manual that helps families prepare for reentry could validate the concerns and needs of significant others, while clarifying their role in supporting returning missionaries. Essentially, while missionaries are serving their missions, parents and family can be working on tasks that help them engage in missionary work at home and cultivate a more welcoming environment for the returning missionary.

*Structuring the time in the mission home.* Informants seemed to suggest that while their exit interviews were sometimes poignant and the opportunity to attend the temple and reminisce in the mission home was nice, the last few days in the mission lacked clear structure and a cohesive narrative. Currently mission presidents are given some liberty regarding how these final days could look which has resulted in variable experiences, with negligible benefits. A more concrete list of topics and format for presenting them might add value to this crucial period in the missionary’s journey. For example, topics in the exit interview, final group meeting, etc. could all be aligned (albeit adapted to individual needs) to provide a consistent narrative about what can be expected and how one should be prepare for the next steps in life. This time should focus not just on reflection and spiritual maintenance but also on practical matters that will need to be addressed upon return. This may also be an appropriate time to let individuals share their concerns and worries about reentry and provide counsel specific to those concerns.
Additionally, mission presidents should be encouraged to stick to the script and avoid “beating a dead horse.” In other words, mission presidents should not designate missions as honorable or dishonorable and should not put timelines on marriage (both of which are explicitly stated in their training material). Moreover, missionaries know that the family is important and that marriage is the next step in their lives and already experience anxiety about this. Rather than stressing this topic again, acknowledge the elephant in the room and consider providing practical tips for beginning the process of dating and courtship for those who are ready to do so.

*Talk about the tough topics.* Missionaries are constantly confronted with Anti-Mormon arguments and materials and yet they are provided with little training regarding how to handle these arguments or how to critically assess the reasoning provided by their ‘opponents.’ Mission leaders could more regularly and thoroughly identify common arguments and their sources, provide clarity on these issues and teach missionaries how to respond when confronted with ideas that challenge their assumptions and beliefs. In doing so, this sends the message that the Church has nothing to hide, that asking questions is appropriate in the Church, and that there are reasonable responses or arguments to many of the claims made by Anti-Mormon authors and arguers. The Church has already published a number of documents on these tough topics in an effort to be more transparent and help guide the narrative about these issues. The next step would be to engage in intentional dialogues with young members of the Church (before, during, and after their missions) to tackle these issues head on and cultivate a Church of critical thinker-leaders.
**Post-mission.** After missionaries return, it is vital that support continue and focus on leveraging strengths and validating struggles. Ideas for maximizing reentry support include the following:

**Adopt a human development mindset.** Bishops are primarily responsible for the youth of the Church and typically expend great efforts preparing individuals to serve missions, sometimes pushing them to serve even if unprepared. In contrast, because missionaries often mature in multiple life domains, they are typically viewed as adults even though in many ways they have postponed some of the common tasks of adolescence and have a great deal of developmental work yet to do. If Bishops were to view returning missionaries as “youth” who are still under their jurisdiction and in need of their care, than perhaps these individuals would receive a greater share of ward attention and resources instead of a hefty load of responsibilities. Part of this developmental mindset would include acknowledgement that returning missionaries are still shaping their identities and commitments, learning how to live independently, and exploring a variety of options that will affect their future careers and relationships. This mindset also acknowledges that not all people or missionaries are the same or had the same experience and attitude as missionaries. For every excited, obedient missionary there is likely to be a disillusioned, confused, lazy, or incompetent one. Our high expectations of all returning missionaries often leaves those with need under-resourced and under-supported.

**Facilitate continued place-making.** Given the attachments that missionaries develop to the culture and people of the places they served, Church leaders may (a) wish
to facilitate opportunities for missionaries to either share or continue to explore their mission cultures and relationships, or (b) help missionaries find resources that will help them maintain contact with former mission contacts and develop new connections with other returning missionaries who may understand their plight. This could be facilitated through show and tell style events, international fairs, local and regional reunions, service and outreach to members of the local community who have migrated from mission areas, or scholarshipping missionaries to Utah based mission reunions. The Church could also offer free online independent study courses on the history, language, culture, and employment opportunities associated with mission places via one or all of its Brigham Young University campuses. As an additional note, returning missionaries may live in regions where the Church is less developed or congregations are more dispersed. In order to find or connect to a community of returning missionaries that understands their needs, they may need to look to outside of their geographic surroundings. The Church could more actively facilitate social networking online via a Facebook page or group or via one of its many emerging websites. In addition to providing resources, this page/site could also host discussions, include messaging functions, and create an atmosphere for honest exploration of doubts/struggles to take place, etc.

*Provide a post-mission planner.* Though iterations of a post-mission planner exist and are sold online or in select book stores, the Church may wish to consider developing a planner to returning missionaries much like they do with missionaries that includes new “indicators” of post-mission success. This planner would focus on goals in specific categories and ideas for daily tasks or a daily schedule to accomplish those goals.
While spiritual goals would be an obvious inclusion, goals related to education, career, international involvement, or service in the ward and community might also be considered. Lists of topics to study or meaningful tasks that allow missionaries to use their skills could be included as references in the back of the planner (i.e., volunteering, teaching, studying, etc.). One of the goals of this planner would be to help missionaries conduct an inventory of and generalize their newly acquired skills to other life domains. Though missionaries are often encouraged to take career inventories, they are less frequently assisted in the process of identifying spiritual attributes, practical skills, and leadership acumen developed as missionaries. Developing or adapting a standardized assessment would make this a low resource, easy to implement tool to use during reentry.

**Invest in your investment.** A great deal of attention and training is given during the departure stage than the reentry stage of the missionary cycle. Moreover, while the departure stage is filled with ceremony, and even sacredness, the return is somewhat anticlimactic. Pre-departure, youth in the Church receive years of training in the doctrines of the Church and all missionaries received training in one of 17 training centers throughout the world. Before departing, missionaries participate in preparatory, symbolic ordinances, where they are given knowledge, authority, and power to do God’s work. Mission calls are opened with excitement and farewell parties are loud and proud. Yet homecomings are often quiet, quick, and soon forgotten. Adding a similar pattern of training, ceremony, and significance to the return could make this stage more meaningful and draw attention and resources to the missionaries who need them. Regarding the need for pomp and circumstance, Turner (1987) remarked that ritual or rites are
transformative, ceremony is confirmative. Markstrom and Iborra (2003) similarly spoke
to the importance of ceremony in rites of passage indicating that ceremonies “convey
dramatization…leave a strong impression of importance” and confirm the move from one
status to another. Without this ceremonial confirmation, missionaries struggled to feel
closure and move on. Regarding training, one might consider having returning
missionaries attend a daily seminary in the morning like they did as youth (rather than a
singular institute class) or establish study groups that meet at times convenient for the
group. Single adult wards seemed to provide more of a structure for these types of
activities but at the same time, became a place to fall through the cracks. In that regard,
Bishops in singles wards should make it a priority to know and regularly meet with every
member of their congregation on a regular basis. Bishops should also quickly refer
missionaries to mental health counsellors or other relevant resources/trained
professionals, as needed, during these regular follow up meetings.

Avoid overworking missionaries. Former President of the Church Gordon B.
Hinckley taught that new members of the Church need three things to remain committed
and active: a friend, a calling, and nourishment of the good word of God. This principle
has been applied to returning missionaries as well who often have plenty of fans but few
friends, are overworked, and feel as if they are undernourished. As ward leaders extend
callings they should be mindful that other ward and stake leaders may assign
responsibilities to RMs as well (e.g., speaking assignments, impromptu teaching
opportunities) and should coordinate and communicate with other leaders to ensure
missionaries are not overworked and subsequently burnt out. Callings should be
meaningful and extend the skills learned from the mission without duplicating the mission (for which missionaries have ‘served their time’).

**Implications for Scholarship**

In many ways, the reentry opportunities and challenges encountered by returning missionaries in the present study were comparable to those experienced by other reentrants and are well-documented in reentry scholarship. For example, reports of disillusionment, cultural distance, and changed cultural values align with existing theories of cross cultural adaptation and the symptoms of reverse cultural shock; Gaw, 2000; Dettweiler et al., 2016). As another example, many of the stumbling blocks encountered by returning missionaries were the direct result of the expectation-reality gap identified in the reentry literature (Mooradian, 2004). In other words, missionaries, like other reentrants incorrectly anticipated that reentry would be a straightforward process or a reconnection with the familiar, when in reality they returned feeling like strangers in a strange land. Beyond traditional understandings of reentry these findings also draw attention to four important aspects of reentry that have previously been understudied or unsupported by existing theory. These four areas include: (1) the importance of people and place attachments, (2) the therapeutic function of critical reflection, (3) the challenges of personal transformation and social confirmation, and (4) the developmental importance of meaning making. These areas overlaps with theory and literature from other disciplines to provide a more holistic understanding of reentry (particularly in the context of returning missionaries in the Church) and are discussed hereafter.
The Importance of Place. As noted in the findings above, many missionaries developed strong connections with and affections for the people and places they interacted with during their missionary service. In the travel and tourism literature this phenomenon is commonly referred to as destination or place attachment, an “emotional, cognitive, and functional bond an individual has with a place” (Chubchuwong & Speece, 2016, p. 349). Morgan (2010) noted that when a “person lives in a particular locale over an extended period, that person will often develop feelings of affection for, and a sense of belonging, or being of that place, so that the places becomes ‘one anchor of his or her identity’ (p. 12). In other words, place attachments reflect how individuals (1) identify with and (2) depend on places, as well as the (3) affective attributions they ascribe to those places (Halpenny, 2010; Proshansky, 1978). Informants in the present study touched on all three components of place attachment (i.e., identity, dependency, and affect) in expressing how much they “loved,” “missed,” desired to return to, and “found themselves” during their missions.

Low (1992) developed a typology of cultural place attachment and described types or processes (e.g., genealogical, cosmological) that help explain the symbolic ties missionaries developed with their missions. For example, he posited that living somewhere for an extended period of time (genealogical) or engaging in religious practices in a place (cosmological) tie people to a place, both of which were true for missionaries in the present study. Morgan (2010) further postulated that attachments to significant places may parallel the process of attachment to important people in our lives. In this light, places adopt a stabilizing function and become a refuge (or a reprieve from
anxiety and distress in one’s present life) much like a parent or caregiver (see also Low & Altman, 1992; Scannell & Gifford, 2014).

From Morgan’s (2010) perspective returning to one’s mission, or at least reuniting with mission colleagues, may also coincide with RMs’ self-care practices, or desires to temporarily alleviate reentry distress by remaining connected to a secure place – their mission. This appeared to be true in the present study. Though places are comprised of both social and physical dimensions (Lewicka, 2011), the social or people aspect of place attachment is often overlooked in the literature (Chubchuwong & Speece, 2016). Chubchuwong and Speece (2016) challenged this neglect and argued that attachments to places are strengthened over time as relationships are deepened rather than in response to changes in the landscape. This idea may further explain the missionary motivation to reunite with former mission associates via mission reunions. This phenomenon (i.e., place attachment tied to return intentions) is well-documented in the travel and tourism literature (Chubchuwong & Speece, 2016).

**The Therapeutic Function of Critical Reflection.** Missionaries indicated that they temporarily or perpetually struggled to communicate with almost anyone who had not recently returned from a mission and were, therefore, incapable of understanding or appreciating their experience. They craved and actively pursued outlets of empathy, where they could find understanding, belonging, even healing. Dean (2016) conducted a needs assessment of 107 Central Palm International University students who had traveled through the university’s Education Abroad office and similarly found that the need to reflect, unpack, and translate the skills and experiences acquired abroad into a career was
a foremost concern. These findings are unsurprising given the extant literature detailing reentrants’ need to feel heard, have their experiences validated, and feel like they have a supportive safety net of family and friends (Gaw, 2000; Walling et al. 2006). In response, Dean (2016) proposed a program called Reflect and Connect. The program utilized online journaling, student driven dialogue, and a number of writing assignments to debrief the experience and connect reentrants with peers who had similar experiences.

According to Hutchison (2017) reflecting and debriefing in the ways described above provide opportunities for reentrants to become self-aware, prepare, and unpack their experiences. Thus, it is no wonder that revisiting mission experiences and retelling mission stories with people who ‘got it’ likely served a therapeutic function for those who were able (LaBrack, 2010). First, this may be true given that place attachments are strengthened as a result of time spent reflecting about a place (often in lieu of engagement with one’s present location and life; Morgan, 2010). Second, distinct forms of reflection (e.g., nostalgia, reminiscence), have been identified as balms to the grief and loss associated with reentry and separation from people and places. Nostalgia has been described as “a sentimental longing or affection for the past” (Baldwin, Biernat, & Landau, 2014, p. 1); however, the term’s meaning and use have evolved across time, disciplines, and contexts (Batcho, 2013). Nostalgia was coined in the late 1600s as a term to describe the mental and physiological symptoms associated with a deep homesickness and is literally derived from the Greek Nostos and Algos which reflect “a sad mood originating with a desire to return to one’s native land” (Hofer, 1934). That said, the idea of nostalgia is much older and has been observed in some of the civilized world’s earliest
texts; e.g. the Christian Bible and Homer’s Odyssey (Baldwin et al., 2014). Since the first appearance of the term, nostalgia has shifted from a pathological concept that emphasizes bitter feelings to more bittersweet and positive conceptualizations; however, contemporary nostalgia scholars, particularly in the field of psychology, have sought to distinguish nostalgia’s sometimes bitter precursors (e.g., loss, homesickness) from its sweeter outcomes (e.g., fond reflection, pleasant pining) (Sedikides et al., 2009). This line of work has explored the contribution of nostalgia as a buffer, coping strategy, and means of establishing optimism, self-continuity, self-esteem, collective identity, and well-being (Routledge et al., 2011; Sedikides, Wildschut, Gaertner, Routledge, & Arndt, 2008; Vess, Arndt, Routledge, Sedikides, & Wildschut, 2012; Zhou, Sedikides, Wildschut, & Gao, 2008).

Recently, this line of work has also drawn attention to the links between positive nostalgia, cross-cultural adaptation, and reentry (Sedikides et al., 2009; Zhou et al., 2014). For example, Sedikides et al. (2009) described the economic (e.g., unemployment, poverty), cultural (e.g., unfamiliar language, policies, and customs), and social (e.g., prejudice, discrimination) stressors associated with immigrant acculturation and its psychological effects: negative affectivity, anxiety, depression, loneliness, and uncertainty. They argue that nostalgic reflection (typically oriented toward family, special occasions, personally meaningful artifacts) may act as a reoccurring psychological escape from the negative realities and emotions of the present. They further contend, citing their prior empirical work, nostalgia can contribute to “successful integration] by promoting psychological health and bolstering interpersonal adequacy [good interpersonal
relationships, cultural learning, and the reception of social support]” (p. 368). The authors warn, however, that nostalgia should be used in moderation and in many ways is viewed as a symptomatic treatment rather than a panacea. In a more recent study, Zhou et al. (2014) explored the experiences of 700 repatriated international teachers and found that “feeling nostalgic about a host culture (i.e., hostalgia) contributes to repatriation success” (p. 1). Hostalgia may replace feelings of loss for the host country and longing for host customs and culture by temporarily, cognitively and emotionally transplanting the individual to that place or time.

Reminiscence in contrast is described as “more than simply recalling the past” (Hsieh & Wang, 2003, p. 336), instead “it is a structured process of systematically reflecting on one’s life” (Brady, 1999, p. 179) and has traditionally been used as a therapy with geriatric populations to address issues associated with aging (e.g., dementia, depression, and well-being). Reminiscence therapy is useful because it can provide support in four areas that may be relevant to RMs: “(1) identity-forming and self-continuity; enhancing meaning in life and coherence; preserving a sense of mastery; and promoting acceptance and reconciliation” (Bohlmeijer, Roemer, Cuijpers, & Smit, 2007, p. 291). Appropriate, guided reminiscence might help Sophia, for example, merge her two seemingly disparate identities (e.g., Sophia v. Sister Rodriguez) or help her visualize how elements of her missionary persona fit outside of the mission context. Reminiscence might help missionaries who lack purpose to identify and transfer skills and attributes from their mission to their post-mission life and use those skills to more actively create a future for themselves. Finally, reminiscence therapy could help informants like Grayson
to reflect in a healthy way (that leads to acceptance and transcendence over current challenges) rather than in a way that leads to rumination, pining, and paralysis.

As RMs sought to find belonging, they often looked to online communities. While online platforms play an important role in helping facilitate and maintain relationships (Chung & Buhalis, 2009), Chung and Chung (2017) confirmed that relationships are easier to maintain and strengthen when there are opportunities for offline, face-to-face interaction and recommended that supporting organizations coordinate such events. However, barriers such as geographical distance and economic status make these types of in-person interactions unrealistic. In these cases, online platforms have the potential to facilitate social support and sense of community (Loomis & Friesen, 2011). However, Duffy (2017) documented the role of technology in facilitating a type of escapism, what he called “absent presence” (p. 94; originally coined in Gergen, 2002). He argued that individuals leverage technology to stay connected with their missions but at the expense of cultivating relationships or seeking help from people in their immediate social circle.

**Personal Transformation and Social Confirmation.** The transformative potential of travel described in the findings of the present study is well documented (see Lean, 2016 for an extensive review of the topic) and typically requires and results from “bodily relocation” or literal/physical separation from familiar roles, routines, and relationships. As noted, many RMs indicated that the mission transformed their religious and social identities. These links between travel and identity, are well-established in the tourism literature (see Deforges, 2000; Oakes, 2006) and suggest that in encountering the ‘Other’ one better comes to understand or find him/herself. Kong (2004) similarly posited
that religious travelers both transform and are transformed by the landscapes they come in contact with and that these landscapes may “play a role in constructing and maintaining the boundaries that sustain religious identities and communities” or reproducing identities/communities (p. 373). In Braxton and Owen’s experiences, the mission allowed them to first identify the boundary, then cross it, thus leaving or at least distancing themselves from their post-mission religious community.

Boyd (2013) provided a more in depth description of the process of disaffiliation in the Church. In her phenomenological study of five disaffiliated members’ experiences she identified the process of disaffiliation as being marked by three stages including an “exploration of belief systems, pressure to conform to LDS standards, and a decision to leave the Church” and in most cases abandon organized ‘religion’ altogether (p. 24). The process resulted in both positive (e.g., feeling of being true to oneself and to ‘truth’ generally) and negative consequences (e.g., relationship strain). Bahr and Albrecht (1989) similarly documented that the process of disaffiliation may include elements intellectual exploration/deviation and pressure or “push” from Church members but they added family breakups as an additional factor influencing disaffiliation (especially given the important role and eternal nature of families in the Church). In support of these studies, the mission seemed to function as a space for missionaries in the present study to intellectually explore, question, doubt, and in some cases deviate from core beliefs. And as noted by Boyd, this was often a bittersweet experience given a host of factors, including positive childhood memories in the Church.
Scharp and Beck (2017) collected exit narratives of 150 former Mormons from the website postmormon.org. From the narratives she identifies five Mormon identities that reflected reasons for leaving the Church, which include: “(1) disenfranchised victim, (2) redeemed spiritualist, (3) the liberated self, (4) (wo)men of science, and (5) Mormon in name only” (p. 139). Harper represents the women of science in that she, with the help of roommates sought evidence sufficient to justify her doubts and subsequent exit from the Church. Bella’s embrace of an alternative lifestyle aligns well with the identity of the liberated self while Braxton’s experience reflects that of Mormon’s in name only who often remain in the Church in order to maintain relationships with significant others.

Social comparisons are a normal part of the process of identity development and assist individuals in evaluating themselves (e.g., their social standing, abilities, success) in relation to others (Gyberg & Frisén, 2017). However, social comparisons have also been known to produce, as was the case in Sophia’s experience, “low self-esteem” and “uncertainty about the self” (Gyberg & Frisén, 2017, p. 242). While missionaries continue to engage in social comparisons in the field, they also postpone adult commitments across multiple identity domains (e.g., romantic relationships, occupations, and education). Thus, when they return, they theoretically enter a period of moratorium and resume the process of identity exploration and social comparison in those domains. Given that the Church has clearly defined gendered roles and strongly encourages the pursuit of education, gainful employment, and eternal marriage, these social comparisons are likely to either motivate or discourage RMs who seek to measure up.
Gerber, Wheeler, and Suls (2017) added that social comparisons are both directional and contextual. Regarding direction, individuals often compare themselves to people or standards that are either “upward” (i.e., those they typically perceive as better than themselves) or “downward” (i.e., those they typically perceive as worse than themselves; see also Buunk & Dijkstra, 2017). In Sophia’s case, she compared herself to someone who returned more recently (presumably downward), and felt discouraged because the comparison missionary had achieved normative goals (e.g., marriage, graduation) in a shorter amount of time than she had. Regarding context, environmental factors including events or interactions can influence the direction and impact of comparisons. Sophia may not have made the social comparison as readily if her mission president had not drawn attention to her marital status. His question about her dating status brought her discouragement in this area to the surface and made her apparent dating failures seem starker in contrast to the recently RMs who were in committed relationships.

Interestingly the Church’s doctrine discourages comparison with other people, and instead encourages members to anchor their worth to appraisals from God. However, this alternative stance can elicit a confusingly dichotomous expectation that may have similarly discouraging results. For instance, LDS scripture encourages members to “be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in Heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48) and describes members as having divine worth and potential (D&C 18:10) on one hand (a seemingly unobtainable upward comparison), while simultaneously describing individuals as “less than the dust of the earth” and “eternally indebted to God” (Mosiah
In the book, The Triple Package, Chua and Rubenfeld (2014) describe this paradox as an inferiority (insecurity) - superiority complex but frames the complex as a driver of Church members’ secular success. According to Chua and Rubenfeld Church members are ever striving (i.e., driven) in an effort to their overcome their insecurity and pursue the lofty goal of perfection, and also persistent in their failure (i.e., resilient), relying on the belief that they are valued and supported by God.

Individuals constantly evaluate their environment and identify relatable figures with whom they can compare their opinions, emotions, and behaviors in either lateral or upward/downward orientations (Suls & Wheeler, 2013). This information is used to either assimilate (detect similarities) or contrast (identify differences) in order to self-evaluate and/or self-enhance. Some individuals are more likely to make comparisons based on situational or intrapersonal factors (Stets & Burke, 2014). For example, people who more regularly think about themselves and in negative ways are more likely to make social comparisons and in ways that are detrimental, which seemed to be the case for Liam and Sophia.

Fear of rejection is tied to social comparisons and confirmation and was noted as an important part of the mission and reentry processes. Chou (2013) noted that rejection plays a role before, during, and after one’s mission. For example, anticipated social rejection motivated individuals in his study to serve a mission, while actual social rejection led in-field and RMs to decrease their religious behavior and commitment. Interestingly, rejection in the field, particularly from out-group members, varied as a product of respondents assigned mission location and cultivated more acceptance by the
in-group. Rejection was also experienced differently by men and women in the study, such that men felt/feared rejection in connection with failure to conform to normative expectations and women felt/feared rejection tied to interpersonal/relationship difficulties. While Chou’s (2013) general assumptions regarding rejection were supported by the present study, the gendered experience was not fully supported. That is, men and women were equally likely to report feeling rejected via out-group refusals to accept the Gospel or in-group relationship problems.

Beyond social comparison and rejection, individuals experienced social conflict with significant others during and after their mission. For example, Sophia and others experienced challenges with their mission companions. Parry (1994) explored the nature of these companionships in more depth via a small sample of Canadian university students (n = 12) who had recently returned from their missions. His students confirmed that companionship relationships were in fact filled with tension and conflict, in part, because: (1) they diverged from the private/individualistic lifestyles most missionaries were accustomed to, (2) they were not freely chosen, and (3) they forced individuals from different backgrounds to live in close and constant proximity. Moreover, Mission Presidents reportedly pair missionaries that “do” with missionaries that “don’t” in hopes that the doers would motivate the missionaries that were lazy, disobedient, or otherwise ineffective to get out and work. These were the “babysitters” described by Carter in the present study. Because missionary companions are assigned without missionary assent, and because unity in companionships is essential to missionary success, most missionaries had to figure out how to be patient, tolerant, and understanding and develop
the ability to compromise and overcome differences. In some ways this happens organically but this reconciliation also occurs as a product of scheduled companionship inventories – time set apart for companions to resolve interpersonal issues that may prevent them from being successful in their work.

In that regard, the companionship functioned as a socialization agent, preparing missionaries for marriage and future Church service where these skills would be required. In many missions the relationships between companions were so strong that they became almost familial. For example, trainers were called fathers, greenies (i.e., missionaries who are new to the field) were called sons and the Mission President and his wife were viewed as the resident Patriarch/Matriarch. Moreover, missionaries in Parry’s (1994) sample viewed the missionary companionship as the strongest relationship developed during the mission such that the companion became “like part of [the] body” (p. 183).

Griffin (2012) described the conflicts encountered in both mission and familial relationships as “dialectical tensions experienced by relational partners” (p. 152) and explained that within relationships individuals are confronted by the following dichotomies: connection v. autonomy, certainty v. uncertainty, and openness v. closedness. As an example, tension was created between Ava and her mother because Ava was seeking autonomy and separateness while her mother was interested in being connected. As another example, Grayson had a need for closedness while his parents were seeking to open doors of communication.

**Meaning Making.** While in the field, missionaries felt like they were engaged in an important work with a clear direction and purpose. Church leaders and scholars have
reinforced the importance of creating and maintaining a shared vision or cause, as these processes relate to establishing stability and steerage in life, building unity, and achieving personal and institutional goals (Malphurs, 2015; Tirri & Quinn, 2010; Thompson, 2015; Wirthlin, 2008). Moreover, human development scholars have established links between the identity needs of emerging adults and whether or not they feel their lives have meaning or purpose (Damon, 2009).

After returning, missionaries no longer felt like they had a meaningful or clearly defined purpose and vision for their lives, and subsequently felt alienated from and in their missions, families, wards, and communities. Stemming from the philosophies of Marx, Heidegger, and Kierkegaard, alienation refers to one’s feeling detached, separated from, or inauthentic in his/ her work, relationships, meaning/purpose, and the world in which he/ she lives (Jaeggi & Neuhouser, 2014). Alienation produces feelings of rootlessness or homelessness, isolation, and powerlessness; i.e., one is no longer the master of his/ her own fate (Jaeggi & Neuhouser, 2014).

Many missionaries touted religiosity (i.e., engagement in daily disciplines) as a balm to this animosity (i.e., alienation from their purpose); however, maintaining their religiosity was not easy. Kimber (2012b) similarly noted that missionaries struggle to maintain daily disciplines; however, he provided additional evidence that engagement in these daily disciplines could reduce reentry distress (Kimber 2012a/ 2012b). In contrast to the challenges identified in the present study, Chou (2013) and Madsen (1977) both found that RMs in their respective studies experienced greater post-mission religiosity. This disparity in findings may be related to differences in measurement (i.e., different
operationalizations of religiosity). For example, in the present study, religiosity was tied to both tangible, observable behaviors (e.g., daily study and prayer) and intangibles (e.g., beliefs commitment, or personal relationship with God). Whereas other studies only used objective measures (i.e., meeting attendance) and different ones at that. As an alternative explanation, lack of religious behaviors reported in the present study may also be tied to evolving internal metrics. For instance, reentrants may, in reality, be more religious than they were prior to their mission but continue to use the mission as a reference point and standard that is difficult to measure up to. In that case, their post-mission religiosity may be significantly higher than their pre-mission religiosity, but seems to pale in comparison to what they practiced as missionaries. As another example, missionaries in the present study may participate in consistent religious practice but only do so to avoid social rejection or feelings of shame and guilt (i.e., I should know or do better since I’ve served a mission). Thus, they may feel that their religiosity is not as authentic/meaningful and therefore underreport.

**Limitations**

Because this study investigated a single case with a small and somewhat homogenous sample size, the generalizability of these findings is somewhat limited. That said, in my personal experience as returned missionary, in my observations as a leader in the Church, and in light of prior research, sermons, and supporting documents this case seems fairly typical or representative of reentry for missionaries living in the United States (Kennedy, 1979). Nevertheless, additional cases in different regions of the country or the world would strengthen the arguments and findings of this case and provide
Church leaders and reentry scholars with a clear picture of the process of reentry in the Church.

In addition to reflexive memoing; thick description of individual and aggregate accounts using informant language and quotations where possible, I also conducted a series of checks with informants and external reviewers to ensure that the themes reported in the present study accurately represented the views and experiences of each informant. For example, each informant was provided with a copy of their interview transcript, an individual summary narrative, and the aggregate themes of the group. While some small points of clarity and additional information was provided during these checks, all informants agreed that the stories and themes accurately reflected their experience. Data were also triangulated and confirmed to some extent by additional stories and experiences identified (though not included here in full) during the social media monitoring process.

Of the sixteen informants that were interviewed, and four alternative explanations acquired from social media, only one interview felt disingenuous in that the individual seemed to be inflating his perceptions of himself and his experience. That said, his attitude seemed to be consistent across contexts and I suspect his response would have been similar with any number of researchers. Because his self-aggrandizing behavior may have been a coping mechanism or possibly a misinterpretation on my part, his data was retained in the study.
Conclusion

In sum, reentry is a bittersweet experience where returning travelers experience the joy of reuniting with family and the familiar on one hand, and report feeling like ‘strangers in a strange land’ on the other. To date, reentry scholars have neglected to fully capture the nuanced reentry experiences of returning missionaries, instead focusing on the reentry of corporate expatriates, deployed military personnel, students, and other similar groups. This study addressed this research gap by documenting the experiences and process of reentry across the missionary lifecycle. In addition to providing recommendations for how to better serve returning missionaries, this study identified theoretical perspectives that add to our understanding of reentry and sources of reentry distress.
CHAPTER 4
RETURN WITH HONOR: THE ROLE OF DISCOURSE IN THE REENTRY EXPERIENCES OF RETURNING MISSIONARIES

Abstract

The purpose of this research was to identify and investigate reentry discourses and their impact on returned missionaries in a southeastern stake of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Interviews (n = 16) conducted with key informants and data from a variety of sources (i.e., Church sermons and handbooks, social media, popular press articles, and academic scholarship) were analyzed to better understand and contextualize returning missionaries discursive practices. Main ideas constructed from the discourse were organized according to Robert Gee’s seven building tasks and discussed in relation to how power (or lack thereof) is distributed and manifest during reentry. Discourses predominately emphasized the imperative to serve a mission, dating and marriage as the next ‘horizon’, symbols of a missionary’s release, identity-first language, and conceptualizations of the ‘perfect’ RM. Moreover, power in the Church was complex and dynamic, with leaders, the collective membership of the Church, informants, and society actively shaping the language and social practices of reentry in the Church. This research increases understanding of reentry, religious discourse, and the links between the two, and may open the door for new avenues of research in all of the aforementioned areas.

Keywords: Missionaries, reentry, discourse, power, critical discourse analysis
Introduction

The proselytizing mission is an important rite of passage in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and functions as a socialization agent and marker of social and spiritual adulthood (Nelson, 2003; Shepherd & Shepherd, 1998). Missionaries in the Church often feel compelled to serve and to complete their mission in its entirety, and hope to ‘return with honor’ at their mission’s end. Moreover, participation in this rite may result in the acquisition of a new status in the Church, which typically leads to improved dating prospects, increased leadership opportunities, and greater social acceptance (Chou, 2013). Motivations, experiences, identities, and outcomes tied to missionary work and reentry in the Church are likely influenced by discourses and cultural scripts, perpetuated via hierarchical, hegemonic, and ideological forces. However, these discourses and scripts, their sources, and impact have largely gone unexamined and unquestioned.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) – simply described as “the study of language in use” and its relation to power – may reveal the social and institutional factors (i.e., discourses) that influence returning missionaries’ beliefs and behavior (Gee, 2010, p. 8).

Thus, the purpose of this research was to identify reentry discourses in the Church and their origins, and explore how these discourse influenced the experiences of returning missionaries. The scope, success, and distinctiveness of the Church’s missionary program, coupled with the hierarchical order, rapid growth, and global expansion of the Church, provide a premier setting in which to study discourses and their impact (Chou, 2013).
Literature Review

In the Church of Jesus Christ, the mission is a significant rite of passage. By participating in this rite, missionaries are endowed with a new status and entitled to the social and spiritual rights, powers, and privileges associated with that status (e.g., leadership opportunities, social acceptance, and increased marriageability). Shepherd and Shepherd (1998), considering the Church’s perspective, detailed the importance of serving in the process of socializing individuals into roles as lifelong members of the Church and as volunteers in its lay ministry. This process is as systematic as it is comprehensive, meaning the process begins early and requires that expectations and discourses be continually and consistently reinforced by peers, parents, members, and leaders. No surprise then, that hymns such as “I hope they call me on a mission,” “I want to be a missionary now;” and “We’ll bring the world his truth” are sung on a regular basis in primary classes, or that children with miniature name tags that read “future missionary” can, at some time or another, be seen walking the halls of most meetinghouses of the Church. The topic of missionary work is regularly discussed as part of the Church’s Sunday school curriculum, handbooks of instructions for leaders, youth programs (especially for young men in the Church), periodicals, and sermons. Moreover, Mormon memes position missionaries as heroes, executing an important, even requisite part of their life journey, and missionary stories are orated as epics akin to the Odyssey. When all is said and done, the mission is regarded as a commandment akin to tithing in Church (though not required for salvation, according to the Church’s doctrine; Kimball, 1981). In summary, while it the mission is often described as personally meaningful, it is
also institutionally meaningful and therefore protected and perpetuated via institutional process (i.e., hierarchy, hegemony, and ideology).

**Hierarchy, Hegemony, Ideology, & Discourses of Power**

Missions, and other religious rites, are embedded in religious institutions – which are typically hierarchical, hegemonic, and ideological – and thus related to discourses of power in institutions. Karlberg (2005) defined hierarchy and provided an atypical perspective about the role of hierarchy in society:

In a social or organizational context, *hierarchy* refers to unequally structured power relations. Not surprisingly, many people equate hierarchy with oppression. But this equation...conflates power inequality with adversarial power relations. In the context of mutualistic power relations, hierarchy can be a valuable organizing principle. When any group of equal people is too large to effectively engage every member in every decision-making process, the group may benefit from delegating certain decision-making powers to smaller sub-groups. This consensually agreed upon inequality – or hierarchy – can empower a group to accomplish things it could otherwise not accomplish. (p. 11)

Embedded in this lengthy quotation are the following ideas: (a) a characterization of hierarchy as “unequally structured power relations” in an organization, and (b) juxtaposed views about whether or not hierarchies are inherently mutualistic or adversarial, ‘good’ (i.e., liberating) or ‘bad’ (i.e., oppressive). The normative view in society tends to suggest that hierarchies are inherently oppressive—one entity dominates and exercises greater power over another entity that has little or no power. Conversely, Karlberg’s (2005) view is that hierarchy is liberating, particularly in larger organizations where individuals may willingly give up decision-making power in order engage in other more intrinsically or collectively meaningful tasks. In other words, in educational, political, or religious organizations “consensually agreed upon inequality – or hierarchy” is both acceptable and desirable as this structure streamlines decision-making processes.
and makes the overall functioning of the organization more efficient. That said, hierarchies and power relations must be regularly re-examined and oppressions eradicated.

Wearing (1998) states that *hegemony* “is concerned with the control of consciousness by cultural dominance through the institutions of society” (p.61). Thus, leaders in institutions design a culture that dictates the norms, conventions, or ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ in a social group (Gee, 2010). In essence, the authority figures in an organization promote their own values/norms through hegemonic structures to all lower classes in order to maintain the status quo. This conceptualization of hegemony aligns with traditional, masculine views of power, or the power-over perspective. Viewed through this lens, discourses are used to maintain power and privilege, though subcultures may arise that challenge, undermine, or replace dominant cultural forms (Wearing, 1998).

Here, discourse refers to the collective beliefs or values that shape the behaviors and practices of a community; that is, community discourse is manifest in localized institutional speak and social praxis (Hollinshead & Jamal, 2001). Leaders in the Church of Jesus Christ for example have set forth a discourse regarding gender, gendered roles, and the family. Sub-discourses, subcultures, and/or subgroups (e.g., Ordain Women, Young Feminist Mormons) have emerged to make sense of and in some cases challenge the dominant discourses in the Church. Many of these counter discourses align with the “sacred project of sociology” and broader social discourses (Smith, 2014). In either case, Church leaders, through sermons, letters, curriculum, and training materials, actively seek to steer and correct the dominant culture of the Church.
Ideology, typically functions to maintain hegemony within institutions through the use of language that normalizes certain behaviors and practices (Althusser, 2001). Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) describe the link between ideology, power, and dominant (norming) discourses:

The contemporary discursive conception of ideology sees power as increasingly exercised through the use of persuasive language instead of coercion. When ‘proper’ ways of thinking about and doing things give a one-sided account that ignores the variety of practices, discourse is said to function ideologically. (p. 26)

In other words, discourse is ideological when it serves the interests of one group over another or when it serves to structure thought so that other ways of thinking are no longer considered possible. Thus, when people behave ideologically, they lack recognition that they are captive to an ideological moment and have internalized the dominant discourse as their own. Taken together, hierarchy, hegemony, and ideology may all manifest themselves in RMs’ reentry discourse. However, the extent to which religious hierarchy is viewed as oppressive or liberating in this context has yet to be decided, and whether or not reentry discourse is traditionally hegemonic (aimed at control) and, thus, ideologically one-sided remains unclear.

**Discourses of Power**

Discourse has been defined in a number of different ways. Jaworski and Pritchard (2005), for example, suggest that discourse can be as simple as “anything beyond a sentence” but also describe more complex conceptualizations of discourse that link language and identity (p. 4). They describe both narrow (focused on linguistic/textual) and broad (social) views of discourse and postulate that “Discourse defines experience
and performance, and by empowering action or inaction, naturalizes social relations” (p. 2). Hollinshead and Jamal (2001) refer to discourse as the collective beliefs or values that shape the behaviors and practices of a community; that is, community discourse is manifest in localized institutional speak and social praxis.

According to Dann (1966a) “Discourse is not just about what is represented and communicated, it is also about what is practiced” (p. 4). Schiffrin et al. (2001) defines discourse as a “broad range of social practice that includes nonlinguistic and nonspecific instances of language” (p. 1). Often, discourses are so integrated into individuals’ daily lives that they (the discourses) go unnoticed. Discourse shapes the identities of individuals, institutions, and societies (Pritchard & Jaworski, 2005). According to Foucault (1998) individuals are simultaneously products of and producers of discourse(s). When satisfied with their circumstances they promote the dominant discourse and when dissatisfied they challenge it (Dann, 1996a). In that regard, discourse can be used by hegemonic leaders to subjugate peoples or as an act of compliance/resistance on the part of subjected peoples. In many cases, however, discourses are overly optimistic or positive such that criticism or critiques of institutions or experiences are rare (Dann, 1996a). Dann suggests that discourse is often tautological in that individuals learn and then seek to reproduce discourses through their behavior. He cites Boorstin (1987) who, describing the modern tourist, suggest that “we go not to test the image by reality but to test reality by the image” (p. 116). Discourse, according to Foucault, is also concerned with situated meanings. For example, dress and behavior for attendance at a baseball game is typically very different from dress at a fine dining establishment because the shared meanings
about those spaces/places reinforce a discourse about how one should behave in them (Gee, 2010). Thus, discourse is not just concerned with what is said, how it is said, or how frequently it is said, but rather what is meant and how those meanings influence behavior and socio-political moorings. Along these lines, Cohen (1999) framed discourse as a multi-dimensional question:

1. Who…
2. …represents who…
3. …how…
4. …in what medium…
5. …under what socio-historical conditions…
6. …and in what socio-political relationships? (p. 39; cited in Dann, 1996a)

Noteworthy in this conceptualization is the idea that discourses may be localized but are always influenced by broader socio-political discourses. Thus, discourse analysis that fails to incorporate a discussion of the broader contexts in which localized discursive practice is occurring could, therefore, be considered less valid (i.e., incomplete, less inclusive of the big picture). Hannam and Knox (2005), pulling from Foucault (1977/1979/1998) and Derrida’s (1977) work, emphasized that discourses arise from powers, ideologies, and constructed meanings. They note that as important as what is said, is what goes unsaid but is implied/understood (see also Hjelm, 2013). In sum, discourse has come to mean different things, to different people, in different contexts, but is inherently political and therefore inseparable from discussions of power. As one is better able to step out of a dominant discourse and recognize and challenge the relations of power,
transformation is possible. Thus, this research sought to detect problematic discourses and suggest discursive tools that could be used to uproot them.

Gee and the politics of discourse. Robert Gee has written extensively about language and discourse and posits that “language has meaning only in and through social practices” (Gee, 2010, p.12). In that regard, discourses are used to define rules and norms among groups, cultures, or institutions and when a group member enacts these conventions he or she “sustains the group” (Gee, 2010, p. 16). According to Gee (2010), the study of discourse is “the study of language in use” and discourse can be understood as a “characteristic way of saying [informing], doing [action)] and being [identity] (p. 8). Thus, discourse reveals socially situated identities (who) and meanings or practices (what). At the core of understanding and analyzing discourse is what Gee (2010) refers to as “the problem of recognition and being recognized” (p. 32). Thus, much of discourse analysis is what Gee (2014) calls “recognition work”:

People engage in such work when they try to make visible to others (and to themselves, as well) who they are and what they are doing…People engage in such work within interactions, moment by moment. They engage in such work when they reflect on their interactions later. They engage in such work, as well, when they try to understand human interaction as researchers, practitioners, theoreticians, or interventionists of various sorts. (p. 37)

Missionaries in the Church of Jesus Christ are at a critical juncture in their lives because their identity(s) and commitments are still relatively elastic. Thus, determinations about “who they are and what they are doing” have not been solidified and dominant discourses may influence their identity in meaningful ways. Given that reentry can be an especially unstable time, reentry discourses become even more potent sources of identity security.
One other way discourses operate is to identify ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ and determine both how to distribute social goods (e.g., status, power) and to whom. Thus, discourses in the Church may direct how RMs are regarded, and what and how many resources they are granted.

**Foucault on knowledge and power.** Foucault’s ideas emerged from his own experience as a person of both privilege—as an affluent, White, male—and marginalization—as a gay, sadomasochist (School of Life, 2015). He personally observed/experienced the oppressive power of institutions and was highly critical of institutions as the arbiters of power (Cheong & Miller, 2000). He also challenged societies unquestioning acceptance that the current practices had/have improved those of the past and specifically criticized the “medical gaze” that so commonly dehumanized and constrained individuals (such as people with mental health abnormalities) who had historically been liberated and even given an elevated status in some circumstances and societies (Hollinshead, 1999). For Foucault, knowledge is power and both are inseparable from the socio-political and historical contexts from which they emerge (Hollinshead & Jamal, 2001). He argued that whoever possesses and propels knowledge through public discourse has power (Hollinshead & Jamal, 2001). Thus power is a form of social control via the directing, defining, and dispersing of knowledge.

However, Foucault’s conceptualization was also more complex than this and moved beyond the idea that power is solely manifest in the subjugation of one group over another. He viewed power as a “relationship rather than an entity” such that power “flows in multiple directions” (Cheong & Miller, 2000, p. 375). With this in mind he reinforced
the link between power and discourse: “discourse transmits and produces power but also undermines and exposes it” (Foucault, 1998, pp. 100-101). Resistance, he argued, “is possible through counter discourses which produce new knowledge” (Wadsworth & Green, 2003, p. 208). This broader and bi-directional understanding of power is important in the context of my study, as it (a) acknowledges that missionaries co-produce reentry discourses and (b) can resist oppression through discourse.

**Marx’s critique of capitalism: The alienation of modernity.**

Marx challenged the hierarchical nature of institutions, particularly capitalist institutions that created wealth gaps (between rich and poor) and class distinctions that would inevitably lead to inequality and unrest (Marx & Engels, 2009). He argued that the control of production or the means of production was a source of power which, in capitalist societies, was reserved by the bourgeoisie or the upper class (Marx & Engels, 2009). He identified six ills associated with capitalism including: the alienation of modern work (detachment of labor from the end product), insecurity due to the devaluation of human labor and overvaluation of technology/profitability, low wages for laborers who are exploited by profiteering bosses, instability or recurring crises created by the unsteady invisible hand of capitalism, commodity fetishism and consequent dissatisfaction with life for capitalists who derive their value from money rather than relationships, and the ideology that unemployment and, therefore, leisure time are bad (School of Life, 2014).

Taken together, these ills or common practices and beliefs of capitalism perpetuate an exploitative, class based society that Marx believed would ultimately lead
to revolt and revolution and a shift towards socialism and eventually communism, a purer, more equal societal form. In either case, Marx was challenging the unquestioning embrace of capitalism and its proclivity for ignoring the growing wealth gap, proclivity to fail unexpectedly, and over emphasis on production and consumption (Marx & Engels, 2009). His analysis invited critique of institutions and hierarchies of any form and called for a more egalitarian structure. Particularly Marx believed that if people were made conscious of their situation they would act to free themselves from their oppressive circumstances (Marx & Engels, 2009). Perhaps RMs who disaffiliate have become similarly disenchanted with the hierarchical nature of organizations—specifically the Church—or, through knowledge acquired as missionaries, feel the need to be liberated from what they perceive to be oppressive ideologies.

More specifically, and central to Marx’s critique of capitalism, is the possibility that missionaries may become alienated from their work, and the fruits of their missionary labors during reentry. According to Sharpley (2002), alienation is inextricably tied to authenticity, refers to a “sense of estrangement from a situation, society, culture, or group,” and results in feelings of “placelessness, powerlessness, or purposelessness” (p.19; see also Seeman, 1975; Wang, 1999). Thus, missionaries may be motivated to serve a mission to escape feelings of alienation, or may feel alienated from their home and/or mission upon returning (Cohen, 1992; Sharpley, 2002; MacCannell, 1976). In that sense, Xue, Manuel-Navarrete, and Buzinde (2014) regard alienation as both the “cause and consequence” of mobility (p. 187). Xue et al. (2014) further posit that alienation in modern society can be understood through the lenses of production (i.e., traditional
Marxist thought), consumption (i.e., acquiring meaningless experiences as status symbols) and existentialism (i.e., prioritizing others opinions over one’s own). Thus, in a religious culture that values productivity, achievement/status, and selflessness – as the Church of Jesus Christ does – alienation becomes even more likely. Finally, alienation can occur when one feels separated from God, a notion that may arise when a missionary no longer has the day to day spiritual highs, direction, and opportunities for communion, or in cases where return missionaries distance themselves from God via sin and subsequent guilt.

**Feminist theory(s) of power.** Karlberg (2005) chronicled feminist influences on how society conceptualizes power and noted feminist scholars’ efforts to change the discourse about power from being dominance-orientated (power over) to being empowerment- (power to) and capacity building- (power with) orientated. Karlberg first drew attention to Follett’s (1942) work, remarking that,

… [She] articulated a distinction between “coercive” and “coactive” power, or “power over” and “power with”. Follett argued that the usual understanding of power relations as coercive was limited and problematic. She (Follett, 1942, pp. 101) argued instead for an expanded understanding – a “conception of power-with, a jointly developed power, a co-active, not a coercive power” – that could serve as a new normative basis for social and political relations. (p. 6)

Prevailing Foucauldian theories of power have assumed power and discourses are oppressive (power over), implying that because the Church is hierarchical and because Church leaders have power, its members are oppressed and powerless. Whereas, Follett’s conceptualization makes room for alternative ways of viewing power as collaborative and symbiotic. For example, a number Church members individually and as part of activist
groups petitioned Church leaders to provide women with more prominent leadership and service opportunities. During this period Sister Jean A. Stevens offered the benediction at a general conference of the Church, becoming the first women to pray at a worldwide meeting of the Church (Stack, 2013). Likewise, since that time, a number of sermons have been given that address the role of women in the Church and their relationship to the priesthood, providing clarity on this issue and shifting the discourse to emphasize the strength and opportunities for women in the Church. Similarly, Church leaders have taken steps to be more transparent about the Church’s history, artifacts, and stances on other sensitive issues besides women and the priesthood (e.g., race and the priesthood, polygamy, and same sex attraction; Otterson, 2015). Thus, while this study aims to uncover or root out oppressive discourses it also considers that power(s) and discourse(s) in the Church may be cooperative and liberating in some ways.

Karlberg also cited Miller (1982) reinforcing the idea that this feminist theory of power runs counter to normative discourses on the subject. He quotes Miller, who said:

Empowering other people, however, does not fit accepted conceptualizations and definitions of power… Women’s views have [thus] not been taken into account in most studies of power…Miller (1982, pp. 1-2), in turn, advocates a broad redefinition of power based on the “capacity to produce change”, which includes activities such as “nurturing” and “empowering others”. (p. 6)

Interestingly, while many contemporary feminist scholars use discourses of power to disparage ‘traditional’ roles and attributes ascribed to women, Miller (1982) proposes a counter discourse that exalts these characteristics and roles. A similar discourse is employed by women in the Church of Jesus Christ, who must constantly weigh what the Church teaches about gender and womanhood against the messages society promotes

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about gendered norms and expectations (Beaman, 2001). To me, this clarifies Gee’s (2010) point that discourses reflect situated meanings and Foucault’s (1998) belief that discourses are fluid. In other words, what is viewed as oppressive by one person in a given context can be considered empowering by another person in a different or even a similar context.

Continuing the discussion, Karlberg next cites Hartsock (1983) who largely reaffirms the work of Follett and Miller when she says:

Theories of power put forward by women rather than men differ systematically from the understanding of power as domination. Women’s stress on power not as domination but as capacity, on power as a capacity of the community as a whole, suggests that women’s experience of connection and relation have consequences for understandings of power and may hold resources for a more liberatory understanding. (p. 253)

From the works of these three feminist scholars, and others, Karlberg (2005) developed a unified schema of power as empowerment and capacity. Power is contextualized in both adversarial (power against) relations, which occur in environments that are inherently competitive, and mutualistic (power with) relations, which occur in environments that are inherently cooperative. Within his schema, Karlberg contends that inequality and equality can be manifest in both adversarial and mutualistic relations. For example, inequality is produced in adversarial relations when power is imbalanced and results in oppression, domination, or coercion. Conversely, when power is balanced adversarial relationships produce stalemates or frustrating compromises.

In the case of mutualistic relations, power imbalances result in opportunities for education, nurturance, and assistance while power balance produces synergy,
collaboration and coordination. In many ways this modelling of power extends and expounds on the Foucauldian notion that power is bi-directional and fluid, and suggests that power is not always pejorative. Thus, in my investigations employing discourse analysis, consideration of the environment (competitive, cooperative) and the status (equal, unequal) and how these contribute to oppressive, adversarial, or mutualistic power relations is necessary. These distinctions are critical given that they would solicit entirely different responses/solutions. For example, if power relations are mutualistic then it is possible that the RM reentry discourse will be positive and empowering and ought to be reinforced to some extent. However, if the power relations appear to be oppressive or adversarial then there an opportunity for resistance and transformation arises.

**The Societal Discourse of Emerging Adulthood(s)**

Missionary reentry and young adulthood in the Church of Jesus Christ do not occur in a vacuum. Church members are constantly confronted with competing social discourses from the media, social media, peers, former members, and less-active or non-member family. RMs thus find themselves torn between Church discourses and prevailing discourses about emerging adulthood and how young adults *ought to be* living their lives. American sociologists Christian Smith and Robert P. George documented some of the discourses of emerging adult secular and spiritual lives in their texts “The Sacred Project of American Sociology,” “Lost in Transition” and “Self Mastery, Academic Freedom, and the Liberal Arts.”

In the Sacred Project, Smith (2014) argues that American sociology (and I would argue American society, as portrayed by the media) is “committed to the visionary
project of realizing the emancipation, equality, and moral affirmation of all human beings as autonomous, self-directing, individual agents (who should be) out to live their lives as they personally so desire, by constructing their own favored identities, entering and exiting relationships as they choose, and equally enjoying the gratification of experiential, material, and bodily pleasures” (pp. 7-8). According to this discourse, individual autonomy – unencumbered by institutional edicts or verdicts – reigns supreme. Smith (2014) further captures the social-theoretical lineage of this sacred movement suggesting the project “stands in the modern-liberal-Enlightenment-Marxist-social-reformist-pragmatist-therapeutic-sexually liberated-civil rights-feminist-GLBTQ-social constructionist-poststructuralist/postmodernist tradition” (p. 11). Thus, the project is inherently both liberal and critical (though he would argue it is often uncritical, or at least unaware, of itself), where mainstream religions like the Church of Jesus Christ are typically not.

George (2008) similarly contends that many authority figures in institutions of higher education have hijacked the term and purpose of a “liberal education” to promote a leftist, revisionist agenda focused on liberation from “traditional social constraints and norms of morality—the beliefs, principles and structures by which earlier generations of Americans and people in the West generally had been taught to govern their conduct for the sake of personal virtue and the common good” (p. 1). A secondary aim of this discourse is to enable young adults to “become authentic individuals – people who are true to themselves” (p. 2). In contrast, George argues that “according to the classic liberal arts ideal, learning promises liberation, but it is not liberation from demanding
moral ideals and social norms [as the revisionist agenda suggests]; it is, rather, liberation from slavery to self” (p. 4). A liberal education then is about “acquiring skills and habits of mind” that help one to master oneself and overcome or transcend the coarsest or basest parts of one’s nature. While the latter discourse seems to resonate with the teachings of the Church (George is a member of the Church after all), the former seems to prevail in broader social thought and again positions the self and individual gratification above relational and institutional commitments or moral responsibilities.

In Lost in transition, Smith, Christoffersen, Davidson, and Herzog (2011) comment on emerging adult perspectives of morality and moral reasoning. One of the central findings of their research is the pervasive adherence to the discourses of Moral Individualism embodied in statements like “it’s personal…it’s up to the individual…who am I to say?” and Moral Relativism characterized by the belief that morality is subjective, socially constructed, and culturally bound, and therefore definitive for no-one (although few were truly and exclusively relativist). A product of these two ways of thinking and being is an aversion to judgment, and a reliance on the social functionality of specific moral principles. Perhaps the most interesting finding of this study is that emerging adults consistently reported that the single most important factor to consider when making a moral decision is whether or not the consequence would make them feel happy (rated more highly than following parental advice or commandments from God, or because the decision would produce status or rewards). Smith et al. (2011) argues that these ideals are largely influenced by post-modern, mass consumerist, media messages that elevate autonomy and individualism (with the illusive aim of increasing consumption). While the
Church similarly touts ‘happiness’ as the ultimate goal of this life, it defines happiness and how happiness is acquired very differently. Happiness in the Church is relational (with the greatest joy resulting from the formation of a traditional family unit) and comes through obedience to God’s commandments rather than self-gratification/ liberation.

In sum, in the Church of Jesus Christ, the mission functions as a rite of passage and has the dual purpose of increasing membership while socializing missionaries into future ministering roles. This process of socialization is cemented (or not) during reentry via discursive tools and practices employed both consciously and unconsciously by Church members and leaders. These reentry discourses (a) come from a variety of sources, (b) are likely to be encountered in anticipation for, during, and after returning from one’s mission, and (c) reflect how power, knowledge, and resources are distributed in the Church. The aim of this study is to better understand how discourse, particularly religious discourse, behaves in the context of reentry. In order to address this question, critical discourse analysis was employed to go beyond traditional thematic analysis and consider how verbal and non-verbal communication, institutional speak, and other forms of discourse shaped the meaning of what is reported in interviews, texts, and artefacts.

Methods

The present study employed a critical approach to qualitative inquiry via critical discourse analyses of written, oral, and visual communications in and about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Primary data were collected from semi-structured interviews with (n = 16) and social media posts from (n = 4) RMs (N = 20) in the Church. Secondary data were collected via archival membership data, popular press articles, and
Church materials such as sermons, magazine articles, handbooks, and memes. Critical discourse analyses of diverse, rich texts enables bridging of the macro (i.e., power, ideology) and the micro (i.e., language, behavior), to contextualize local discourses and question unequal power structures.

**Study Participants/Data Sources**

The primary data source, interviews, were conducted with returning, young adult proselytizing missionaries (n = 16, of a potential 25) who had returned from international and domestic missions to a southeastern stake of the Church as earlier as January 1, 2015 and as a late as December 31, 2016. Thus, no missionary had been ‘home’ for more than two years. This time frame was selected to capture a larger sample of missionaries at different stages of the reentry process, while also acknowledging that memory or recall issues could limit the depth and quality of responses. Likewise, no service or senior missionaries were included in the study given that their mission experiences are vastly different from younger proselytizing missionaries and their age or ability put them in identity-categories that are distinct in terms of the obligatory/normative expectations affixed to them.

In addition to interviews, a handful (n = 4) of social media posts documenting reentry experiences were included to provide a counter narrative or rival explanation of reentry. Secondary data related to Church history, membership statistics, and discursive practices were explored via sermons, memes, news stories, handbooks, curriculum and other religious and secular media and scholarship (in line with the previously discussed factorial model). The majority of Church texts have been digitized and made publically
available via official Church sites such as lds.org and ldsnewsroom.org. Social media
narratives and secondary data were collected via Radian6 social media listening software
and searches using Boolean phrases (related to returning, missionaries, the Church, etc.)
on google, google scholar, and official Church websites.

Radian6 “is a social listening tool that is dedicated to listen, analyze, and engage
information being shared publicly online” (Gan, 2014, para. 1). Though Radian6 ‘listens’
or pulls data from hundreds of thousands of media sources, the data can only be collected
from public sites and in 90 day increments (i.e., from January 1 – April 1). Like any other
search engine, the software uses key phrases and delimiters, which in this study included
the following combinations of words or phrases: variations of the word return; variations
in the name of the Church (e.g., LDS, Mormon, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day
Saints); and words associated with reentry in the Church (e.g., home, homecoming,
adjustment. The searches also excludes sites/posts that included words and phrases that
were likely to elicit large amounts of unrelated, extraneous data (e.g., Mitt Romney,
polygamy, Ordain Women). Data were collected over the two year inclusion period
defined in the study (January 1, 2015 – December 31, 2016) and the parameters resulted
in an average of about 400 total sources per 90 day interval, with an average of 75 per
interval that actually met the inclusion criteria (i.e., documented young adult missionary
reentry experiences in the Church), and approximately 6 per interval representing the
alternative perspectives of reentry I was seeking. The four accounts selected for use in the
present study provided the most in-depth and clear accounts of reentry and some
heterogeneity (i.e., male and female perspectives, those who disaffiliated and those who remained but were questioning/disbelieving).

**Researcher description.** As the primary researcher in this study I developed the research questions and instruments, collected all primary and secondary data, and analyzed and interpreted the data. Thus, the entire research process was influenced by my personal experience and observations as a lifelong member, RM (the fourth to serve in my immediate family), and local leader in the Church. In other words, I co-created the discourse of reentry in the Church and subsequent interpretation(s) of that discourse via my participation in this research. Though I grew up in the Church, one of my parents was a convert and a number of my siblings and extended family members have disaffiliated. I also served in various religious, ethnic, and socio-economic communities as a missionary and have interacted with hundreds of individuals and families via my leadership in the Church. Between these family experiences, my mission experience, and my leadership roles, I have a broad and deep understanding of the Church’s doctrine, culture, and discourse. I believe my familiarity with the language and discourse of the Church opened doors and mouths during the interview process and enhanced my ability to document the discourse of missionary reentry. My insider status also helped me identify the problem of the study, structure the interview questions and probes, and intuitively interpret the data collected. That said, given that discourse can be ideologically driven and unconscious, I have also made efforts to reflexively and critically consider my experiences and consult with others who are less familiar with the Church to provide additional critique and elucidate ways in which my perspective as a member-scholar shaped the research. I also
relied heavily on member checks, non-member critiques, reflexive field notes, and scholarly literature to manage my assumptions and biases, understand external discourses affecting social practice in the Church, and let the data speak for themselves.

**Researcher-participant relationship.** As a product of my membership and leadership role in a congregation of the stake being studied, I was familiar with or had direct authority over five of the sixteen informants. Given that this study explores discourses, power, and inequality, this relational dynamic is particularly relevant. As a caveat, prior to conducting the interviews, my interaction with the informants was somewhat minimal as most of them were attending school at the time (not their home ward where I was stationed). Thus, in most cases my pre-interview exposure to these informants was likely contained to one superficial contact if any. That said, they all were aware of who I was and my leadership role in the Church and could conclude that I had some ‘authority’ or stewardship over them in that capacity – though in reality, I had no authority over them since their membership records had been transferred to their student wards. Regardless, my prior knowledge of some individuals and leadership role did not seem to inhibit informants, as evidenced by the fact that the informants divulged somewhat personal information regarding mental health concerns, dating woes, etc. If anything, my leadership may have signaled to the informants that I could be trusted and would, by virtue of my position, listen, give counsel or direction, and protect the privacy of their information. Taken a step further, some informants may have felt somewhat compelled to participate in the research and respond fully and honestly to my inquiries out of ‘obedience’ or ‘reverence’, as if they were confessing to a Bishop or priesthood.
leader. Thus, my relationship to these five participants may have provided more authentic and detailed responses as a result of the power distance between us or, conversely, more contained and carefully crafted responses.

As an additional thought, any of the 16 participants may have reasonably assumed that by conducting research about the Church, I was doing so with the permission of the Church. To address this possibility, I clarified that I was neither sponsored by the Church or collecting data in opposition to Church policy. Thus, in this one regard, I was a neutral figure with no obligation to report my findings to the Church. That said, informants may have also recognized that I was a married, male, RM who had remained active and committed to the Church after his mission. With this in mind, they may have been less reluctant to share critiques of the Church, crises of faith, etc. or otherwise guarded in their responses. Though, as formerly stated, the length, depth, and vulnerability of most of the responses suggested that this was not the case.

**Participant recruitment.** Potential informants were identified via publically available lists of RMs found in printed programs at the 2015/2016 annual conferences of a Southeastern Stake of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (a stake is a collection of ‘wards’ or congregations bound by a geographical area). Both stake conferences were open to the public (members and non-members alike). Contact information for each participant was obtained through the local membership directory (accessible to members of the stake) and via publically available social media pages (e.g., Facebook). A total of 24 individuals met the initial inclusion criteria for the study and while I was interested in interviewing them all (i.e., census; purposive, convenience
sampling), only 16 could be contacted or agreed to participate. Specifically, four individuals directly refused to participate or did not keep their appointments and four could not be reached after making multiple attempts to contact them via diverse communication platforms. Those who refused to participate similarly refused to disclose their purpose for opting out of the study. In order to diversify perspectives and discourses captures in the study, I assumed that those who refused may have had a vastly different reentry experience. Moreover, in order to capture alternative perspectives/discourses (i.e., diversity sampling) I sought out four additional viewpoints (via social media) as surrogates for the four refusals in the study; these viewpoints came from individuals who had disaffiliated or otherwise struggled during reentry.

Participants were recruited through multiple invitations via phone, email, and Facebook. The variety of contacting modes was reflective of the fact that after being released from their missions, many of the participants had dispersed for education, relationship, and employment opportunities and as a result, were no longer listed in the stake membership directory. The first contact consisted of an email or Facebook message, which included a description of the study and invitation to participate (Appendix D). The second contact consisted of a phone call to confirm participation and schedule an interview (Appendix E). The third contact consisted of the 60-90 minute face-to-face interview (Appendix B). The final contact consisted of a follow-up/thank you call, email, or post (Appendix F). Additional contacts occurred in some cases to allow participants to check the data or to clarify/expand on prior data collection. Interview data were collected during the months of December 2016 and January 2017, while all other data were
collected over the course of the study which commenced in January of 2015. Interview data were primarily collected in person at locations that were convenient and comfortable for the informant (i.e., at informants homes or in one instance, at an informant’s favorite restaurant) or over the phone. No incentives or compensation were provided to informants, and all research processes were approved via the university Institutional Review Board (IRB; Appendix H).

Data Collection

The primary form of data collection was semi-structured interviews with RMs, supported and contextualized by secondary data that consisted of documents and other materials from Church archives and reviews of relevant literature. Interviews lasted anywhere from 30-60 minutes (averaging 43 minutes). Though the interview length could have been extended in some cases, the length seemed to provide enough time to address the research questions and reach saturation across participants. Semi-structured interviews allow for reflexivity, reciprocity, and co-construction of meaning(s), which as previously mentioned was unavoidable and even acceptable given my proximity to the research as a RM in the Church (Jennings, 2005). Semi-structured interviews also allow for in-depth, rich description and informant driven responses, allowing for the revelation of more organic language and discourses. Moreover, interviewing is typically personal (allows one to read body language, observe physical setting), adaptable (allows for probing), and relational (one can establish rapport, more accurately identify power relations in the participant-researcher relationship). Semi-structured interviewing can also contextualize responses (i.e., discourses embedded in one’s natural environment such as a
home or favorite restaurant), while still providing structure and consistency across interviewers (Phillimore & Goodson, 2004).

Interview questions were constructed from my experiences and observations as a member of the Church, RM, and leader, and informed by Church texts and academic literature. Interviews were also guided by a protocol (Appendix B) that consisted of question banks based on various stages of the mission and reentry process; i.e., pre-mission, mission, and post-mission with probes oriented towards likely discursive and power-laden topics. For example, in the post-mission question bank informants were asked: “What has your life/experience been like since you returned from your mission? Have there been any surprises?” and probes were included related to dating/marriage, perceptions of RMs, etc. The questions evolved over the course of the interviews as informant responses signaled unanticipated topics or discourses. For example, one of the first informants described the role of social comparisons and I incorporated a probe on this topic at the tail end of subsequent interviews. The interview protocol was reviewed by members and non-members to ensure comprehensiveness and clarity and a few pilot interviews were conducted with recently RMs who fell outside of the study parameters. These exercises confirmed that the core questions asked were inclusive, clear, and solicited responses that seemed to address the problem of the study.

**Recording and data transcription.** All interview data were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim through a two-step process. Initial transcriptions were contracted out to a third-party. These transcriptions were then checked for accuracy by the researcher, corrected where necessary, and annotated with comments about body language, tone,
demeanor, etc. based on the field notes collected during the interview process. Thus the transcription went from broad to narrow, with clarification of pauses, laughing, etc. being added to the transcripts to retrain as much of the original message and intent as possible.

**Data Analysis**

Discourse analysis has become a useful tool for understanding the influence of language and communication on social practice (Jaworski & Pritchard, 2005). Discourse analysis is typically concerned with: (a) determining what patterns of language or expressed thought influence social practice, and (b) identifying and uprooting power inequities, embedded in discourses, which may contribute to the subjugation of one social group to another (Feighery, 2006a). Critical discourse analysis (CDA; Feighery, 2006a) is particularly concerned with drawing attention to and emancipating individuals from unconscious, oppressive discourses. Gee (2010) contends that ALL language is political so ALL discourse analysis is critical, suggesting that the term CDA is redundant and a misnomer. Thus, the shortened ‘discourse analysis’ will be used hereafter.

Beyond the fact that it is political, discourse analysis is critical because it typically leads to either intervention in some problem or application to some situation. Given that discourses often perpetuate privilege, oppression, etc. discourse analysts also seek to establish justice and equity (Gee, 2010). In the context of my research interests, discourse may be: (a) a tool of subjugation in which unhelpful discourses should be identified and uprooted, (b) a source of resistance in which discourses should be monitored, or (c) a source of help or aid, such that the discourse might warrant reproduction. For example, in the context of my proposed dissertation work, Church leaders may use discourse to
promote compliance, retention, and “re-enlistment” when missionaries return home. Or, in contrast/in conjunction, RMs may embrace hopeful religious discourses (e.g., regarding faith, hope, and prayer) that help them to cope with the challenges of reentry.

Dann (1996a) discussed how discourse analysis differs across media such as texts, images, oral communications, or non-verbal interactions and describes what to look for in each context. For example, he describes how pacing, pausing, or intonation can all communicate something, in an oral exchange, beyond the words that were spoken. Similarly, body posture, facial expressions, or the distance a respondent establishes between the reviewer and him- or her-self, can contradict what the respondent is verbally communicating. This physical contradiction can, therefore, undermine the stated, oral discourse. On another note, the print format and post-positivist orientation of many journals also limits, to a great extent, the ways in which the analysis and results of these diverse media can be represented and disseminated, which challenges the validity of what is represented.

Another challenge with representation of discursive analyses is outlined in Jaworski and Pritchard (2005). They differentiate between the semiotics of discourse, the construction or representation of discourse, and the performance of discourse in tourism contexts. These forms of discourse hark back to Cohen’s (1999) question and beg new questions: “Who owns the discourse in these settings?”, “from where does it originate?” and “how does tourism perpetuate the discourse?” This is clarified, to some extent, in Terry’s (2014) work investigating the notion of the “perfect” worker. He explored how institutional images, texts, and dialogues (provided by the government and the industry)
positioned Filipino workers as the ideal cruise ship employees. Interestingly, while these discourses were somewhat derogatory (i.e., positioned Filipinos as submissive) and inaccurate (i.e., Filipino workers are not necessarily better suited to the sea life), the workers themselves embraced the discourses because they created pathways to employment and gave their country a greater share of the job market. Terry (2014) also noted, however, that sub- or counter-discourses emerged that were reported in an effort to produce a more valid, or representative picture of what is occurring.

Analysis of discourse in the present study is predominately guided by the works of Gee (2010/ 2014). According to Gee (2010), discursive analytic techniques begin with claims or hypotheses, and guide the transcription, analysis, and interpretation of data.

**Claims or Hypotheses.** According to Gee (2010): “A discourse analysis—as any empirical inquiry—is built around making arguments for a specific claim (or claims) or hypothesis (or hypotheses). The claim or hypothesis is the point of the analysis” (p. 122). In my dissertation, I make two broad claims, though additional claims could be made or may be inherent in the data:

1. Difficulty during the reentry process expressed in my data (or dissertation project) is caused, in part, by unacknowledged tensions between missionary, Church, and socio-political discourses.

2. Difficulty during the reentry process expressed in my data (or dissertation project) is caused, in part, by problematic post-mission discourses relating to (but not limited to) gendered roles, dating and marriage, and perfectionism.
These claims were examined and supported or rejected using the seven building tasks and six tools of inquiry outlined by Gee (2010).

**Building tasks.** While there are a number of strategies for conducting discourse analysis, Gee (2010) focuses his work on seven building tasks and six tools of inquiry, or targeted questions that can be asked of the data. These include the following:

1. **Building Task 1: Significance**: How are situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, Discourses, and Conversations being used to build relevance or significance for things and people in context?

2. **Building Task 2: Practices (Activities)**: How are situated meanings, social languages figured worlds, intertextuality, Discourses, and Conversations being used to enact a practice (activity) or practices (activities) in context?

3. **Building Task 3: Identities**: How are situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, Discourses, and Conversations being used to enact and depict identities (socially significant kinds of people)?

4. **Building Task 4: Relationships**: How are situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, Discourses, and Conversations being used to build and sustain (or change or destroy) social relationships?

5. **Building Task 5: Politics**: How are situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, Discourses, and Conversations being used to create, distribute, or withhold social goods or to construe particular distributions of social goods as “good” or “acceptable” or not?
6. Building Task 6: *Connections*: How are situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, Discourses, and Conversations being used to make things and people connected or relevant to each other or irrelevant to or disconnected from each other?

7. Building Task 7: *Sign Systems and Knowledge*: How are situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, Discourses, and Conversations being used to privilege or dis-privilege different sign systems (language, social languages, and other sorts of symbol systems) and ways of knowing? (pp. 121-122)

Not all building tasks and/or questions are likely to be employed in a given study, however, the tasks and tools provide a foundation by which to begin delving into and organizing discourses.

Furthermore, to further connect discourses to power and social practice a number of critical dichotomies and concepts will be applied to each main idea constructed by the discourse analysis. For example, expanding on the work of Xue and Kerstetter (2017) a greater emphasis will be placed on exploring intertextuality in the text, or the extent to which responses are congruent or incongruent with predominant discourses in the Church. Other organizing concepts that will be explored include alienation (Xue et al., 2014), recognition (Gee, 2010), resistance (Wadsworth & Green, 2003), and power dichotomies such as: competitive v. cooperative (Karlberg, 2005), equal v. unequal (Karlberg, 2005), and power over v. power to/power with (Follett, 1942).
**Transcription, grammar, and organization of language.** One of the challenges of discourse analysis relates to transcription. Transcriptions can be either broad (including less detail, fewer annotations) or narrow (including more detail, more annotations) depending on your research question and what you hope to glean from the data. Since so much of language is non-verbal (a shrug, a glance) or sub-verbal (intonation, pace), a narrower transcription is preferred in discourse analysis. That said, a number of transcription symbols, characters, and annotations can be used to indicate pauses, laughter, facial expressions, body language or other key features of an interaction (Du Bois, 2006).

In addition to these tools, Gee (2010) recommends that texts be broken down into their macro and micro structures. The macrostructure includes the "larger ‘body parts’ of the story as a whole" which are typically given descriptors (e.g., setting, catalyst, crisis, evaluation, resolution) and set apart with Roman numerals (p. 138), whereas the microstructure includes the stanzas (groups of lines) and lines (groups of words) that make up each body part. Lines are composed of both content words and function words. This organization allows multiple levels of analysis that help reveal a discourse(s) and shape the narrative of the data point. To this end, each interview was narrowly transcribed, annotated, and broken down into macro structure (e.g., pre-mission, mission, post-mission challenges, supports) and smaller units of analysis, typically about a paragraph in length, demarcated by the start and end of a unified or singular idea. These units were input into Microsoft Excel and organized by their convergence around
discursive topics (e.g., marriage expectations) and their connection to various aspects of Gee’s building tasks.

Looking beyond the text. Hjelm (2013) aptly noted that when in the process of analyzing discourse “…it is equally important…to study what is not said, that is, what we take for granted” (p. 6; see also Feighery, 2006a). He then proceeds to defend his claim by situating the argument in discussions of ideology, hegemony, and discourse:

…any reference to ‘common sense’ is ‘substantially, though not entirely, ideological’ (Fairclough, 1989: 84, emphasis in original). Because common sense naturalizes our conceptions of everyday life, it is the most effective way of sustaining hegemony, that is, an exclusive interpretation of reality. The aim of CDA is to ‘unmask’ the ways in which power imbalances are sustained through discourse – indeed, getting rid of ‘false consciousness’ (Fairclough, 1995: 17) – by drawing attention to the suppression of alternative constructions of the world. (p. 6)

Similarly, Dann (1996a) suggests that discourse is not limited to text or conversation and can include diverse media (e.g., film, images) and other forms of non-verbal communication/behavior. For example, Figure 2.1 provides a sample of a meme used to perpetuate the missionary discourse:
Figure 2.1 A ‘Mormon Ad’ encouraging young men in the Church to enlist to serve a mission (LDS Media Library, 2004).

Note, that what is not said here may be just as important, if not more so, as what is said. What is not said, is that if you do not serve a mission you are not a hero, and if not, what are you? According to Dann (1996a), a few things to consider when analyzing such visuals are the color, format (positioning, size, shape, content, and structure), visual cliché (a piggy bank = savings; or in tourism, a white sandy beach = paradise), and connotation (trick effects, pose, objects, photogenia, aestheticism, and syntax; e.g. superimposing, doctoring photos to add effect). Note that in the Mormon Ad, both the language and image reinforce the super hero cliché. The largest sized text is super, the next largest hero, and the smallest inscription is the admonition to follow the prophet. Thus, the message again is: Superheroes follow the prophet and serve missions. Those
who do not follow the prophet are just ordinary, or less super, by default. While some of
discursive tools are straightforward, the challenge of interpretation continues to arise.

Gee (2010) speaks to this challenge in the context of validity:

Validity is not constituted by arguing that a discourse analysis “reflects reality” in
any simple way. This is so for at least two reasons. First, humans interpret the
world, they do not have access to it “just as it is.” They must use some language
or some other symbol system with which to interpret it and thereby render it
meaningful in certain ways. A discourse analysis is itself an interpretation, an
interpretation of the interpretive work people have done in specific contexts. It is,
in that sense, an interpretation of an interpretation. (p.122)

Methodological integrity. Validity in discourse analysis is established via four
elements: (a) Convergence, or the presence of compatible and convincing responses to
the questions/building tasks; (b) agreement, when a majority of respondents and other
researchers or analysts support or agree with our conclusions; (c) coverage, where
analysis can be applied to former examples or to predict future cases and acknowledges
alternative or rival discourses; and (d) Linguistic details, “the communicative functions
being uncovered in the analysis are linked to grammatical devices that manifestly can and
do serve these functions, according to the judgments of “native speakers” of the social
languages involved” (Gee, 2010, pp. 123-124). By linking discourse analysis with
emergent design and case study research a greater measure of validity and transferability
can also be achieved, given that the discourse is more likely to be contextualized (and
supported by thick, rich description and grounded in participant quotes) and discourses
repeatedly reviewed and revised. The adequacy of the data (citation) was further
established via the pursuit of rival explanations – or perspectives of RMs who were no
longer members of the Church. This allowed for a more diverse representation of the
discourse(s) of reentry in the Church and also clarified the influences of broader social discourses.

I am in a unique position in that I grew up in the Church and served a mission, so I have experienced reentry and Church discourse firsthand. On the other hand, I am also a social scientist who has been trained to think critically and to step back from my previously held biases and assumptions. That said, I recognize that I am both aware of and blind to some of the discourses perpetuated in the Church, including those pertaining to reentry. By employing the analytical strategies and methods for establishing validity in discourse analysis outlined by Gee (2010) I hope to be able to defamiliarize and refamiliarize myself with these discourses. Furthermore, since I was the only ‘coder’ or analyst to review the data, two forms of external review were conducted: First, copies of transcripts, notes, and proposed discourses were sent to the study participants for review or member check (Appendix G). Second, four colleagues who pursue critical research agendas outside of the Church questioned and challenged the work and potential biases represented therein.

Findings

The 16 informants who were interviewed were predominately White, non-Hispanic (n = 14, 87.5%) males (n = 14, 87.5%), aged 20-27 years old, from active, lifelong member families (n = 13, 81.3%). Two of the informants were married and two recently engaged, however, most were single (n = 12, 75%) and either working in service industries and/or attending school (predominately at LDS universities such as BYU Provo, BYU Idaho, or LDS Business College or at institutions in the Salt Lake and Utah
Valleys). All informants had served full time missions (i.e., 18-24 months) in various regions of the United States (n = 8, 50%), Central and South America (n = 5, 31.3%), or Eastern Europe (n = 3, 18.7%). RMs had been ‘home’ between 1 and 21 months (11.6 months on average). All informants had either grown up in or relocated to the southeast prior to departing for their missions, which is a region of the country categorized as highly religious, politically conservative, and ranked low on education, employment, health, and income variables. This region of the country is “powerfully shaped by its history” (Jacobsen, 1992), and continues to navigate its roots in an antebellum economy (i.e., slave-driven plantation farming). The region is also a part of the Bible belt marked by social conservatism, evangelic Protestantism, and more consistent Church attendance and involvement. In sum, one might argue that growing up in a religious climate in this region would provide a somewhat insular perspective and discourse of the world, religion, and individual/social behavior. Regarding the four alternative perspectives, 50% were male, 50% female and only one of four had remained affiliated with the Church.

Reentry discourses are inseparable from broader missionary and Church discourses and situated in societal discourses that occasionally run perpendicular to those in the Church. By examining and describing the discourses identified in the Church and in contemporary society, we can better understand whether or not, and how, missionaries are being influenced by these discourses. The next section presents the main ideas constructed by discourse from informant interviews and documents collected from and about the Church. These ideas are organized according to Gee’s (2010) building tasks and
later interpreted with reference to the concepts of power explored in the literature above. Where appropriate, additional literature and concepts are incorporated to contextualize and expound on quotes, texts, and discursive practices. These findings are then situated within broader social discourses and conversations about young adulthood in contemporary society to illustrate that missionary reentry does not occur in a social vacuum.

**Building Task 1: Establishing Significance “I hope they call me on a mission”**

According to Gee (2010) language is often used to render people, places, or events/things as universally Significant within a community or group. Serving a mission in the Church has certainly become one of those significant things. Accordingly, the discourse of returning in the Church likely begins well before the missionary steps off the plane, with the expectation and admonition to serve. Informants provided ample evidence to support this claim, namely that the significance of a mission was communicated to them long before they received a formal call to serve. Moreover, informants indicated that in addition to their personal or altruistic motives for serving (e.g., desire to help others, desire to strengthen faith or dispel doubts), missionary service was considered a taken for granted, normative expectation, communicated via family, ward members and leaders, and/or friends. My contention, supported by the quotes below, is that the socially prescriptive nature of missionary service may contribute to challenging experiences both in the field and upon reentry.

**Family.** Reflecting on his motivation for serving a mission, Jayce (pseudonym) recalled a memorable experience he had as a young boy. His grandparents had just
returned from a mission to Guatemala and something about their experience triggered in him a desire to serve:

I don't remember things from when I was younger. But there was one experience. My grandparents served a couple missions and I remember we went to their house... when they were coming home from, I think, Guatemala? My cousins were there... I was, I don't know, maybe six or seven... And we sang Families Can Be Together Forever when they came in... It kind of sparked my interest... So from then on it just wasn't really a question I was just like, yeah, I was going.

Though a few informants waffled about whether or not they would serve during their teen years, the language of commitment and certainty expressed here (“it just wasn’t really a question”) by Jayce was much more common and part of the larger Discourse of missionary work. Once the decision to serve was made, it seemed difficult to unmake.

Family inspired service in other ways as well. For instance, some informants saw the mission as an opportunity to make parents proud or to secure the blessings and status obtained by their family members, including siblings, who had already completed their service (a connection to Gee’s building task 3 – Identities, and building task 4 – Relationships). Sophia, who had both been adopted and joined the Church as a teen, recalled:

I remember feeling like it would... make my parents proud... My great-grandma and my grandma and my mom all served, so I would've been the fourth, and I remember thinking that would be really cool, but I also remember that my parents could almost incorporate anything into their missions. Like, they just have so many stories and so many life experiences that had come from their missions and so whenever I thought about how hard it would be to leave for 18 months or when I started to get a little bit stressed on like logistics... the fact that they had done it, helped.
For Sophia, a family history of missionary service (a Figured World\textsuperscript{23}) reinforced the significance of the mission and her commitment to serve, while simultaneously minimizing the perceived and real discomorts of serving. Her family became a resource to draw upon, but also provided a vision of what she could gain or become if she completed her mission successfully. Though his family was not active in the Church at the time of his service, Caden’s parents were similarly supportive of his decision to serve. However, his experience demonstrates the marked difference between family (low pressure to serve) and Church culture (high pressure to serve). He noted:

> My family, they definitely encouraged me to go. They weren't going to force me to go or anything but ... They were like, "You know, if you want to make this decision that's up to you and we'll support you whenever you go." I was like, "Well thanks." I still felt it was my decision to go. There was just lots of people along the way that were like, "Hey, you should. You should go." And I’m like, "I should go."

In Caden’s case, while the expectation of missionary service was clear (the marker “should” indicating the significance of the mission), it did not appear to be coercive. Interestingly, despite being the first to serve a mission in his family and despite (or perhaps because of) his parents inactivity and relative indifference, he conformed to rather than challenging the prevailing norm.

**Ward members and leaders.** Informants described a number of processes by which missionary discourses were transmitted, such as personal spiritual experiences, teachings from Church leaders and instructors, or insistence from ward members.

\textsuperscript{23} Gee (2010) defines a Figured World as a “typical picture” or “unconscious theory or story we use to understand and deal with the world” (pp. 69-70).
According to Jayden, who was the fourth to serve a mission in his family, “it was the thing that we all needed to do, you know? (Laughs).” Jackson expanded on this sentiment:

Growing up...especially in the Church, I was taught that you go on mission and everything. And for me, at a young age I had...wanted to go on a mission.

Interestingly Jackson’s motivation to serve would later wane and then be reignited by a positive experience with the full-time missionaries in his ward. Luke similarly described the expectation to serve as a low stakes, persistent invitation from ward leaders and members:

I think you always - when you grow up in the Church, they’ll [ward members and leaders] always be like, "Hey you want to go on a mission?" And you always talk about it...You talk about your mission your whole life. You know- "I'm gonna go serve a mission."

In contrast, Liam and Oliver felt that missionary service was, to some extent pushed upon young men in the Church:

...there's always that, whether we want to recognize it or not, that social push, your family, your church. Everyone's expecting you to go and always talking about it, and so you don't want to let those people down. And so that definitely is a factor in it. But it's definitely not the most important...I always knew I was going to eventually do it. Just kind of being raised in the Church, and you always kind of talk about it and know it's coming. (Liam)

I definitely understood that it's a lot of pressure when you're 19 to go-And people just say, "Hey, you should go. It'll be good for you," and I was like, "I'm going to go because you're telling me to." And that was probably a little bit of why I felt, like, pressure to, submit them [mission papers] when I was 19. (Oliver)

Again, the significance (building task 1) of serving in these examples was stressed by its impact on relationships (building task 4). While aware of the expectation and in some
cases direct pressure to serve, most informants felt that their decision to serve was
motivated by other factors. In Oliver’s case, while he sensed pressure to serve, he also
believed that he could return at any time if he felt strongly that is what he should do.

For some informants, changes in Church policies such as the reduction in mission
age prompted self-reflection and an earlier decision regarding whether or not to serve.
Personal conversion moments, and witnessing conversion moment in others, also
cultivated a desire to share the Gospel and its blessings with others. For instance,
impactful lessons on the topic of missionary work or Patriarchal Blessings with specific
reference to future missionary service triggered initial desires to be a missionary. Liam
noted such an example:

..the first cognitive recall that I remember that I was like, "Yes I'm going to serve a mission," was when I was four, and we had a Sunday school class, and we got mock mission calls, and I got one to Montana. And ...ever since then, I kind of look on that as when it first went through my mind, like, I guess one day I'm gonna serve a mission.

As noted in Jackson’s experience, missionary oriented wards also increased excitement
and interest in serving as did working and building relationships with the local
missionaries as a youth. Conversely, some people viewed the mission as an opportunity
to reaffirm their faith, confirm the validity of the Church) or eliminate doubts. For these
individuals, the mission functioned as a last stitch effort to obtain the spiritual witness
and testimony of the veracity of the Church, which they had been promised would come
since their childhood, and to miraculously resolve the cognitive dissonance they felt.
Whereas other informants had experienced a conversion moment that motivated their
service, these individuals were seeking the conversion moment as a result of their service (and in most cases did not find it).

**Friends.** Though many informants indicated that friends within the Church either indirectly or directly motivated them to serve (building task 4), one informant – Jayce – mentioned that non-member friends were a larger driving force:

> I had already resolved, so I was going... no matter what. But I think it was kind of weird ... My pressure was more, I think, from the outside community, not from my church. And not from my family...I was one of the few members of the high school and they knew I was going. Especially once I got my call and everything and so then it was like ... we're setting the example, so if it didn't work out or something ... that was like the only the pressure ... not from my family or church.

Note that the culture of missionary service is so pervasive (part of a larger Conversation\(^\text{24}^\)) that even non-members (who are presumably less versed in the Church’s policy, practices, and doctrines) were aware of the expectation to serve and its consequences, according to Jayce. Jayce apparently also felt pressure knowing that his decision to serve or not could present a poor image of the Church to his friends (linking to Gee’s Building Task 4 – Relationships) who in this case were being treated as potential investigators or converts. As noted earlier, a few individuals described how their life was transformed by the Gospel and how they desired to share the Gospel with others as a result. In the canon and handbooks of the Church this type of experience and language has shaped a Figured World and Discourse that I call the Alma effect (see Alma 36), which is encapsulated in a statement from preach my gospel that simply states “Any time

\(^{24}\) Gee (2010) defines a Conversation as “a public debate, argument, motif, issue, or theme that larger numbers of people in society or a social group know about” (p. 113).
we experience the blessings of the Atonement in our lives, we cannot help but have a concern for the welfare of others…A great indicator of one’s personal conversion is the desire to share the gospel with others” (“The Atonement and Missionary Work,” seminar for new mission presidents, June 1994). The significance of this statement is the implication that if you do not desire to serve a mission or share the Gospel, you must not have a personal belief in or relationships with Christ (something few people would wish to admit). In sum, the Significance placed on the mission via the discourse of the Church highly influences one’s decision to serve, and perhaps one’s subsequent experience in the field and reentry. This Significance was clear in relation to the quotes above and will become more so in discussions of early return, the desire to return with ‘honor,’ and the desire to maintain one’s status as a missionary, in the quotes below.

Building Task 2: Practices (Activities)

The next horizon, dating and marriage. The second of Gee’s (2010) building tasks, Practices, refers to “socially recognized and institutionally supported endeavors that usually involves sequencing…in certain specified ways” (p. 17). One of the most recurring ideas that emerged throughout the interview process was the use of Discourse to encourage, enact, and normalize reentry marriage expectations and practices. Specifically, informants noted that just as there was anticipatory pressure to serve a mission, there was also post-hoc pressure to pursue the next significant rite of passage or marker of adulthood in the Church – marriage. Note here that in the doctrine of the Church, marriage and family are central to God’s plan and mankind’s purpose and potential (Hudec, 2013). Prior scholars have confirmed that the culture and doctrine
surrounding marriage in the Church strongly effects how members practice their faith and engage in the processes of dating and marriage; moreover, some of the structures within the mission (i.e., companionships, companionship inventories) are intended to prepare missionaries for later marriage roles (Hudec, 2013; Parry, 1994). Hudec (2013) argues that most members of the Church follow these discursive practices unquestionably, even when they do not entirely agree with them. Thus, the discursive pressure to conform to the marriage practice is well established. The following series of quotes from informants document this pressure and illustrate that the discourse is again transmitted through multiple sources (e.g., leaders, peers/friends, and family:

**Leaders.** “There’s definitely... Anytime a general authority would come and talk to us, marriage would always be brought up (laughs). And how you shouldn’t delay it because of school or whatever ... And when you get home, get married ... you know. I don’t know. It didn't really feel like pressure to me. But ... The idea was definitely there...” (Caden)

**Peers/friends.** “I think it's just a lot of my mission companions are getting married and my cousins that are the same age and that have been on missions sometimes so it's kind of like ... It's a little bit of that. But nothing that's too ...Just kind of like, you get back and everyone expects you to get engaged really quickly.” (Jayce)

**Family.** “There’s tons of pressure. I mean, this is BYU. Everyone gets married in two seconds. Your newsfeed and social media is a constant thread of engagements. You hear my mom, every single conversation we have there's, "My favorite sister missionary from the ward just got out there. You need to go talk to her." Or, "I have this new girl that would be so perfect for you, blah, blah, blah." I'm like no, no. I won’t... If you suggest anyone I will never, ever go on a date with her (Laughs).” (Liam)

From these quotes we can conclude that RMs are bombarded with messages about marriage and its importance on all fronts. An examination of the My Plan reentry
program of the Church will also reveal that marriage is listed as the foremost goal and achievement of a missionary’s post mission life. Likewise, scholars have documented a phenomenon they call “single cursedness”, which was more common in earlier Church discourses but continues to linger through generational storytelling in the Conversation about marriage in the Church today (Raynes & Parsons, 1983). As an example, members of the Church commonly banter about a supposed Brigham Young quote that labels any unmarried person over the age of 25 as “a menace to society.” Liam believed that there may be a subculture or discourse at Church sponsored schools (and perhaps in Utah generally) in which the Conversation about marriage is even more pronounced or aggressive.

That marriage was the next step after the mission (at least for men in the Church) was clearly stated by Luke’s Mission President:

...He told me that that [marriage] was "the next horizon." I think those were the words he used. Like, that's the next big major thing you're gonna do in your life.

Here the world horizon took on a new, Situated Meaning\(^{25}\), and again added Significance (Gee’s Building Task 1 – Significance) to the practice of marriage. Benjamin confirmed that marriage was the next step in life after one’s mission and clarified one of the ways the discourse of marriage is perpetuated (and even socialized) during the mission (Parry, 1994).

\(^{25}\) Gee (2010) defines situated meanings as words and phrases that take on highly specific meanings in their actual contexts of use. For example, a horizon is literally defined as the point where the earth and sky meet, but in the right context can also refer to an upper limit to reach for or goal to pursue. In this case, marriage was positioned as the upper limit or goal of the RM’s life.
....marriage is obviously god's next step I guess you'd say...He [God] puts a lot of emphasis on the family. I definitely want to have my own family. I mean teaching about the family for two years on a mission ... you definitely experience this. See other people's families and be able to see the blessings that come from it.

From this quote we glean that in studying and teaching the doctrine of the family, missionaries learn and internalize it. Michael was particularly influenced by the discourse on marriage and changed his post-mission life plans as a result. His observations and experiences teaching the doctrine of marriage reinforced both the Significance and Practice of marriage in the Church:

Temple marriage... before the mission I didn't really care as much... if I get married to somebody, like it could be a member, it could be like, a non-member, doesn't really matter as much to me. But I think the mission kinda changed me ... I want to be married in the temple. Probably because it's easier, to live with somebody who has the same religious background as you. Also ...'cause we were taught in church that we had all these blessings from temple marriages and stuff, and knowing that has influenced me, too.

Not only did marriage become more of a priority for Michael but his views about appropriate ways in which marriage should be enacted (i.e., marriage to someone of the same faith) were also changed. In contrast, after leaving the Church Bella chose to engage in multiple pre-marital sexual encounters, in direct contradiction to Church teachings. Both behaviors (i.e., same faith marriage, premarital sex) are examples of the specific sequencing aspect of this task, and how the task is either reinforced or resisted in practice.

Jayce and Mason both noted that the expectation to date and marry or pursue this “next horizon” was so ingrained in the Conversations of the Church that some Mission Presidents did not feel the need to spend time discussing the topic during exit interviews:
And I went in there and he was like, "You know I'm not gonna give you a lecture on getting married or any of that because you already know all that" (Jayce)
My mission president never sat down with me and said, "Hey, you know, you need to be trying to get married." But, obviously we've had the conversations of... pursuing the next covenant and that's ultimately what we're here to do is to make covenants and keep them and continue to make those covenants, renew 'em. (Mason)

Owen had a similar experience. First he acknowledged the broader Conversation about marriage in the Church, and then he clarified that because marriage was a taken-for-granted expectation, his Mission President could provide more refined council about how to achieve the marriage goal.

...I had heard that mission presidents tell you to go get married as soon as you can...so I asked him if he was going to tell me to get married, and he's like, "no, I'm going to tell you, you should be looking"

One Mission President described the Figured World surrounding marriage and how the mission prepares missionaries for that World. Jackson recalled the President’s words:

I remember as well, he [the mission president] told us... "Go home and get married". But the mission president, he always said that the reason we say, "Will you", when you're asking investigators [to make commitments] is that you're preparing to ask your future wife to marry you. So remember that, to ask the will-you question, the direct question.

In other words, missionaries are trained to invite non-members to make and keep commitments using what has come to be known as “the commitment pattern.” This Mission President was suggesting that Jackson return home and use the same social language and pattern to commit a young lady to be his wife.

Adding to the expectation and pressure to date and marry, RMs experienced discomfort interacting with members of the opposite sex, awkwardness, anxiety, and low
self-worth. Supporting prior research, informants in the present study also felt underprepared for marriage, and tended to pursue more creative and casual forms of dating (e.g., hanging out, friendship first; Woodger, Holman, Young, & Neusner, 2007). Dating related stress and pressure was also exacerbated when RMs made social comparisons to other RMs who were dating and getting married. Sister missionaries expressed that they had less power or control over their dating/marriage experience and, yet were often blamed for their lack of dating success; i.e., if you are not married, there must be because something wrong with you. These findings coincided with those from other works which suggest that Church women desire to have more influence or power in the courtship process and more distributive and shared roles and authority in the home (Beaman, 2001; Woodger, Holman, & Young, 2007). Beaman (2001) also documented the Figured Worlds that women in the Church create to justify their roles (and lesser power) – a world in which men somehow “need” the priesthood (to make up for their shortcomings) or in which procreation and priesthood are separate but equal responsibilities of women and men respectively. Woodger et al. (2007) compiled sociological studies of marriage and courtship patterns in the Church (most of which relied on limited BYU samples) and reported that young members of the Church desire to marry, usually commence the process of finding a spouse by “hanging out,” and rely heavily on spiritual guidance to select a marriage partner. The authors further noted that the age of marriage is lower in the Church when compared to the general U.S. population in part due to the seriousness placed on marriage.
The primary answers. As missionaries returned home and navigated the stresses of reentry, they often turned to what are commonly known in the Church as “the primary answers” (a.k.a., Mormon answers, CPR) for relief. The word primary has a Situated Meaning that refers to the context in which “answers” were learned. Primary is the organization that cares for and educates the children of the Church (primarily on Sundays) from the time they turn three until they turn twelve. The “answers” learned in primary are so often used that they have become rote; they include practices such as daily study of the scriptures, daily prayer, attendance at Church meetings, temple attendance, and occasionally include a variety of other behaviors (e.g., service, weekly family home evening, and regular family study and prayer). Interestingly, informants rarely referred to secular sources of support during reentry, relying heavily on spiritual solutions to their problems. Likewise, Mission Presidents and the recently developed My Plan program of the Church stress “primary answers” over other practices or forms of reentry support. This phenomenon is not uncommon in the Church, to the point that leaders are known to press upon members the importance of not taking these practices lightly or for granted (see Decoo, 2013; Long, 2017). As examples of how these practices were enacted by or communicated to informants, a few quotes are presented below.

As a starting point, one informant expressed that in anticipation for home, missionaries often ask themselves the question: “What are you going to do? …on a weekly basis?” The following quote represents what he believes to be the collective, socialized response:

*I'm going to read my scriptures. I'm going to pray. I'm going to go to the temple. I'm going to do my home teaching. It's like the same things that you teach people*
on your missions. It's the same things that you've been told your whole life. But being able to do those frequently and effectively, those are the expectations.

Of all the primary answers to be considered, a number of informants expressed that attending and worshiping in Mormon temples was the “single” or most important thing that helped them navigate reentry distress. For instance, Carter stated the following when asked about advice he would give to future RMs:

If possible, go to temple on a weekly basis...That single thing is what has sustained me the most. Be able to go to the temple and to be able to worship there is ... the best thing for me to be able to do. It was the strongest thing for me to be able to do and it helped me grow in my faith even more. Even after I had ended my mission. I know a lot of people say that their missions were the best two years of their life. For me, I like to say my mission were my best two years up to that point because since then I’ve had so many experiences that have taught me, that have helped me understand, that a testimony in Jesus Christ doesn’t have to just be grown, when you're serving him 24/7/365 ...as a full time missionary. If you will ...do the standard Mormon answers, go to church, read your scriptures, pray, attend the temple, you'll be fine. Just do them, don't say you're going to do them but actually do those answers. And keep the commandments. If you keep the commandments then you have safety, you have peace, you'll have the Holy Ghost, he'll direct you, exactly what you need to do.

Carter stressed that commitment to the primary answers had to be both genuine and unfailing, which many RMs indicated was difficult. Jackson expressed that this struggle created internal conflict and turmoil, partly because the primary answers are tied to one’s identity and purpose (building task 3). He contended that when enacted, the primary answers could reorient people to their place in life:

I feel like ... Some people lose their place. You felt important for two years, or 18 months, and then you come back, and you lose the name, the badge and you just, kind of, forget who you are and the person, and you lose sight of why you went on the mission in the first place. You stop going to church, the small things that we always taught about, and the small things that matter. There's like the three main

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things ...we always call it CPR, Church, Prayer and Reading the Book of Mormon. If you stop doing one of those things, you're not gonna crumble immediately. It's gonna be a little slow crack and within those cracks Satan can put little thoughts and...

In Jackson’s quote we also see the first introduction to the idea of an adversary, of Satan, and his role and contribution during reentry. Satan’s role as the enemy of truth and light was subtly peppered throughout informant’s accounts of reentry. Many guiltily admitted that they had not practiced the primary answers as well as they should or that they had engaged in sinful behavior at one time or another during reentry. Thus, in some ways, fear of God’s disappointment or Satan’s approval, pushed them towards adherence to those primary answers.

**Building Task 3: Identities**

The tag as a sign or symbol of their calling. According to Gee (2010) “we use language [and symbols] to get recognized as taking on a certain identity or role” (p. 18). As missionaries described the conclusion of their missions, they addressed the symbolic, identity-laden nature and importance of their missionary name tag. The removal of the plaque functioned as an indication that their work was done and was imbued with bittersweet, nostalgic feelings. Without the tag, individuals’ identity’s became muddled and their purpose less clear. Ryan made an attempt to document why the tag carried so much meaning for some missionaries. His response is captured here:

_Hard question. (laughs) So I guess what it represented to me was just being a servant of the Lord, following everything he wants me to do, I mean, I felt like I was in touch with the Spirit. I didn’t feel the Spirit all the time but I was in touch with the Spirit all the time and there’s a special spirit about being a missionary that one feels, and when they take the tag off, you can kinda feel that spirit_
leave. So it's just like there's a special part of you that is leaving. I mean, after being a missionary, you can still be a missionary, go out with the missionaries, teach and everything, it's just it's not the same spirit as being a missionary.

Thus, according to Ryan, the tag and language surrounding the tag were symbolic of the spirit and power associated with one’s missionary calling. He notes that one can continue to do missionary things but do not identify as a missionary as readily. Benjamin explained that the removal of the tag signified a major life transition and also noted the important role that family play in the ritual of removing the tag:

I was able to go into the room with my family and...share an experience from the mission which was definitely ... awesome because it felt like it was the first experience I kind of shared with my family in person and got them to kind of get a taste of what it was like. It was a very touching moment and then my mom got to take off my plaque which was also kind of hard but definitely a good moment to have with the family and good to just kind of experience that with them. We’re going to the next chapter of life. So it was nice to have a family there.

Notice that by incorporating the family, Benjamin indicated that reentry and the next chapter of life was now a group (we) practice rather than an individual act (building task 4). In contrast, Luke felt his release experience was anticlimactic and the removal of the tag insufficient to mark the transition from one phase of life to the next. Describing his release experience, he said:

When you get in, when you get called to be a missionary, they have someone's hands laid on your head, and they officially call you. But when you get home, the Stake president just says, "I release you." There's no great prayer, there's no, unsetting apart, or whatever that would be. He just says, "You’re released. Take off your tag." And I kind of felt cheated. I was like, "What, are you kidding? That's it?" (laughs)...
For Luke, the Practice of releasing someone in the Church was not regarded with the same Significance and ceremony that is placed on the call to serve. Moreover, while other informants felt like the removal of the tag was a weighty symbolic gesture and that the tag was in some ways imbued with or signified the power of their call, Luke did not feel that way. Jayden similarly noted that while the removal of the missionary tag is a formal/tangible symbol of one’s release from formal, fulltime missionary service, the tag removal also marks the commencement of a life of informal, part-time member-missionary service. He remarked:

_We're missionaries. That's who we are. It's not just something that you can put on for two years and then just take off, or for the ladies, it's put on for 18 months and then just take off. It's something that you are. You know, you're always a missionary. Like, you're never released as a missionary. You're just, "All right, you're not a full-time missionary anymore." Prophets have said, you know, you're, always a missionary. All members are missionaries, so ... But for a full-time mission, I just said that I returned when I took off the badge, but as a member-missionary, I still am, if that makes any sense._

In this sense, the tag became a sign or symbol (semiotics) of an identity – missionary – in much the same way that the Eiffel tower has become a near universal sign of a place – Paris (Palmer, 1999). However, Jayden’s remarks indicate that signs are interpreted differently or come to have different meetings based on those who come in contact with them (Zhang & Sheng, 2017). Thus, while the tag is significant, it is also insignificant in that for certain informants it only marked a two year portion of a long life of service. Grayson agreed with Jayden to some extent but also expressed that the shift to member-missionary work was difficult. He contended Gospel sharing was much easier when one was wearing the tag, especially given the Conversation that exists regarding the tags
significance to non-members. Grayson’s comment is supported by scholarship that would suggest the LDS missionary attire and tag have become recognizable symbols in society (Decker & Austin, 2010). Grayson also suggested that a post-mission program should focus on the following, related topic:

How to still share the gospel not wearing a name tag where everyone knows already, 'cause it's a lot harder when you're not wearing a name tag and everyone knows...because, when you do that stuff [share the Gospel]... I feel good. I feel like I remember why I did it, and, if they could teach you how to do that in a worldly setting, and not like, "Oh, just share this Facebook post." 'Cause that doesn't have the same gratification as handing a book of Mormon to someone, like someone you've known for a long time. Like, I know how to do it, but like, how to muster the courage up now, as you're not a missionary.

Embedded in all of these quotes is an interest in continuing to be identified by one’s missionary status, power, and authority, which was somehow affixed to the missionary tag. What these ideas also point to is the question, what does it mean to be a RM? A question that is addressed in the section below but in some ways is capture here as a Figured World in which RMs maintain a semblance of the missionary power and purpose they had experienced during their full-time service.

Building Tasks 3/ 5/ 7: Identities, Politics, and Sign Systems – The “perfect” RM

In the Church, identification as a RM can elevate one’s status, importance, and power (i.e., the pedestal mentality). This is evident in the identity-first language often employed by LDS news sources where nameless individuals with the title “Returned Missionary” are described as the victims of callous crimes, the saviors of sports teams, or the heroes of inspiring stories. Moreover, some accounts collected in this research posit that RM status is linked to better marriage prospects, priesthood advancements, and
general recognition. In that regard the discourse of reentry is not only focused on the task of Identity but the task of Politics – where social, spiritual, and tangible resources are distributed to RMs before others, and the task of Sign Systems and Knowledge – where RMs are recognized as more knowledgeable authority figures within a ward. All that said, the nature of the RM status and its importance does seem to change over time. That is, as enough time passes the individuals resume their role in the collective body of the Church, which is full of RMs just like them (homogeneity). In addition to the social benefits associated with identifying as a RM, the label also invites higher expectations and greater responsibility (from self and others). In fact, a Discourse of perfection tied to the missionary identity seems to balance out the perceived benefits of that identity. Specifically, the perfect RM is known to have the following traits:

**The perfect RM is exactly obedient and does not make mistakes.** Jackson outlined the expectation that missionaries should be perfect and even went so far as to explain why this discourse is problematic. He felt like those who had served missions understood that neither missionaries nor RMs were perfect; instead, those who hold RMs to the highest standards were people who had not served:

*A lot of people think that ... Well for those that haven't gone on a mission or haven't yet gone on a mission, I think that they see returned missionaries as perfect. That, "Oh, they've been on a mission so they won't have anything wrong with them." And they're expected to just know everything and be able to get right back into life without a skip. And to me, I think that's a little, kind of, impossible because one, we're still humans, even though we served a mission we still have problematic days, things we do wrong....Just because we serve a mission doesn't mean that we're perfect. I mean, it doesn't mean that we should be put on a pedestal... I think that's another reason why it's hard for returning missionaries ... so much is expected of them to stay in church, to get married, go to college, start*
a life. There's so much that people expect of them to do, and if you put all of that on one person it's gonna weigh them down with all this worry and stress and it's hard to handle, if ... you don't have the right support getting home, the right friends. So I feel like, what people expect of RMs is kind of, unreachable, in some aspects... And if you have so many tasks to do at a certain time, that your stress is a little too much to bear, and I think that's where a lot of people, or a lot of return missionaries, struggle with their spirituality just because they have so much to do, so much is expected of them and they're trying as hard as they can and it just feels like they're not doing good enough for those around them.

Regarding the expectation of perfect obedience, Grayson struggled to be obedient as an RM (without the structure and purpose the mission provides) and yet the expectations seem comparable to those held for full-time missionaries:

You expect [higher expectations as a missionary], 'cause when you're on your mission, it's pretty easy to be really good... there's like little things you'll slip up on, 'cause no one's perfect, but it's really easy to be good. And, I mean, off your mission, it's not so easy to be good, and, I couldn't do everything I wanted to. I'd slip up, I'd do something, I'd be bad, like not bad, but I'd slip up, do something that I shouldn't have done. And I'd be like, "Oh, I'm a returned missionary. I have to do this."

A perfect RM has all the answers & actively participates in church meetings. Grayson also noted that in addition to the absence of mistakes, RMs are expected to show that they have acquired spiritual knowledge and actively share that knowledge in Church meetings. However, he resisted this notion to some extent, choosing instead to revert back to a former, quieter self.

They expected me to be...more spiritual, which I was...I think there's a constant expectation when you're back home. Like I talked to about it with my cousin 'cause we both got back around the same time, and we talked and, I was like “Hey, I don't like talking in class. I never have.” And I'm like, “I kind of reverted back to that when I came home from mission." And he's like, “Yeah, but you have to talk, you have all the answers now” (Said with earnest). I'm like, “Hey man,
I'm not a missionary” (Said with skepticism). And so he had the expectation that he had to share his insight with everything, and I didn't have any expectation set for myself. I just reverted back to old ways. It was just like, **everyone's served a mission here.** Like, 90%, and if not, they're older, they know this stuff too. It was Elders Quorum.... and the high percentage of people have really good things to say and I don't want to be talking all the time. And that's an expectation that I thought I would have, 'cause he told me, but, no. It didn't last very long, 'cause I just talked a little but during class but that's it.

Here, Grayson assumes that the majority of members have served missions, which is not the case and therefore shifts the expectations placed on himself to other presumed RMs. Liam on the other hand, felt guilt and shame that he was not living up to socially proscribed standards associated with things like personal worship, home teaching, and service:

- **My prayer and scripture study, are super sporadic and super bad. It's embarrassing...to come off of your mission and that's not something that you're effectively doing. But it's super hard to be able to keep up with that. Like I'm done with religion classes now, at [school], and so...there's no classes like forcing me to be able to read consistently. It's up to me now to be able to do that. And I'm like, dang.**

- **[Having seen RMs as a missionary who did not home teach well] You're like, 'I'm going to come over and be a perfect home teacher." And then like just being able to do all those things to find meaningful ways to serve, to go back and visit your mission, and to follow up on those people, like those are all expectations that I put on myself. And, I'm still not where I want to be.**

Sophia expressed her frustration that people assume that all RMs are good people, active in the Church, and perfectly knowledgeable about the Gospel. She stated:

- **They'll just assume that they [returned missionaries] are good people because they're RMs or just assume that they're active in the Church because they're RMs... I was studying for my Book of Mormon final and my friend said, "You...**
served a mission. You'll be fine," and I remember being like, "(laughs) What?"
"No, I don't feel like that means anything."

Where the discourse of the Church defined RMs as flawless, Sophia had personally observed the flaws in others and herself and, therefore, could not digest this discourse. She recognized that this identity was more complex than how it was being treated and that resources were being unfairly distributed as a result.

A perfect RM applies what he/she learned; he or she is the perfect member missionary. Many missionaries desired to maintain their passion and ability to share the Gospel and teach others, or at least acknowledged that this was expected of them, a sentiment captured in the following quote from Ava:

...for me it's just about like becoming the ultimate member missionary so that you can be of help to the missionaries and you yourself can help the work come forward. I guess for me it's just like being the best member missionary that you can be and keeping missionary work a priority in your life.

She continued:

Where I've struggled...a lot is feeling that if I'm not doing missionary work, I don't feel like I'm progressing. And that's funny because I'll look at other companions or other people in my mission and they might do missionary work but they are not married ... or they haven't progressed in other ways and they feel like they are not progressing....That has been very contradicting, because I have been progressing yet I feel like because I've put so much attention on those things, obviously I can't be a full time missionary anymore. So it's just been a kind of a desire of always wanting to be a disciple of Christ and share the gospel more and have more time. But... [also] trying to put myself first, family first, and providing for work and school.

Here Ava draws attention to the mounting and sometimes conflicting expectations placed on RMs (e.g., get married, start school, and seek employment v. continue to serve, do
missionary work, and maintain daily disciplines). She also makes the connection between these expectations and social indicators of success or worth (i.e., outward demonstrations of “progress”; building task 5).

Sophia recalled being critical of RMs when she was serving as a full-time missionary. Her feeling was that a RM should know and do better because he or she had experienced the opportunities and challenges of full-time missionary service:

*I think that as a missionary, the title RM seems like such an unobtainable goal and you meet so many and talk to so many and some of them are still rock stars and they take the work from our mission and really applied them and you can tell, and some of them, not so much, you know? They just kind of left their mission at the door and they did it, but it didn’t really change their lives and so, I wanted to be able to say that my mission changed me and I wanted other people to be able to realize that, too ... when I was a missionary, when people were RMs and like they didn’t help missionaries or didn’t put forth as much effort as I knew that they could, I was always a little bit frustrated ’cause I was like, “You know how it is!”*

Sophia later reflected on her own efforts as a member-missionary (which were subpar) and was how she had had a change of heart. She developed greater empathy for the RMs she had criticized, and acknowledged (like Ava) that the busyness and stresses of life can interfere with one’s desire and ability to serve. These discrepancies between the RM ideal and reality is well supported in the memoir of Craig Harline aptly titled “Way below the angels: The pretty clearly troubled but not even close to tragic confessions of a real live Mormon missionary” (see Downing, 2016).

*A perfect RM does not doubt.* Sophia also expressed that RMs were given less room to doubt, question, or explore their faith. They were expected to have perfect faith and to thoroughly rely on the primary answers (see above) to resolve their issues.
...People think that if you're an RM, you know the Book of Mormon so well, that you should have your whole life together and that you should be super active and I think that people are really surprised that RMs have questions or doubt things or have problems with faith because we were missionaries, we taught this, we should know, and that's kind of another one of those social stigmas in Utah, and especially Provo and it's kind of hard that people ... they just expect more out of you.

Sophia also clarified that this expectation was lowered for those who had not yet or never would serve missions.

I feel like it's much easier and more acceptable to have doubts before a mission. But I also feel like, when you're a convert and you have doubts, then people assume that maybe when you joined the Church, you weren't fully converted. Which is hard for me because you very well can feel the spirit and have a testimony of certain things and then months later, realize- You know, missionaries are so imperfect and we don't teach people everything. You learn so much. I'm still learning and I've been a member for like six years...I have an uncle right now who is having a hard time and he served a mission and his mom, my grandma, keeps telling him, "Just pray more. Just read your scriptures more and that's why you've been crazy"... but he's like, "I've been doing that my whole life and I don't feel like I have a testimony," you know? And so I think that sometimes people just assume that the primary answers should be good enough. And when they're not good enough for someone like they are good enough for you, there's a little bit of this dissonance that's hard to handle.

The discourse of doubt led to some informants remaining within the Church as “closet doubters” (Burton, 1982), afraid to admit their concerns and face the social retribution that would come, OR resulted in disaffiliation and ostracization after doubts were admitted and embraced (building task 7).

In sum, this discourse places RMs on a pedestal with unobtainable ideals and timelines. This ideologically motivated discourse is potentially problematic as it may create an environment where members who try and fail to live up to the high standards
set out by Church leaders and by God, begin to feel counterproductive guilt and shame. This observation has been supported to some extent in a recent study of religious scrupulosity, perfectionism, and commitment (Allen & Wang, 2014). Scrupulosity here refers to a “pervasive concern around sinful activity” and compulsive participation in repetitive religious acts, while perfectionism – in its maladaptive form – is characterized as “a tendency to feel that one is never good enough” (p. 258). The authors found that while a high proportion of the LDS sample were deemed adaptive perfectionists – those who hold high standards and “are more likely to feel self-acceptance and less depressive symptoms when experiencing perceived failure” (p. 258) – they also noted that when “faced with perceived failures around their high standards, they may [have felt] overly fearful of making mistakes (committing sin) and worry about not pleasing God” a tendency that “may ultimately lead to a lack of satisfaction with life” (pp. 261-262) ¹. In other words, as members fail to live up to the discourse of perfection that prevails in the Church, they may experience decreased life satisfaction and comorbid negative mental health outcomes.

Applied to missionary reentry, if missionaries have a preconceived notion of a “perfect” reentry experience in their minds and their personal reality does not align with that image, they may feel similar guilt or lack of worthiness and subsequently adjust poorly. Perfectionist attitudes may also result in a reluctance to disclose information to significant others or Church leaders in an effort to avoid being seen as one who ‘lacks faith’ or who is failing to ‘endure to the end.’ In this case, missionaries would fear that their perspective would no longer be valued and their access to priesthood and relational
resources would be diminished. Interestingly, Church leaders seem to be aware of this and other unhealthy sub-discourses and have addressed them to some extent in their general addresses to the Church. However, these discourses have not been formally considered in scientific scholarship and further research is warranted.

**Building Tasks 4/6: Relationships and Connections – Early Return “Return with honor”**

Gee (2010) posited that we also use language “to build social relationships” or “signal the sort of relationships we have or want to have” (p. 18). Moreover, we use language “to render certain things connected or relevant (or not) to other things” (p. 19). While those who remain in the field for the entirety of the scheduled service (i.e., 18 months for sisters, 24 months for elders) are expected to be perfect when they return, the opposite may be true for individuals who return early (even with the censure of the Mission President and local leaders). In other words, early return missionaries are sometimes viewed as imperfect, transgressors, and much like military deserters. They are regarded as too weak, rebellious, or sinful to have completed their task. Johnny documented his perception of the contrast of his early return with that of those who had returned ‘with honor’ or served full term.

_I waited for a bit while most of the others went down the escalator to screaming throngs of poster wielding extended family, then finally mustered the courage to go myself. My parents were waiting at the bottom along with my two youngest brothers. I had [explicitly] told my parents not to bring them. I did not want my brothers to see their dishonorable, early-returned missionary brother... [home] felt like more of a foreign land than [South America] ever did as my dad and I drove away from the airport._
Johnny’s description of his return are indicate that he became irrelevant or disconnected from the social world that had previously accepted him and delivered him to the mission field. Braxton had a similar experience and added his feeling that returning home early would destroy his chances of engaging in meaningful relationships in the Church (building task 4), particularly romantic relationships.

_I certainly did not want to hurt the expectations that many of the people I love had for me...I did not want to be viewed as a failure, as I know many early returning missionary will be viewed. I didn’t want to go home and be instantly cut off from 90% of the females in the community who would now no longer date me because I didn’t return home ‘honorably.’_

Interestingly, even in situations where a medical release was given and highly publicized (which is typically viewed as an acceptable and ‘honorable’ form of release), informants still felt stigmatized and ostracized from their wards. What’s more interesting is that many individuals who return early served faithfully or chose the path of integrity and authenticity by returning home to repent of prior transgressions and begin anew or by returning home to reconcile their beliefs and start an alternative journey outside of the Church. Conversely, a number of individuals who serve their full term let sins and doubts remain undisclosed, or wasted away their mission through slothfulness and disobedience and yet retained the Relationships and Connections associated with their title. Thus, as Sophia noted, the titles RM and early return missionary say very little about individual differences, attitudes, and experiences and if applied without scrutiny can do more harm than good.

Informants in the present study, particularly those who left the Church were influenced by these broader discourses. Owen, who only attended Church periodically,
seemed to be toeing the line between the Church and broader Social discourses, a ‘lukewarm’ position that is not well regarded in the Church (see Matt 6: 24 “no man can serve two masters” or Revelations 3:16 “So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew thee out of my mouth”). He and Grayson both expressed that coming home and being released signaled, to them, an increase in autonomy and a lowering of standards. The handful of informants who had left the Church all made allusions to the philosophies of autonomy, individualism, and pluralism as well. For example, Bella described her process of disaffiliation from the Church as a pattern of doubting Church discourses, researching and discovering alternative discourses, and liberating herself through those newfound discourses. She describes the result of this process in the following statement:

I believe we are all perfect just the way we are...Everyone has their own definition of what is wrong or right, what’s weird and what’s normal. When I finally grasped that perception as reality, I realized that we choose our own paths. We choose what is right and wrong for ourselves...we can be WHOEVER we want to be.

As society continues to move more and more towards a culture of individualism, pluralism, and non-judgmental language, more questioning and disaffiliating in the Church may occur.

Discussion

The mission in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints continues to function as a socialization agent, marker of the passage to religious adulthood, and source of religious identity for young adults in the Church. According to Parry (1994) for young men in the Church “…a worthy mission is the proper and usual prerequisite to full adult
participation in the LDS Church and the Mormon Community” (p. 182). The act of returning from a mission may crystalize those socializing processes and result in retention and reenlistment in the Church’s lay ministry and mission (what Parry described), or allow for critiques of those processes and lead to disbelief and disaffiliation. Social discourses related to moral individualism and autonomy may further push RMs one way or the other (i.e., towards commitment or towards disaffiliation) or may foster cognitive dissonance and distress in these individuals’ lives as they try to navigate two opposing but potent Conversations about the source of happiness in life and the necessity of faith.

This study has revealed a number of religious discourses that are present during reentry in the Church and examined the role these discourses may play on establishing significance, relevance, identities, etc. While not debilitating, these discourses may influence the social, mental, emotional, and spiritual status of RMs in the Church. Thus, Church leaders ought to consider whether or not these discourses and their cultural or doctrinal underpinnings need to be challenged or altered and the extent to which language could be used to influence change via sermons, curriculum, corrective letters, and other media. In that case, the Church will be required to balance its organizational growth and stability (i.e., retention, re-enlistment in the lay ministry) with its obligations to its members (i.e., member care).

To facilitate this discussion and a critique of reentry discourses, a number of links between discourse, power, and social practice will be drawn. One of the first questions that could be raised is whether or not members of the Church have agency in relation to missionary service. In other words, is it an option to NOT serve a mission in the Church?
At face value, the answer is yes. A number of missionaries in the study expressed that they felt like their decision to serve was made independent of all other considerations or influences (i.e., power to). That said, nearly every person interviewed acknowledged that there was taken for granted expectation and sometimes even an explicit pressure to serve a mission in the Church (i.e., power over).

Likewise, it seems clear that those who do not serve, who engage in alternative forms of service, or return early do not obtain the same status and privileges as traditional RMs. These social consequences, in effect, make missionary service a non-option…social suicide. In the case of one missionary, who self-identified as a non-believing active Mormon and remains a “closet doubter,” the stigma attached to not serving, returning early, or disaffiliating discouraged his “coming out.” This reaction suggests that the discourse establishing the Significance of the mission is strong enough that even non-believers adhere to it…often unbeknownst to leaders or family.

Missionaries, like the aforementioned “closet doubter,” may find that they have invested so much into the Church and vice versa that they cannot disentangle themselves from it. For instance, in addition to a lifetime of preparation and two years of service at a prime developmental period in their life, missionaries (and often their families and wards) have expended substantial social, emotional, spiritual, and fiscal resources into the Church. Walking away after such an investment seems wasteful, ungrateful, embarrassing, and even offensive to those who have similarly invested so much.

As an additional, personal example, a colleague of mine in the Church recently broke up with his girlfriend (a women he had considered asking to marry) because her
parents did not approve of his decision not to serve a mission. Though he had a documented mental health exemption, the approval of his family and local leaders, and a track record of faithful service in the Church (one that could put many RMss to shame) this young women had been persuaded by her parents that because full-time missionary service was not on his resume, he could not provide her with the opportunities in the Church that she deserved. Interestingly, the young women had asked for concessions on her behalf – she also struggled with mental health issues – which she was unwilling to give.

Worth noting here, is that failure to serve a mission is often tied to weakness, and for men, may therefore be tied into conceptions of maleness or masculinity. This notion draws attention to the Church meme (Figure 2.1) that encourages youth to serve a mission with the phrase “Choose to be a Hero.” What is not said here, is that if you choose not to serve a mission you must be a villain. With the levels of one-sided and ideological thinking manifest in these examples, where the dominant discourse causes a person to throw reason out the door or take certain realities for granted, it would appear that agency is somewhat limited. Given that agency is central to God’s plan and the doctrine of the Church, Church leaders and scholars may need to (a) come to a common agreement about what this term really means, and (b) reconcile the potential discrepancies between agency in principle and practice. In other words, the Church may tout individual agency as one of its central tenants but if Church leaders are not actively cultivating an environment that honors that agency then they are only engaging in lip service.
Another avenue worth exploring in relation to discourse and power relates to the
gendered experience in the Church. Rabada (2014) documented some of the subtle and
not-so-subtle differences in expectations and experiences of women in the Church. For
example, she points out that despite recent changes that have lowered the age of
missionary service and provided new leadership opportunities for women, there is still
“an emphasis on missionary service being a priesthood duty” and anticipation that after
the mission they will return to traditional roles regardless of the added maturity and
leadership experience they have acquired (p. 20). Prior to the lowering of the missionary
age, the age for women’s service was set at a higher limit in order to allow for women to
pursue marriage as a primary option. Rabada (2014) argues that the lowering of the age
may actually encourage more sisters to serve without fear of aging out of marriage
eligibility when they return. Taken together, these changes may have expanded the
numbers of sisters returning, without an increase in training for leaders who will work
with these female missionaries who have distinct needs/experiences. These trends were
observed by female missionaries in the present study who (a) felt that post-mission status
sequences or life trajectories were more clearly defined for men in the Church, and (b)
felt like local leaders were unsure of how to counsel and support them as a result. These
women also expressed that they were unfairly blamed for difficulties finding marital
partners, especially given the norm in the Church (and society) that men drive the
courtship process. These experiences run counter to the power-with or power-to
conceptualizations proposed by Follet and are suggestive of a more oppressive,
patriarchal structure.
However, over the course of data collection and interpretation for this study the Church has made significant structural changes aimed at leveling the playing field for women including but not limited to: defined leadership roles for female missionaries; a more forgiving dress code for female missionaries; a withdrawal from the Boy Scouts of America program; a redistribution and equalizing of budgets between male/priesthood quorums and female/auxiliary organizations; the restructuring of quorums and meetings, to increase the resemblance between the Relief Society and Priesthood organizations; and increased opportunities for young women to engage in ministering. In the last five years, Church leaders have also challenged incorrect discourses about the priesthood and stressed the vital role of women leaders in the Church. As an example, members of the Church often refer to men as “the priesthood” but a more accurate description would define men as “priesthood holders” and would define the priesthood as the power of God given to men on earth to bless his children. Though subtle (and still male-centric) the later conceptualization orients power in the Church as emanating from God, not from the men to whom he occasionally permits its use, if they do not abuse it.

As another link between discourse and power, intertextuality considers the extent to which returning missionaries’ language converges or diverges with predominant discourses in the Church and society (Xue et al., 2017). As noted in the findings of the present study, the language of aspiration and guilt put forth by RMs who are not “perfect”, who doubt, or who feel pressure to date and marry provide evidence of both convergence and divergence. For example, most informants drew upon statements from Church leaders or their experiences teaching the doctrine of the family (as taught to them).
to indicate both external and internal motivations to date and marry (convergence). In the same breath, they expressed concerns about the pressure to date and marry and ways in which they chose to alleviate dating pressures by approaching courtship in a more casual way; i.e., hanging out, friendship first, which Church leaders have openly discouraged (recommending intentional pairing off instead; divergence).

Intertextuality was also observed in relation to broader social discourses. A few informants, particularly those who left the Church, diverged from Church discourses but converged with broader discourses of autonomy and individualism. This was evident in their use of non-judgmental and self-gratifying behaviors (e.g., substance use, pre-marital sex with multiple partners). In these two examples (i.e., casual approaches to dating, engagement of risky behaviors), alternative discourses were embraced as a form of resistance, rather than obedience to Church teachings (Wadsworth & Green, 2003). As another example from the media, a young women commonly identified by her surname, Sargeant (2015), began a campaign that challenged the discourse surrounding returning early in the Church. In other words, she gave early returning missionaries a platform to share their stories and has sought to destigmatize early return, mental health diagnoses, and help seeking behavior. Resistance in some of these examples also seemed to be about the recognition work proposed by Gee (2010), such that individuals who doubted no longer felt accepted or acknowledged as relevant in the Church (because of doubts or behaviors that transgressed the norms) and sought other avenues and forums (e.g., online communities of “ex-Morms”) to voice their perspectives and find belonging. In these settings their perspectives were validated and their new life trajectories solidified.
Recognition (Gee, 2010) was also tied to the identity-first language used in and about the Church, though some informants (i.e., Sophia) challenged these discourses of recognition by acknowledging that to identify as a RM did not guarantee that an individual was ‘good’ or ‘knowledgeable’ or worthy of recognition.

In the realm of missionary work, recognition, identity, and status are tied to place. For example, being called to a foreign or even non-English speaking mission (as a U.S. resident) is much more glamorous than being called domestically. In fact, there is a subculture or discourse in the Church that essentially posits that domestic missionaries are in some way less competent or faithful compared to their international serving counterparts. When I announced that I was called to serve in a domestic location, my father unknowingly reinforced this discourse by telling me that “the U.S. needs good missionaries too,” as if to suggest that those who traditionally get called here are somehow less-than and that I was an exception. Elder David A. Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, speaking at the April 2017 general conference of the Church, sought to eliminate this unproductive discourse in a sermon titled “Called to the Work.” He repeated a line included in every missionary’s call (extended via a letter signed by the Brethren), which reads: “You are hereby called to serve as a missionary of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. You are assigned to labor in the ______ Mission” (para. 4). He noted that distinction between the first and second sentence and taught that missionaries are called to serve as a missionary and THEN assigned to labor in a specific place. He then suggested that: “An assignment to labor in a specific place is essential and important but secondary to a call to the work” and suggested that in the culture of the
Church, we too often elevate and inappropriately attach status to the place that one is called (para. 12). This behavior, like the obsessive posting of mission photos on social media is one of many forms of conspicuous consumption in the Church that reinforce the Significance of the mission, the Identity of the returned missionary, and the Politics of reentry in the Church.

Perhaps one of the clearest connections between RM discourses and power relates to Alienation. The current discourse of reentry in the Church – including the symbolic removal of the tag, high spiritual expectations, and pressure to date and marry – seemed to alienate RMs from their work as a missionary, former/future relationships, and even the Church (Xue et al., 2014). Perhaps if Church leaders provided a more significant release experience that included symbols and discourses that made returning a continuation instead of an ending, missionaries would continue to feel that their skills and experiences were valued in the Church. Providing a more concrete strategy for how to continue missionary work as a member-missionary while balancing the busyness of life could also foster a discourse of support and continuity. Lastly, permitting the exploration of doubts could allow for faith transformation in a positive direction, especially if RMs feel validated, accepted, and directed through the process. This is a Conversation that Church leaders have pursued more actively recently, with specific sermons acknowledging the importance of questioning in the Church’s history and in the process of developing faith. However, culturally, the difference between doubting and questioning is unclear and those who actively voice concerns or doubts are often stigmatized. If the Church does not act to address the alienation experienced by RMs,
these individuals may turn to other sources of support and competing discourses for answers and acceptance (Karlberg, 2005).

Conclusions

In sum, the discourse of reentry in the Church is complex and contradictory, at times idealistic and at other times ideological. Though the current discourse of reentry in the Church seems focused on retention and clearly reinforces the socialization function of the mission, it is clear that Church leaders have made efforts to lighten the conversation, level the playing field, and allow for alternative experiences and interpretations of returning. Ultimately, however, the discourse in the Church is not entirely in the hands of the General Church leaders who have trained mission presidents and local leaders to avoid putting undue marriage pressures on members or who have spoken about the acceptability of questioning one’s faith. Cultural discourses influenced by the old-guard members of the Church and emerging discourses influenced by broader conversations in society seem to be competing with and in some cases trumping institutional efforts.

When discourse is functioning ideologically, it is typically positive leaning (absent of critique) and individuals often do not know they are influenced by said discourse. Thus, it is possible that participants and other data sources unconsciously or explicitly provided ‘sugar coated’ perspectives of reentry and discourse. However, efforts were made to elicit authentic responses from diverse sources, and it would appear that participants, in particular, were forthcoming and honest in their responses (i.e., acknowledged pressures, concerns, etc. without obvious restraint). Future research should explore, in more detail, which discursive sources have the greatest influence on
missionary behavior (i.e., leaders, members, society). Moreover, future research ought to delve deeper into the gendered experience of reentry and how separate expectations for men and women in religious and non-religious contexts influence reentry. Likewise, explorations of reentry discourses in other religions and non-religious settings could help clarify how different cultural scripts and Conversations operate to influence post-trip adjustments. Further study of the influence of religious discourse on the transition to adulthood is also worthy of study and could add support to scholarship that suggests that emerging adulthood is a culturally nuanced experience. Given that this study focused primarily on interview data with a small sample of return missionaries based in the southeastern United States, the findings should be generalized to other regions of the country or global Church with caution. Likewise, how the culture of the southeast influenced their engagement with religious and non-religious discourses was unclear. Thus, a closer examination and additional ‘case studies’ could help clarify regional and international variations in reentry discourses in the Church.
CHAPTER 5

PORTRAITS AND PROFILES OF RELIGIOUS COMMITMENT: RELIGIOUS REENTRY AND THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

Abstract

Using phenomenographical analysis, this article examines and categorizes the experiences of emerging adult returned missionaries (n = 20) in a southeastern stake of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Specifically, the article provides portraits (i.e., rich individual narratives) of religious reentry and develops profiles (i.e., clustered ‘types’) of returning missionaries’ religious commitments based on Smith and Snell’s religious types. The article posits that features of religious reentry such as cultural and physical relocation, intra- and interpersonal expectations, participation in religious practices, search for meaning, and perceived social support influence returning missionaries’ developmental trajectories, religious commitments, and transitions to adulthood.

Keywords: phenomenography, religious commitment, missionaries, reentry, emerging adulthood
Introduction

Clear markers of adulthood (i.e., rites of passage) are becoming increasingly rare in U.S. society and their absence, alongside other social trends, has been linked to a prolonged period of adolescence – emerging adulthood – characterized by the postponement of adult responsibilities, identity confusion, and participation in high risk behaviors (Arnett, 2000b; Smith, Christoffersen, Davidson, & Herzog, 2011). In The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Church), the proselytizing mission functions as a significant rite of passage, a stabilizing socialization agent, and marker of spiritual and social adulthood (Chou, 2013; Nelson, 2003; Olsen, 2006; Parry, 1994; Shepherd & Shepherd, 1998). In addition to reinforcing traditional timelines and tasks of adulthood, particularly in the U.S. (i.e., marriage, career), the mission presumably shapes one’s identity and social standing in the Church; for example, successful completion of a mission is often linked to marriageability, priesthood advancement, and overall well-being (Chou, 2013).

While, serving a mission can be transformative and provide a host of personal and social benefits, returning (and subsequently integrating those changes or securing those social benefits) may prove to be challenging (Chou, 2013). These challenges are likely to affect returning missionaries’ religious commitments and may actually inhibit rather than facilitate the stabilizing and socializing functions of the mission. Moreover, a 2012 change to the Church’s missionary program – the lowering of the age of missionary service – may further exacerbate these challenges by depriving younger missionaries of opportunities to engage in developmental tasks associated with adolescence and early
adulthood (i.e., identity exploration and commitment; Arnett, 2000a). The purpose of this article is to investigate the reentry experiences of emerging adult returning missionaries in the Church, identify and categorize their post-mission religious commitments, and describe the features of reentry/emerging adulthood that lead to those commitments.

**Literature Review**

Arnett (2000a) defined emerging adulthood as the period between ages 18 and 25 (though this range varies, sometimes beginning at age 17 and pushing into the early 30’s) in which individuals subjectively express that they are no longer adolescents, but do not feel they have fully achieved adulthood. This period, according to Arnett (2000a), did not used to exist and is a product of social changes such as increased opportunities and demands for education and employment (especially for women), delayed marriage and family commitments, and the subsequent absence of traditional markers of adulthood. Arnett’s formulation was initially derived from qualitative, narrative data collected from a non-random sample of 300 Americans aged 20 to 29, presumably representing a diverse demography (Arnett, 2004). What this and subsequent data revealed is that transitions [emphasis added] that historically marked the passage to adulthood, such as establishing a permanent residence, getting married, or having children were listed low on emerging adults’ criteria for adulthood; whereas, a desire for self-sufficiency [emphasis added] through accepting responsibility for one’s self, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent were consistently rated as primary indicators of adulthood (Arnett, 1998).
Arnett (2003, 2006) later clarified that his findings regarding the criteria for adulthood were not entirely consistent between world regions (i.e., America and Europe) or even across American ethnic groups noting, for instance, that family capacities, norm compliance, and role transitions weighed more heavily in ethnic population’s perceptions of adulthood than in White population’s perceptions (see also Nelson, Badger, & Wu, 2004). Barry and Nelson (2005) further postulated that religious background also impacts how emerging adulthood is defined, performed, and experienced. For instance, they found that norm compliance and family capacities were ranked as more important criteria for adulthood for members of the Church when compared to the general public.

Beyond the subjective criteria for adulthood, Arnett’s formulation is also characterized by five inter-related features (first presented in Arnett, 2004) including: identity exploration, trying out new roles, relationships, and experiences without making firm commitments; instability, engaging in frequent changes in employment, residence, relationship status, or other affiliations; self-focus, turning inward to consider one’s own needs, decision-making, and goals; feeling-in-between, feeling neither adolescent nor fully adult, having left home, graduated high school, or experienced some other transition without achieving full independence; and optimism about future possibilities, remaining hopeful that one’s personal future will be bright even amidst surrounding social decline (this latter feature is discussed in detail in Arnett, 2000b). As noted here, industrialized societies often facilitate a lengthened period of identity exploration, particularly focused on “love, work, and worldviews” (Arnett, 2000a, p. 473).
Furthermore, engagement in risk behaviors (e.g., binge drinking, unprotected sex, substance use, reckless driving) during the exploratory period is presumably more common during emerging adulthood, since emerging adults theoretically feel more pressure than adolescents or young adults to do a given risky behavior ‘now, before it’s too late’ (i.e., family roles are assumed; Arnett, 2005; Barry & Nelson, 2005; Ravert, 2009). Once again, however, Barry and Nelson (2005) noted that emerging adult members of the Church experience this life stage differently such that they tend to adopt rather than explore beliefs, and engage in less risky behavior. Thus, in many ways members of the Church are atypical emerging adults, possibly because they have retained clearer rites of passage (e.g., the mission) linked to adulthood. That said, members of the Church are not unaffected by broader social trends influencing emerging adult behavior and returning from a mission may add stress that leads to either greater convergence to or divergence from these trends.

**Emerging Adulthood and Religious Commitments**

In Souls in Transition, Smith and Snell (2009) narrow their focus to the religious lives of emerging adults and posit that a number of macro-level (societal) factors discourage religious commitment during this life stage. These factors include things like: “mass consumer capitalism”, “youth targeted advertising”, “new career imperatives”, “revolutionary communication technology”, “proliferation of media programming”,

26 A notion described in the Book of Mormon as “eat, drink, and be merry…for tomorrow we die” (2 Nephi 28: 8).
“moral pluralism”, and “continued waves of the sexual revolution” (p. 281). Moreover, the trends and features of emerging adulthood outlined by Arnett (i.e., hyper focus on autonomous self-sufficiency, postponement of family formation) both produce and are a product of aversions to religious commitment.

The transcending belief held by the average emerging adult (if such a person exists) is that religions and religious leaders/followers are generally good people, with good intentions, who do good things, however, “no one really knows what is true or right or good” (p. 287). Most emerging adults feel that they age out of the need to rely on an institution or individual to show them how to do or be good, that religion becomes a personal matter), and that authenticity is key (i.e., anti-institutional, personal relationship with God. In spite or perhaps because of these factors, Smith and Snell (2009) do not necessarily see a mass secularization of emerging adults in the U.S. In fact, there seems to be some evidence supporting a plateauing and even slight increases in overall religious commitments among this age group. Moreover, they would argue that religious commitments correlate with (and even cause or predict) a wide range of desirable outcomes during this life stage; e.g., physical health, mental and emotional well-being, charitable behavior, and reduced substance use, to name a few. Thus, understanding factors that influence these commitments, such as reentry distress encountered during religious rites, and responding to them could contribute to the overall well-being of this population.
Rites of Passage

Rites of passage are rituals of transformation, comprised of three distinct phases: separation (pre-liminal), a liminal period, and reentry (post-liminal; Turner, 1995; Van Gennep, 1960). The separation stage is typically marked by a departure or detachment from normative routines, social structures, and roles (Turner, 1987/1995). During this stage, individuals are cognitively, spiritually, and/or geographically relocated. In other words, individuals are literally and metaphorically separated from their families, homes, communities, and/or routines in a number of ways. For example, individuals engaged in rites are often geographically relocated to domestic or international locales where they are required, by virtue of their assignment, to immerse themselves in the routines and practices of the local community and collaborate with previously unknown colleagues. In some cases, communication with home is also limited during the process.

The liminal period is a temporal-spatial period when new roles and behaviors are enacted. This time/space of so-called ‘anti-structure,’ or rather alternative structure, acts as a tabula rasa for the individual(s) involved. Within the liminal time/space, one may undergo a transformation, becoming a new entity, unrecognizable to friends, family, congregations, communities, and the self. Turner (1987/1995) describes liminality as an in-between space (in between departure and return, for one); this time and space is set apart for new identities to emerge, new roles to be adopted, and new discourses to be encountered (Hennig, 1997; Thomassen, 2009). After the liminal period the individual returns to or reintegrates into the site of departure. Reentry, has received a great deal of scholarly attention and is arguably the most critical and challenging stage of the ritual
process (Gaw, 2000). During this phase one is tasked to incorporate new roles, routines, and identities – which are often the product of transformative experiences – into old ways of thinking, living, relating, and being in the world (Turner, 1987/1995).

Serving a mission is often described as a significant rite of passage in the Church, particularly for male members of the Church who are under obligation to participate (Nelson, 2003). Like other cultural rites, it marks a transition to adulthood and serves as a rite of initiation into the mainstream body of the Church. Members who participate (i.e., serve missions) learn the doctrine and discourse of the Church and adopt the language, ideals, and signs needed to communicate with other initiates (Nelson, 2003). In the context of a mission, each stage in the rite of passage is distinguishable by its purpose, timing, and the types of experiences missionaries encounter (Church of Jesus Christ, 2016f; Pepper, 2014). For example, in the separation stage, missionaries are physically removed and relocated, often to international locales. Their contact with friends and family is reduced to weekly emails or letters and two annual phone calls, one on Christmas and the other on Mother’s day (Church of Jesus Christ, 2006). Their routines, clothing, behavior, and language are replaced by conventions and expectations learned in the missionary training center (MTC) and prescribed in the missionary handbook (Church of Jesus Christ, 2006).

According to these guidelines, missionaries are supposed to refrain from listening to or viewing pop culture music and media, moderate the type and quantity of social media they use, and adopt approved missionary attire. During the liminal phase, missionaries also encounter new foods, cultures, histories, religious dogmas, and ways of
thinking (Pepper, 2014). Moreover, missionaries are confronted more heavily with direct criticism, previously unknown or unfamiliar information about the history of the Church, and even explicit persecution. The daily routines of the mission also push many out of their comfort zone and can be physically taxing. Thus, within the rigid structure of the mission, missionaries actually have numerous opportunities to explore and expand their thinking, identities, and limits, while giving new consideration to their long-held religious and cultural beliefs (Pepper, 2014). To date, research exploring reintegration in the Church is scarce, and includes but is not limited to topics such as academic achievement, language attrition, and stigma associated with early returns (citations needed; Doty et al., 2015; Doty et al., 2016; Hansen, 2012; Jepson, 2014). A review of Church publications reveals a growing concern for reentry, and an interest in increasing post-mission religious commitments (Bingham, 1978; Parry, 2001). That is, there is some evidence to suggest that missionaries are becoming less-active or disaffiliating during the reentry period, and a desire by Church leaders to reverse this trend.

Positioning the experience of missionaries in the rites of passage framework allows for a more holistic, integrated investigation of reentry, and post-mission religious commitment (Austin, 1983b). In other words, reentry is not an isolated process any more than the liminal period is. One’s preparation for the liminal period affects how the liminal period is experienced, and one’s encounter with liminality effects reentry. Further, the reentry period often resembles or functions as an extension of the liminal period. For instance, missionaries may become so accustomed to the life and structure of the mission (its social network, institutional beliefs, and behaviors) that ‘home’ actually becomes a
foreign entity, a new site of anti-structure, and exploration. In this regard, and in line with the concerns of Church leaders, reentry may actually become a point of added confusion and uncertainty and prolong the transition to adulthood rather than solidifying a missionary’s identity and commitments. As an additional consideration, age has been shown to influence the type and extent of difficulties experienced by reentrants (i.e., older adults experience fewer difficulties, likely due to identity-stability). Given that the Church lowered the age of missionary service in 2012 to 18 for men and 19 for women, there may be an increased likelihood that returning missionaries will experience distress related to the developmental tasks associated with the transition from adolescence to early adulthood.

**Reentry and Emerging Adulthood**

A number of known reentry challenges may be linked to emerging adult development and transitions. For example, reentering individuals may experience *reverse culture shock* (RCS), the shock that occurs when one tries to re-acclimate to his or her country or community of origin, and may encounter a major identity crisis as a result (Allison, Davis-Berman, & Berman, 2012; Gaw, 2000). This crisis stems in part from the relationship strain, role ambiguity, and the feeling that the reentrant is between cultures (Allison et al., 2012; Gaw, 2000). Third culture kids (TCKs), youth and young adults who have returned to their country of origin after having spent most of their developmental years abroad (e.g., military or missionary kids) frequently experience this cultural ambiguity and identity conflict (Lijadi & van Schalkwyk, 2014). TCKs are the ultimate ‘in-betweeners,’ in that they are socially/emotionally between cultures and
cultural identities (Bikos et al., 2009). Furthermore, TCK’s are often simultaneously described as multicultural and acultural, and their experiences as having both negative (e.g., isolated, depressed; Lijadi & van Schalkwyk, 2014) and positive (e.g., adaptive, open; Moore & Barker, 2012) outcomes. This consequence of reentry (i.e., identity confusion) is particularly relevant given that one of the goals of emerging adulthood, as an extension of adolescence, is identity security.

Reentrants also report feeling misunderstood, unable to connect with others, and, consequently, alienated (Allison et al., 2012; Haines, 2012; Weaver, 1987). This alienation occasionally leads to depressive symptoms and interpersonal difficulties which, for emerging adults, could discourage important identity exploration opportunities and increase their already rising proclivity for high-risk behaviors such as substance use or abuse (Gaw, 2000). These symptoms and behaviors are also a product of the grief and loss reported by reentrants. For example, many reentrants experience a loss of friendships, loss of lifestyle, loss of purpose, loss of experience, or loss of their idealized view of their culture of origin (Kostohryz et al., 2014). Relating to the latter of these losses, reentrants often experience disillusionment and dissatisfaction with the cultural values and behaviors of friends, family, and countrymen in their country of origin, which fosters pessimism and cynicism that runs counter to the optimism attributed to well-adjusted/volitional emerging adults (Haines, 2012). Furthermore, the anticipation associated with the possibility of being politically active, volunteering, or pursuing new career and life trajectories during readjustment is quickly extinguished as a result of this disillusionment (Kollar, 2006). All of these factors seem to be mirrored in religious
reentry contexts where concern for religious cultures, relationships, purpose, and identity must also be taken into consideration and may alleviate or exacerbate reentry distress (Selby, 2011).

Summary

In light of these issues and trends, the purpose of this phenomenographical study is to further investigate and classify the reentry experiences of returned missionaries in a southeastern stake of the Church, particularly as they relate to religious commitments made during the transition to adulthood. Specifically, the questions being asked in this study includes: What are the lived experiences of missionaries in a southeastern stake of the Church? What religious commitments do these missionaries make when they return? And what are the common experiences of missionaries that predict their religious commitments?

Methods

A phenomenographical approach was employed to address the aforementioned research questions. Phenomenography is “an interpretive methodology recognized for its value in unveiling the qualitatively different ways of understanding and experiencing a phenomenon” (Novais, Ruhanen, & Arcodia, 2018, p. 325). Though related to phenomenology, phenomenography is distinctive in that it focuses on collective meanings rather than individual ones (Novais et al., 2018). Thus, rather than capturing individual experiences or conceptualizations of a phenomenon, phenomenography aims to capture “categories of description” (Novais et al., 2018, p.327). Moreover, in addition to simply grouping experiences, phenomenography “can foster the discovery of new
features and nuances” within an experience, by distinguishing one category or group from another (Novais et al., 2018, p. 327). Unlike phenomenology, which has been studied for decades, phenomenography only recently began to “take shape” (i.e., in the late 1980s early 1990s) and operates as a methodological approach rather than as a theoretical or epistemological framework (Cibangu & Hepworth, 2016, p. 148).

Thus, phenomenographic research studies typically have shared features, and include the following: the use of purposive and theoretical sampling techniques to allow for variation in responses and to elicit/elucidate distinct categories (Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Martin 1986), the use of interviews as a primary data collection and with saturation typically occurring between 15 and 25 interviews (Bowden 2000; Forster, 2016; Marton 1986), and the use of a three-tiered analytic approach (Novais et al., 2018).

Study Participants

In line with the features of phenomenographic research, the present study employed a purposive sampling strategy to capture the experiences of 25 returning missionaries living in a southeaster stake of the Church. This particular site was chosen partially out of convenience (i.e., it was proximal to the researcher and the researcher had access to online directories via his affiliation with the site), and partially because the stake represented a ‘typical’ or representative case in the U.S. Missionaries were included in the study if they had returned between January 1, 2015 and December 31, 2016, and had served a traditional full-time proselytizing mission (though they did not have to complete their service in its entirety). This criteria excluded service missionaries who typically serve locally and for shorter periods of time, and senior missionaries who serve
at a different developmental life stage. The timeframe was selected to increase the
sampling frame (two year window of return), capture the typical adjustment cycle
documented in reentry scholarship (i.e., it typically takes half the time spent abroad to
fully adjust at home), while being mindful of the increased potential for recall error as the
data collection period increased. A theoretical sampling strategy was also utilized to
collect online narratives that would provide alternative perspectives of reentry for
returning missionaries in the U.S. Particularly, the goal of the theoretical sampling was
to capture the perspectives of individuals who had disaffiliated or doubted the Church
and therefore could not be reached/refused to participate as part of the purposive sample.
These narratives were collected over a similar time frame, however, it is possible that the
posting dates did not correlate with the actual window of return outlined above.

As noted above, I was a member of the Church and stake being studied at the time
of the study. I was also serving in a leadership position in the one of the local
congregations in the stake. Thus, I had a more intimate knowledge of the stake and of
some of the participants in the study, whose families I interacted with on a semi-regular
basis. That said, prior to collecting data, my interaction with study participants was
minimal and in my position I had very little real authority or stewardship over any of
them (as many of them had left to attend school and were attending congregations outside
of the state). In that regard I think my leadership status (which was largely unknown to
participants) likely had little effect on responses. In contrast, it is very possible that my
status as a male, active, committed member-researcher and functioning returned
missionary influenced participant responses. For example, female missionaries may have
felt as if I could not understand or relate to their distinct mission experience. All of the participants may have felt that I was a representative of the Church and, therefore, sought to provide social desirable answers or cast the Church in a positive light. To minimize these interviewer effects, I clarified that I did not represent the Church and was open to a wide array of responses and perspectives. I also attempted to guide the interview with more open-ended questions.

Data Collection

Data were primarily collected via semi-structured interviews with participants in the southeastern stake of the Church and social media monitoring using Radian6 software. The interview protocol included blocks of questions about respondents’ pre-mission, in-field, and reentry experiences, as well as specific prompted questions and general probes to encourage respondents to expound on their answers as needed. The primary questions guiding the interviews included: what was your motivation for serving a mission, how would you describe your mission experience overall, and how would you describe your transition home? Interview lasted between 30-90 minutes (average of 43 minutes) and were recorded, transcribed verbatim using a narrow transcription method, and reviewed multiple times for accuracy. Narrow transcriptions typically include special symbols and characters that denote pauses, laughing, and other forms of verbal and non-verbal communication. Annotations help contextualize verbal and non-verbal communication and explain nuances that text or audio alone could not. Potential participants were identified via publically available lists printed on the program at the semi-annual conference of the stake. From this sampling frame, participants were
recruited via email, phone, and social media based on what information was publically available. Occasionally, participants provided contact information (with consent) to other potential participants.

Radian6 is a social media monitoring tool that searches thousands of public online “social” databases and profiles including news media, social media, forums, and more. The software operates like a traditional search engine using key words, phrases, and delimiters which in the present study predominately included variations of the term ‘return’ combined with variations in the name of the Church. Other terms such as home and adjusting were also included to broaden the search, whereas terms like Mitt Romney, polygamy, etc. were excluded to limit the scope of the search (and reduce the amount of extraneous data).

Data Analysis

In line with common practice in phenomenography, analysis consisted of three stages. First, the conceptions/experiences, hereafter called ‘portraits’ of each participant were identified. In this case participants (i.e., returning missionaries), not statements, were the unit of analysis in order to retain the context of the experience and statements about the experience. A narrative analytic technique called restorying was utilized in order to tell each participant’s story in a more logical and engaging manner. In other words, I reviewed and reorganized each participant’s account into a participant narrative, synthesizing and linking ideas from their interview in a more linear, cohesive, and coherent fashion (Wilson, McIntosh, & Zahra, 2013). Each portrait consists of a short biographical sketch of the returned missionary followed by an account of their motivation.
to serve, and a review of their mission and post-mission experiences. Each account was reorganized and re-presented in pseudo-chronological order to link related thoughts and increase cohesion. I paraphrased or quoted the participant as much as possible in order to provide thick, rich description and in an effort to retain the tone, meaning, and language of the original account.

In line with phenomenological inquiry (which informs phenomenography), I included ideas and direct quotes that reflect the individualized experience and, to some extent, voice of each missionary – rather than a generalized description of common codes or themes. A total of twenty portraits were created – one per participant. Second, portraits were sorted so that individuals with similar conceptions/experiences could be categorized into distinct groups, hereafter called profiles. These profiles were derived from the work of Smith and Snell (2009) who categorize emerging adults into six major religious types based on their interest and involvement in religion/religious institutions. These categories include: Selective Adherents (i.e., cafeteria style religionists picking and choosing whether, what, and when they practice faith), Religiously Indifferent (i.e., uninterested in religious matters), Religiously Disconnected (i.e., unaware of religious matters), Committed Traditionalists (i.e., tied to an institutional faith with defined religious practices), Spiritually Open (i.e., open but not actively seeking), and Irreligious (i.e., skeptical and critical of religion and personal faith). For the purposes of presentation in this article, one portrait was selected to represent each profile or type. Transcripts were read and reread to ensure that portraits were sorted into the best fitting profile. Third, the links between the different profiles were explored to better understand what features of
the missionary cycle (i.e., pre-mission, mission, and/or reentry factors) influenced post-mission religious types. This step was pursued after the portraits (and the essence of those portraits) and profiles had been created to avoid “imposing a biased structure on the data” (Novais et al., 2018, p. 328).

**Findings**

Of the 25 potential participants, only 16 could be contacted and agreed to participate. This number proved to be sufficient to reach saturation. However, four online narratives were included that characterized a varied, albeit small set of alternative perspectives, for a total sample of 20 reentry portraits. The sample (n = 20) was predominately comprised of White (85%), male (80%), members who had born in and remained active in the Church (65%). Most were single (66%) and either working or attending school at the time of study. All had served full-time (though one returned early and was redeployed to finish his full term of service) and had been home for an average of about 12 months (range of 1-21 months). Missionaries in the sample also served in various regions of the world with 50% serving in the U.S., 31.3% serving in Central or South America, and 18.7% serving in Eastern Europe.

As mentioned above, the portraits were categorized into profiles based on Smith and Snell’s (2009) six major religious types. In this section, the characteristics of each profile will be explained, followed by a sample portrait representing the profile, and discussion of the reentry processes that may have influenced selection into the respective profile. Only three of these categories were included or represented in the present study: Committed Traditionalists, Selective Adherents, and Irreligious. Because all of the
participants had at one time been active members of the Church they could not, by definition be categorized as religiously disconnected. Furthermore, as will be noted below, while some participants had features that resembled multiple categories, none had become entirely uninterested in religious matters, and all were still actively seeking meaning and belonging, even if from more secular sources. Thus, they could also not be categorized as Religiously Indifferent or Spiritually Open. Smith and Snell (2009) echoed other scholars who noted that members of the Church who disaffiliate are less likely (compared to other denominations) to join another Church. More often, they stay forever tied to the Church in some way or another or become openly antagonistic towards it. This latter attitude is unsurprising given that disaffiliation is often instigated by poor interpersonal interactions or crises of faith.

**Committed Traditionalists**

The majority of participants (n =14) in the present study were classified as committed traditionalists. While only Sophia’s portrait will be presented here, the entire collection of portraits in this category can be found in Appendix C. According to Smith and Snell (2009) Committed Traditionalists are typically affiliated with and adhere to an institutional faith with clearly defined religious beliefs and practices. They tend to be grounded in mainstream religious organizations (i.e., Protestantism, Mormonism) and are more concerned with personal worship and morality (internal) than with social activism (external). Ultimately, their “identities…moral reasoning” and lifestyle are wrapped up in their faith tradition (p. 166). Though she was a convert to the Church who initially had doubts about joining, Sophia had a second ‘conversion moment’ that propelled her on a
mission where she felt like her faith was solidified. Though her reentry experiences was not free of distress or doubts, she was grounded enough in her faith tradition and the practices and skills that she had acquired as a missionary to remain a Committed Traditionalist.

A portrait of Sophia. Sophia joined the Church while she was in high school but quickly began to question her decision. After a few rough years, she decided to attend a sacrament meeting with her family and had an unexpected, powerful spiritual experience. The experience involved a part-member family, family friends, who unbeknownst to her were being taught by missionaries. Like Sophia, they had also decided to join the Church. She recalled:

*The husband was being confirmed, and I hadn’t known he had even taken more lessons or even gotten baptized, and... I stopped at his confirmation and I just bawled because he meant so much to me, and I realized at that moment that like, I was looking for happiness in a temporary way, and that the Gospel brings us happiness in a lasting way, in an eternal way, and sometimes it’s hard and sometimes we have to be patient, and I realized, in that moment, that’s what I wanted, that I wanted to be happy. And then through a series of events, and prayer, and my patriarchal blessing, I realized that if I want to be happy- that I needed to share it all with other people too.*

Sophia was clearly moved by this experience, but had other reasons for serving a mission as well. For example, her adoptive parents both grew up in the Church and had served missions. Impressed by how so many of their life experiences came as a result of their missionary service – she wanted those same experiences for herself. Sophia also desired

27 The term part-member family typically refers to situations where one spouse is a member of the Church and the other spouse is not.
to make them proud, and felt she could do so through her missionary service. Moreover, the two sister missionaries in Sophia’s ward regularly invited her to make visits with them, which played a huge part in her decision to serve a mission and her ability to recognize the value of the Gospel in her life.

Sophia served in the southwestern United States, speaking English. Interestingly, everything that Sophia expected to be difficult as a missionary turned out to be easy, and things she expected to be easy turned out to be extremely difficult. For example, Sophia did not anticipate how quickly she would learn to love the people or how heart wrenching their rejection would be. Sophia also had contentious relationships with a few of her companions. Though her mother had warned her that these types of interpersonal conflicts were common, Sophia was overconfident in her people skills and disregarded the warnings. In spite of these unanticipated hardships, Sophia had a positive view of her mission and saw it as a transformative experience.

You hear the cliché “I found myself in my mission and I found my testimony on my mission,” but I joined the Church when I was 16, and my mission really transformed me. I went through a lot of like comparing myself to my companions and wishing that I had more knowledge... but I found myself connecting with my converts easier, and being able to relate with them because of the experiences that I had [as a convert]... I definitely feel like I gained a personal relationship with Christ on my mission, and I think that is invaluable....I don't think that I would have like ever experienced that [relationship with Christ] in the same way, with the same magnitude, had I not chose to go.

Sophia’s mission ended well. She had a poignant exit interview with her Mission President, who she valued and respected deeply. His counsel was “vital” and focused on self-care and spiritual maintenance. In other words, he communicated to Sophia that she
should avoid overloading herself with the tasks of life (e.g. school, work), particularly at the expense of continued involvement in the Lord’s work. My Plan, the Church’s reentry program had also come out during Sophia’s mission, so she and the Mission President reviewed her My Plan goals together as part of her interview.

My Plan helped Sophia feel more prepared for her return home and had a profound influence on her career trajectory. Before her mission she had always wanted to be a high school English teacher, but after writing that down in her plan, the goal no longer felt right. She counselled with her companions, parents, and God and eventually found her calling in life – a career in the mental health field. Sophia sent a copy of her plan home to her parents so that they could hold her accountable to the plan and remind her of her goals. Unfortunately, Sophia’s newly called Stake President had never interviewed a sister missionary or been trained in My Plan. Thus, he provided little counsel and follow-up; she wished the interview had gone very differently.

Sophia seemed to be navigating reentry well, but still had her share of struggles. When Sophia first returned home she missed her mission, particularly the people and culture. She feared that the tight relationships she had formed during her mission would come to an end. However, Sophia’s fears were unwarranted, as many of her closest friends and coworkers are people that she met during her mission. These enduring relationships have been an unexpected blessing for Sophia:

*Having people to be able to talk to who went through those life-changing situations with you has been really cool and it's been...kind of like an unexpected bonus, not unexpected but like, I had hoped for it and it has come in better than I had hoped.*
Sophia had a “built in support system” of people from her mission whom she could rely on when she missed the mission or had questions about how to navigate post-mission life. Her mission friends could also commiserate with her during hard times and validate her experiences and challenges as an RM. Further, Sophia had a close relationship with her adoptive parents, both of whom served missions and could therefore relate to her experiences, to some extent. Sophia’s parents actually moved to her mission while she was serving there. So, immediately following her release, she lived and worked in her mission area for about three months, which allowed her to experience a different role and clarify her post-mission identity:

So, I lived in Mesa after my mission, and got to take on a different role with my converts and the people that I worked with and families that I grew close to, and I think that was really cool for me because... I found out that I was both people, like I was Sister Smith (name changed), but I could also be Sophia for these people, and so that was kinda cool.

This opportunity helped Sophia to make sense of her identity and merge pre-mission, mission, and post-mission personas. This continual process of identity negotiation was and continues to be much more difficult than she had anticipated.

Something that's been harder than I expected... (laughs) I've kind of noticed that... it was really hard for me to just be okay being Sophia. I remember like three days after I'd been home, I was standing in the kitchen with my dad and I was just so flustered 'cause it'd been like three full days and nobody had called me Sister Smith and I just felt lost and confused and I didn't know who I was and I kept telling them like, "I don't know who Sophia is. I don't know what she likes. I don't know what she does for fun. Like, I only know how to be Sister Smith." And my dad was like, "That's not true. That's the same person. You're the same person. You have to combine both." And I was like, "No, we're very different people and I can't be both of them," and I just kind of had this identity crisis... Even now, sometimes when I hear people say my first name... I'm like... it just sounds
foreign, which is really weird. But combining the two people was definitely a process and still probably is.

Sophia now lives in a community that is highly populated by members of the Church; she feels that living in this new environment has limited her opportunities to continue sharing the Gospel. For Sophia, however, the real impediment to lay missionary work has been the lack of time, and her changed role in the Church. First, between school and work, finding time to share the Gospel was extremely difficult. Second, now that she is no longer officially called as a missionary she does not feel the same power or sense of purpose that she once had:

...it's really hard to feel like you're being productive, because all of a sudden, you're not spending all day, every day literally trying to save souls. ... And I don't have a badge anymore, so I can't walk up to random people and talk to them about Jesus—... and that's life-changing and eternity altering, you know? And, I don't have that same power or that same ability anymore and that is really hard.

Navigating anti-Mormon influences was another difficult process for Sophia. A Concerned Christian group had established itself in her mission and was offering “loving help out of Mormonism.” This anti-Mormon presence presented a number of challenges both during and after her mission. For example, during her mission, people were closed off to her message because of deeply rooted misconceptions about the Church spread by the Concerned Christians. After her mission, Sophia encountered friends and former mission acquaintances that were spreading or had left the Church because of anti-Mormon literature. Sophia felt like she had to strike a balance between protecting herself against these negative influences, while trying to be open and understanding.
And I think the hardest part is the people who do all of this anti stuff, most of the time, they're not malicious. They really do believe that they have found that the Church isn't true and they really do wanna save people and so it's hard because you think "oh, if I was still a missionary, I would want them to listen to me and give me a shot, and so they deserve that same courtesy." But it's really easy to get sucked up into that and to feel like the things that they've found or believe make things easier, you know? Like, the Gospel and living the Gospel is hard, and these ideas...make it easier and make you feel less guilty doing things and so it's really easy to get sucked up into that...

The hardest part for Sophia was seeing former missionaries leave the Church (one because of things he had discovered about the Church’s history and another because of same-sex attraction). Theoretically, these missionaries had similar knowledge and experiences as Sophia, and yet they still fell away, which made her feel vulnerable.

Attitudes about feeling and verbalizing doubts in the Church exacerbated this issue. While Church leaders actively promote inquiry and the development of personal testimony, Sophia felt like RMs were expected to have absolute, unquestioning faith. When people did have doubts, she observed that they were encouraged to pray more, study more, or have more faith. In Sophia’s experience, this was not always a straightforward or helpful response. She recalled a situation she witnessed in her family, where this “dissonance” came to light.

...I have an uncle right now who is having a hard time and he served a mission and his mom, my grandma, keeps telling him, "Just pray more. Just read your scriptures more and that's why you've been crazy"... but he's like, "I've been doing that my whole life and I don't feel like I have a testimony," you know? And so I think that sometimes people just assume that the primary answers should be good enough. And when they're not good enough for someone like they are good enough for you, there's a little bit of this dissonance that's hard to handle.
Sophia observed similar patterns in discussions about marriage and family; coupled with her inclination to compare herself to others, these conversations about marriage have been discouraging. Though she cited multiple similar examples, one experience – attending a baptism with a friend – highlighted the pressure Sophia felt to date and marry, as well as members’ insensitivity and her lack of control in this area.

So my best friend is a companion from my mission and she drove down to Arizona with me for my sister’s baptism and all of my extended family was there and, you know, after her baptism everybody I talked to said, "Who are you dating?" You know? And when I said that I'm not, they were like, "Why? Like, you're at [a Church affiliated school]. You're an RM and you're at [a Church affiliated school]," and so it's like I should basically be married and over the Christmas break I remember my uncle saying, "There's either something wrong with you or them," (laughs) but... you know, it just felt like either me or the hundreds of males that I come into contact with every day, you know? ...There's just this stigma that there's something wrong with you if you're an RM and not dating," and that is really hard for me.... especially when you're a girl and dating culture in [this area] is really actually very awful... and so it's not like I have a ton of... I don't have a ton of control over my dating life and so it's really annoying that other people feel so strongly or so confused as to why I'm not dating...

Though Sophia experienced some of these same situations and social comparisons at mission reunions she attended, she felt like the benefits of reconnecting with mission leaders and friends far outweighed the cons.

Sophia has been home for about 7 months (at the time of the interview); she currently attends a Church affiliated university studying psychology and works for an agency in a related field.

What advice would Sophia give to a RM?

...it is so essential to not get stuck in the rut, to not make our prayers in vain...and to not make church attendance about going to church just because it's a habit, but
going early and studying the scriptures and being prepared for the meeting and the whole like sacrament initiative\textsuperscript{28} through the brethren came out on my mission and so... we had lots of trainings from the general authorities and we watched lots of videos and it's so important, but so easy to not do... and so I think that my advice for any returning missionary would be, to not forget the Lord when you come home. And it all stems from good things, like, we want to make Him proud and I've just spent so long being a missionary and I feel proud about my service there and so now I need to do something else to make Him proud. And if I'm not going, going, going, going, I feel like I'm not using my time wisely or, whatever... but it's so important to not forget and to not get complacent in our relationship with Him because... we might feel like it's reached its all-time peak on the mission, but you can always improve it, you know? You can always make it better. Yeah, don't forget about the little things.

Selective Adherents

Generally, selective adherents (n = 3) typically approach religion the way they approach dining at a buffet, picking and choosing what, where, when and how they practice their faith. Typically, these individuals are characterized as “less serious and consistent” but more aware and grounded than other types (Smith & Snell, 2009, p. 167). Like Committed Traditionalists, Selective Adherents typically come from active member families. However, as they grow older, Selective Adherents become more independent and critical in their observance of their faith and deem some practices as “outdated” or outright disagreeable and tend to disagree or disregard Church teachings in the following areas: “sex before marriage, the need for regular religious service attendance, belief in the existence of hell, drinking alcohol, taking drug and use of birth control” (p. 167). In the present study, selective adherents were those who chose to remain in the Church but

\textsuperscript{28} During the year 2015, Church leaders concentrated many of their sermons, conferences, and trainings around the theme “Making the Sabbath a Delight,” in an effort to help members improve their observance and enjoyment of the Sabbath.
either did not believe or did not practice any or all of its teachings. In many ways these individuals compartmentalized and customized their religious lives to suit their personal needs and self-interests. While Owen maintained his beliefs in the Church, for example, he chose not to regular meetings. Braxton, in contrast, lost his faith but continued to attend Church meetings fearing the social repercussions. His experience is highlighted in more detail below.

A portrait of Braxton. Braxton came from “pioneer stock”, grew up in the Church, and described his early years in the Church as a “wonderful experience” filled with great leaders, support, and love. When the time to serve a mission approached, however, things got “real” and he recognized that he needed to figure out if he really believed in the Church.

He prayed to know if the Church was true and, without receiving any clear confirmation from God, decided to rely on trusted Church leaders and obey the commandment to serve a mission. During his mission he soaked in as much information as he could (from books written by Church leaders and other similar sources) and though he learned a great deal, he still had not received/recognized an undeniable witness that the Church was true:

Absorbing it all in, I learned many great principles...I learned about Jesus’ life, fell in love with the teachings in the New Testament, learned how to love people, and learned how to serve people. Despite the great things I was learning, the entire time I had doubts, mostly about the book of Mormon and Joseph Smith.

Prior to his mission, Braxton was somewhat familiar with what he called the “dark history” of the Church (e.g., polygamy, seer stones) but he only felt capable of fully
processing his beliefs and doubts after he had matured and acquired more developed reasoning skills as a missionary. At this time, about six months into his mission, he came to two conclusions: (1) that he would never be able to come to terms with the inconsistencies and factual flaws he had identified in the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith’s accounts of its origins, and (2) that pioneering members of the Church and current Church leaders sincerely and earnestly believed in the Book of Mormon and its origins and made great sacrifices to maintain and promote that belief.

Despite his lack of confidence in the Book of Mormon and some (not all) of the Church’s teachings and history, Braxton continued his mission. He had seen hungry people fed, families united, and people’s lives transformed for the better because of the Church, in spite of its allegedly illogical origins. And, he did not want to prevent other people from having these positive experiences. He also wanted to continue to learn the foreign language and enjoy the culture of the place he had been assigned. Moreover, he had personally changed and become a strong, independent, individual able to think critically and interact well with others as a result of his missionary service.

For Braxton, deciding to continue his mission, and to remain a participating member of the Church thereafter, was a matter of personal preservation and a “path of least resistance.” For example, he did not want to be stigmatized for returning early, which he felt would create problems in multiple aspects of his life.

*I certainly did not want to hurt the expectations that many of the people I love had for me...I did not want to be viewed as a failure, as I know many early returning missionary will be viewed. I didn’t want to go home and be instantly cut off from 90% of the females in the community who would now no longer date me because I didn’t return home ‘honorably.’*
In addition to fear of being marginalized by friends, family, and potential romantic partners, Braxton hoped that his doubts would one day be resolved and that by sticking with the Church and staying connected to his current social network he could continue to live the principles and enjoy the fruits of the Church that he still had confidence in (e.g., love, self-mastery, and service). He saw little to gain by leaving, and so much to lose by leaving.

Braxton describes himself as a “non-believing, active Mormon.” Though his wife and children are unaware of his true feelings about the Church, he loves them deeply and they all continue to actively attend Church meetings and serve in the Church.

Irreligious

The Irreligious individual (n = 3) is familiar with and therefore skeptical of religion and personal faith. Rather than remaining stoic, the Irreligious are often openly and actively critical of religious institutions. Many in this group had at one time been affiliated with a faith tradition but departed because their existential questions remained unanswered, the perceived hypocrisies (i.e., differences between what is taught and practiced) were too much to bear, or as a result of ideological or social conflict. Some are “angry” while “others are simply mystified that anyone could believe” in the tenets of most religious groups (Smith & Snell, 2009, p. 168). According to Smith and Snell (2009) atheists and agnostics are also grouped here. Johnny’s portrait tells the tale of an individual who entered the mission field with hope that he might gain a witness of the Church but instead confirmed his doubts, increased his disillusionment, and acquired
depressive symptoms. He found solace in the company of ex-Mormons, whereas others took comfort in more secular pursuits.

A portrait of Johnny. Johnny was raised in an active LDS household, with pioneer ancestry, grandparents serving missions on both sides of his family – the whole nine yards. As a youth, his experiences with the Church were overwhelmingly positive and he can recall times where he felt the “spirit;” however, there were always things about the Church that did not seem logical and that he struggled to understand or accept.

Despite his reservations, Johnny served a mission in a southern region of South America, where he hoped he would finally come to know that the Church and its claims to authority, revelation, etc. were true. However, soon after arriving, Johnny became disillusioned by his mission and felt that he was doing little to help the “poverty-stricken” people he had been called to serve. About six months after beginning his assignment, Johnny was diagnosed with depression (related to his feelings of disillusionment and disappointment) and sent home with a “prescription to pray, study, and serve” which, according to Johnny, did nothing to alleviate the “cognitive dissonance” he had been feeling as a missionary. Though discharged by a caring Mission President (a rarity, according to Johnny), he felt ashamed and anxious about returning home early.

Johnny recalled walking off the plane with other missionaries who had served the full two years and were returning from their missions “honorably,” as well as his feelings of trepidation about the reception he would receive:

I waited for a bit while most of the others went down the escalator to screaming throngs of poster wielding extended family, then finally mustered the courage to go myself. My parents were waiting at the bottom along with my two youngest
brothers. I had [explicitly] told my parents not to bring them. I did not want my brothers to see their dishonorable, early-returned missionary brother... [home] felt like more of a foreign land than [South America] ever did as my dad and I drove away from the airport.

Johnny attended therapy and was prescribed anti-depressants when he returned home, and then began his education at a Church affiliated university. While at school, he connected with other early RMs through social media who shared resources and support during his time of crisis. In one of these online social forums, he came across a document called the “CES letter” (a booklet that details one member’s concerns and ‘scholarly’ reasons for leaving the Church), which resonated with him; immediately thereafter, he became obsessed with “anti-Mormon/ pro-truth” articles and sites. His subsequent discoveries about the Church were “revelatory” and shook his whole world. For example, Johnny expressed that after he left the Church and embraced alternative viewpoints he was ostracized by family members and classmates, who neither understood nor sought to understand his perspective. He specifically mentioned calling a cousin who was a recently RM and so-called True Blue Mormon (TBM) and she proceeded to ignore him thereafter. In his words, it was “hell.”

Johnny describes himself as a “recently enlightened ex-Mormon (exmo) trying to figure out life without the Mormon lens.” The takeaway from Johnny’s post mission experience is embodied in this quote from John Steinbeck’s book East of Eden (the tile of Johnny’s post):

And now that you don't have to be perfect, you can be good.
Discussion

According to Barry and Nelson (2005) emerging adulthood is a period in which young people generally: “(a) question the beliefs in which they were raised, (b) place greater emphasis on individual spirituality than affiliation with a religious institution, and (c) pick and choose aspects of the religion which suit them best” in order to (d) proceed to develop their religious identity (p. 247). However, they also argue that some groups of emerging adults experience this process differently, such as members of the Church who are forced to confront their religious identity and commitments at a younger age and in a very real way – via participation in missionary service at the age of 18 and 19. Though emerging adult religious decisions are not highly influenced by early socialization experiences, the mission comes at a life stage that is highly focused on identity exploration and commitment and may have a greater influence on the formalization of one’s religious identity.

The results of this study suggest that while most of the participants began their missions as Committed Traditionalists or Selective Adherents (supporting findings that members of the Church have higher religious commitments compared to other religious and non-religious groups), a few participants moved into new categories (Irreligious, Committed Traditionalists) after their mission and during their reentry process (Table 3.1). For the most part, these shifts indicate decreased commitment to the Church, with one exception. Moreover, these shifts may have a direct effect on the developmental progress and well-being of returning missionaries (individual level) and certainly have implications for retention and experience management in the Church (institutional level;
Smith & Snell, 2009). Exploration between and within each profile (and the others not presented here) revealed a number of connections and experiences that may help explain how participants in the present study were pushed and/or pulled into their respective profiles.

Table 3.1

Pre- and Post-mission Religious Profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Pre-mission Profile</th>
<th>Post-mission Profile</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ava</td>
<td>Committed Traditionalist</td>
<td>Committed Traditionalist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bella</td>
<td>Selective Adherent</td>
<td>Irreligious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benjamin</td>
<td>Committed Traditionalist</td>
<td>Committed Traditionalist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Braxton</td>
<td>Selective Adherent</td>
<td>Selective Adherent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caden</td>
<td>Committed Traditionalist</td>
<td>Committed Traditionalist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carter</td>
<td>Committed Traditionalist</td>
<td>Committed Traditionalist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grayson</td>
<td>Committed Traditionalist</td>
<td>Selective Adherent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harper</td>
<td>Committed Traditionalist</td>
<td>Irreligious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackson</td>
<td>Committed Traditionalist</td>
<td>Committed Traditionalist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jayce</td>
<td>Committed Traditionalist</td>
<td>Committed Traditionalist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jayden</td>
<td>Committed Traditionalist</td>
<td>Committed Traditionalist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnny</td>
<td>Selective Adherent</td>
<td>Irreligious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liam</td>
<td>Committed Traditionalist</td>
<td>Committed Traditionalist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke</td>
<td>Committed Traditionalist</td>
<td>Committed Traditionalist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mason</td>
<td>Committed Traditionalist</td>
<td>Committed Traditionalist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Selective Adherent</td>
<td>Committed Traditionalist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oliver</td>
<td>Committed Traditionalist</td>
<td>Committed Traditionalist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owen</td>
<td>Committed Traditionalist</td>
<td>Selective Adherent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ryan</td>
<td>Committed Traditionalist</td>
<td>Committed Traditionalist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophia</td>
<td>Committed Traditionalist</td>
<td>Committed Traditionalist</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. Profiles were italicized if they had changed from pre- to post-mission.

Processes that Promote Profile Switching or Sticking

A number of factors seemed to pre-dispose individuals to post-mission disaffiliation or commitment. First and foremost, if one was already in the process of doubting one’s faith tradition (i.e., a Selective Adherent), it seemed that mission and post-mission experiences only fanned the flame. In other words, nearly all of the
individuals who were skeptical of the Church prior to serving – including those who genuinely wanted to believe and have their doubts removed during their missionary service – disaffiliated after their missions. The metaphorical fan in this situation included exposure to Anti-Mormon literature and social groups during and following one’s mission, stigmatization and rejection from an apparently bigoted faith group (when doubts and disbelief were publically admitted), and a general embrace for individualistic discourses common to emerging adulthood and society at large.

Individuals who were not fully committed to the Church prior to their mission or who had doubts during and after their mission, but remained committed to the Church, generally felt that participating in daily disciplines, focusing on one’s relationship with God, and observing transformations in oneself and others through missionary service all contributed to their increased commitment.

Outcomes of Profile Switching

Typically emerging adults in the Church are less likely to participate in high risk behaviors (i.e., multiple sexual partners, substance use, etc.) for a number of reasons both spiritual and secular (Barry & Nelson, 2005; Smith & Snell, 2009). Interestingly, one of the outcomes of switching from Selectively Adhering to an Irreligious Status was the almost immediate embrace of these more common, risky emerging adult behaviors. However, after enjoying the grass on the other side of the fence, at least one participant reverted back to a more modest lifestyle and admitted that having experienced the ‘forbidden’ life, she actually felt more aligned with most of the lifestyle tenets of the Church (though she did not return to the Church). Another related outcome of the
decision to disaffiliate was a feeling that one could finally relax and focus on being a ‘good’ person instead of a ‘perfect’ Church member. In other words, individuals no longer had to constantly monitor their behavior and measure up to the Church’s high standards.

Another outcome associated with switching from one religious profile to another relates to social acceptance or rejection. In almost all cases, when an individual switched to an irreligious profile they were reportedly ostracized by their former religious community, and even family and friends. Often, they found support in groups that were antagonistic toward the Church (perhaps because of the shared antagonism they had experienced from the Church) or amongst other ‘enlightened’ folk.

Limitations

The present study is limited by a small and homogenous sample size, though this unsurprising given the characteristics of the population from which the sample was drawn. Moreover, given that the majority of eligible participants were contacted, recruited, and participated, the small sample size is less problematic. That said, generalization of the results and implications should be considered in light of the sample. More important than the size of the sample is the fact that a few of the potential participants could not be reached or refused to participate. Those individuals may have had perspectives that differed from the remainder of the sample. For example, individuals may have opted out of participation because they wanted to avoid embarrassment or refrain from critiquing Church leaders. Individuals may also have opted out or been harder to contact because they disaffiliated and subsequently were either angry,
disconnected, or disinterested in talking about their experience in the Church. Another reason individuals may have refused is due to their classification as a ‘fragile’ reentrant i.e., one who has undergone psychosocial or spiritual crisis (Bonanno, 2004). In other words, they were incapable of fully processing and communicating their experience. To capture these alternative perspectives social media narratives were collected using Radian 6 software. An additional limitation of the study is that interviews were conducted as late as two years after individuals had returned from their missions and may thus have been influenced by recall issues. Expert reviews, member checking, and comparisons to other cases and literature were used to address this concern and see if belated reflections aligned with broader understandings of the phenomenon being studied.

**Conclusion**

Whereas most emerging adults move toward “greater religious liberalism, …autonomy, impulse expression, [and] personal integration,” members of the Church “typically experience the opposite trends including adopting religious beliefs, emphasizing emotional control, and supporting and fostering greater interdependence” (Barry & Nelson, 2005, p. 254). In the present study we explored the extent to which returning missionaries tend to adopt or abandon religious beliefs, based on their categorization into one of six religious profiles. Reentry can be a particularly vulnerable time for emerging adults whose identities and worldviews are still undergoing change, resulting in greater instability, a prolonged adolescence, and/or an inability to accomplish the tasks of adolescence and early adulthood (e.g., developing a secure identity, building and maintaining relationships, respectively).
Côté (2014) underscores this concern, reiterating that failure to accomplish developmental tasks at one life stage could prevent individuals from moving on to the next stage in the life course, thereby inhibiting future, ‘healthy’ development. In other words, if managed poorly, reentry experiences can add instability, confusion, and conflict to an already challenging time in an emerging adult’s life (Kostohryz, Wells, Wathen, & Wilson, 2014). Social institutions (e.g., colleges, corporations, communities, or congregations) are better equipped to address reentry challenges when they understand the source(s) of these challenge. In the context of the present study, well-being seemed most strongly connected to both personal and social acceptance. That is, those that felt that they were making a decision that was personally right for them and who had a social support network of some kind, seemed to fair well whether in or out of the Church.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, & FUTURE RESEARCH

Reentry scholarship emerged in response to growing awareness and concern associated with the problems faced by diverse expatriates. Szkudlarek (2010), documenting “who” is affected by reentry difficulties, noted that few industries, institutions, or disciplines are exempt. In the Church of Jesus Christ, a number of the periodicals, conference proceedings, and instructional materials acknowledge the challenges that arise when “the best two years” (a phrase commonly used to describe the mission) are over (Brigham, 1978, p. 4). As early as 1913, Church leaders were counseling RMs and encouraging them to take steps to find more meaning and purpose in their life (Smith, 1913) and RMs themselves were providing commentary on the challenges of reentry and need for support from members and leaders (Parry, 1929). To summarize these commentaries, RMs at the turn of the 20th century were largely viewed as “drifting,” “wandering,” or being “dropped or ignored” and, according to President Smith, the Church had some obligation and perhaps an opportunity to support these individuals.

Awareness of the reentry difficulties experienced by RMs was documented again, nearly a century later, in a well-known address given by the late Elder L. Tom Perry of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles titled ‘The Returned Missionary.’ He remarked: “I have learned from many conversations with [returned missionaries] that the adjustment associated with leaving the mission field and returning to the world left behind is sometimes difficult.” (para. 6). He continued, “What we need is a royal army of returned
missionaries reenlisted into service. While they would not wear the badge of a full-time missionary, they could possess the same resolve and determination to bring the light of the gospel to a world struggling to find its way” (para. 20)

My primary aim in this dissertation research was to address critical gaps in the tourism, religious studies, and reentry literature by exploring the reentry experiences and discourses of returning missionaries in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. A secondary aim was to investigate how those experiences influence the transition to adulthood. This research revealed that the mission functions as a significant, socializing rite of passage and transformative experience. Furthermore, the results suggest that while a reentry adjustment period of some kind seems inevitable, most of the RMs in the present study, with few exceptions, appeared to be transitioning ‘well’ using Bonanno’s (2004) definition; i.e., “relatively stable, healthy levels of psychological…physical [and I would add spiritual] functioning” (p.20; see also Selby et al., 2009a). Conversely, the study also revealed various challenges encountered by returning missionaries and explored discourses that ought to be challenged, and theories and practices that may assist this group and other populations (e.g., military personnel, humanitarian aid workers) with the reentry process and transition to adulthood. Here I will discuss the implications of these findings for the Church, reentry scholarship, and society.

**Implications for the Church**

At the commencement of the present study (December 2016), the Church of Jesus Christ had supervised the inaugural year of a newly developed reentry program for missionaries – My Plan (a.k.a., My Continuing Mission). The announcement of this
program indicated that after a century of documented concern and haphazard efforts, leaders in the Church finally seem to be fully aware of reentry concerns and actively interested in addressing them via Church sermons, programs, and initiatives. This section will briefly describe the format and content of the current My Plan reentry program and then make evidence-based recommendations (from the findings of the present study and other scholarly literature) regarding additional topics or strategies the Church could employ to better serve its RM$s and strengthen the My Plan program. Implications for broader member care and general reentry practitioners will be discussed thereafter.

**My Plan.** The My Plan program is oriented towards helping missionaries become self-reliant in various domains of life and to step out of their role as full-time missionaries and into the roles as life-long Disciples of Christ. The program is designed to be completed either in groups/ one-on-one sessions facilitated by Stake leaders, or independently and includes an introduction (Ch. 1) and eight (8) chapters titled:

2. Becoming: Fulfilling My Life’s Covenants and Purpose
3. The Doctrine and Promises of Self Reliance
4. Principles for Becoming Self-Reliant
5. Realizing My Goals
6. Working with a Mentor
7. What Resources and Tools Can Help Me
8. Overcoming Opposition
9. A Life of Service
Each chapter includes prompts that invite individuals or group members to read/watch, ponder, discuss/report, participate in an activities and exercises, and/or commit.

Regardless of whether or not missionaries complete the program individually or in a group, Stake leaders are encouraged to introduce them to the material and follow up on their progress.

Chapter 2 helps individuals to develop a vision and mission for their lives and describes the importance of spiritual covenants (promises to obey God’s laws and ordinances) in shaping their life goals and eternal identity. RMs are encouraged to use the scriptures and words of their patriarchal blessing as a guide in developing this vision.

Chapter 3 outlines God’s expectation that RMs become self-reliant – “[able] to provide for your spiritual and temporal necessities” – and describes the blessings promised to those who do so (e.g., God will assist you, provide for you, and apply His grace in your life; p. 7).

Chapter 4 continues to outline principles of self-reliance including the lifelong commitment to exercise faith in Jesus Christ; be obedient to His commandments; solve problems, think and act for one’s self; and serve.

Chapter 5 introduces the topic of goal setting and encourages RMs set meaningful goals with the “highest priority” goal being related to dating and marriage. Reentrants are encouraged to write their goal down, make a specific plan, and be diligent, patient, and faithful as they work to realize their goals.

Chapter 6 encourages missionaries to identify an appropriate mentor and invite that person to take an active mentoring role in their lives. They are instructed to share
their goals with that individual and seek their counsel and support in obtaining those goals.

Chapter 7 reminds missionaries that first and foremost, they are to take personal responsibility for their post mission success but also helps missionaries explore how family, self-reliance resources and groups, online Church resources (e.g., education.lds.org, manuals.lds.org), and participation in the Church’s institute program can help in their post-mission journey. This section also identifies financial resources, government programs, and other secular resources available online.

Chapter 8 teaches missionaries that trials or opposition is a needful and important part of life and God’s plan, identifies spiritual opposition that missionaries may encounter through the efforts of the adversary, and describes the role of the Savior in overcoming those trials.

Chapter 9 begins with what the Church defines as the “keys to a fullness of living” and ends with an invitation to continue serving God and his children. In this section Church leaders suggest that fulfillment in life comes from putting God first, serving others, and repenting – turning to God and away from sin – daily. The plan also includes a worksheet where RMs can reflect on and record (1) lessons learned, skills developed, counsel received, and priorities adopted as a missionary; (2) temptations and challenges they anticipate they will face after their mission; and (3) a vision of who they want to become/where they want to be temporally and spiritually at
some future time in their life and what education, employment, and financial resources they would need to realize that vision^{29}.

In short, the My Plan program seems to focus predominately on helping missionaries identify and set goals to address their own unique reentry challenges and emphasizes the role of faith, obedience, and adherence to Mormon doctrine and covenants as the primary concern of the RM. Thus, My Plan seems to operate on the LDS principle highlighted in Doctrine and Covenants 58: 26-29:

> For behold, it is not meet that I should command in all things; for he that is compelled in all things, the same is a slothful and not a wise servant; wherefore he receiveth no reward. Verily I say, men should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness; for the power is in them, wherein they are agents unto themselves. And inasmuch as men do good they shall in nowise lose their reward. But he that doeth not anything until he is commanded, and receiveth a commandment with doubtful heart, and keepeth it with slothfulness, the same is damned.

In other words, this approach honors the agency and ability of the RM and encourages them to trust in themselves, their divine heritage, and the skills they acquired as missionaries. However, in putting the onus on the missionary, and the focus on spiritual (or limited temporal) concerns, My Plan may overlook resources that address important reentry issues and subject matter such as cross-cultural adjustment and language maintenance, interpersonal communication, mental health, and relationships with or perspectives of significant others.

^{29} The full plan can be accessed at the following link: [https://www.lds.org/callings/missionary/my-plan?lang=eng](https://www.lds.org/callings/missionary/my-plan?lang=eng).
**Recommended amendments to My Plan and its implementation.** Based on the findings from literature reviewed and data collected in the present study, both the content of the My Plan program and how it is delivered could be adjusted to provide a more holistic and effective support structure for missionary reentry. For example, a number of missionaries explained that they had started My Plan during their mission but due to lack of training or implementation efficacy, local leaders failed to follow up with the plan. Given that My Plan was still in its inaugural stages, this finding is as unsurprising as it is admissible. However, recommendations for implementation and training will still be provided. Specifically, recommendations are organized under the headings: coordination, communication, and training; demographic considerations; new content areas; and new delivery methods.

*Coordination, communication, and training.* Based on informant feedback, implementation of My Plan in the field (with Mission Presidents) was still underway and implementation at home (with Bishops and Stake Presidents) had either not fully commenced or not been fully embraced. Specifically, only four of the informants had actually participated in My Plan in the field, though others had heard of the program or expressed interest in a formal reentry program like My Plan. While all but one found the Plan to be valuable (personally or for others), none of the four had meaningful, consistent follow up at the local level. Given the importance of the principles of follow up and accountability in Church and Mission culture, the training of local leaders who will supervise the implementation of individual plans seems vital to the Plan’s success. Thus, General Church and Regional leaders may wish to prioritize their training efforts to
ensure that mission, ward, and stake leaders are trained concurrently and can follow up in accordance with My Plan instructions.

This change would likely include onsite training that stresses both the importance of and implementation of the Plan, including how to find electronic versions of individuals’ plans on the missionary portal or how to organize My Plan support groups. Given the diversity of missionary backgrounds, and the current mission-by-mission rollout of the My Plan program, a concurrent training strategy would be challenging. In other words, identifying which missions were implementing My Plan and then pairing those missions with the appropriate sending communities (i.e., home wards) would be a challenge. Thus, a more universal implementation strategy would need to be adopted where My Plan is implemented world-wide simultaneously to both Mission and Local leaders. To make this possible, would require a reorganization of priorities and possibly a temporary halt on other training activities and Church-wide agenda items.

Additionally, informants expressed interest in more frequent check-ins with local leaders to account for progress or adaptations made related to the plan. Given the rigorous schedule and demands placed on Bishops, perhaps My Plan support could be delegated as a calling or assignment to a member of the missionary correlation team (i.e., a ward mission leader, assistant ward mission leader, or ward missionary). The primary role of this individual would be to maintain contact with missionaries before, during, and after their missions. The individual could help them develop and implement their plan, identify a long-term mentor, involve and work with significant others, and match services/resources to individual needs. Additionally, the reentry liaison could report to
the ward council or priesthood executive committee regarding the progress and needs of
the RM and refer the individual to the Bishop or appropriate Church or community leader
for spiritual, temporal, or mental health counselling. He could make recommendations for
callings, fellowship, and spiritual nourishment. In essence the reentry liaison would be a
local expert on reentry and could provide continuity by reaching out to future Bishops
after the RM departs for school or migrates for employment. This would ensure that the
Plan continues to be reviewed and the missionary does not fall through the cracks or get
looked over during transitional periods.

Finally, reinforcing existing training/practices (and possibly correcting as needed)
should also be considered. Missionaries documented a number of Mission President and
local leader behaviors that seemed detrimental to RM and that contracted Church
handbooks of instruction. For example, the Mission President handbook stresses the
importance of the release interview, stating that the interview should not become routine
and that certain topics such as setting a timeline for marriage should be avoided. Some
informants felt that both of these guidelines had been disregarded such that release
interviews lacked substance or marriage expectations were communicated in an unhelpful
way. Outside of the formal interview, Mission Presidents were known to unwittingly
make comments that put undue pressure on missionaries (sisters in particular, who
typically have less control or say in the matter) to get married.

*New content areas.* While My Plan appears to align well with the needs and
desires of most RMs, the programs almost exclusive focus on spiritual matters could
minimize the impact and importance of other aspects of a missionary’s life. A few topics
that could be considered in future iterations of the program, based on informant perspectives, include:

- **Independent living skills.** Many missionaries were concerned about returning to the responsibilities and activities of daily living such as pursuing housing, education, and careers or managing personal finances. My Plan does include references to the Church’s Self Reliance program which includes sections on personal finance, education, employment, and entrepreneurship. However, including that content and goals related to the content in the Plan could streamline missionary engagement with that material. That said, the self-reliance support groups could be a great tool for missionaries who, in addition to independent living skills, are seeking purpose, productivity, and belonging. Personal invitations from Bishops or other local leaders to attend the groups could provide RMs with the direction they need to take advantage of these resources.

- **Language and culture maintenance.** RMs are one of the largest groups studied in the language attrition literature and yet language maintenance and its value in terms of Church service, academic and career success, and connections to the mission are understated in current iterations of My Plan. My Plan could help missionaries to identify ways and means to maintain their language skills, particularly in situations where individuals cannot afford or choose not to attend educational institutions where language courses are readily available. Reverse culture shock was also present, to some extent, in the findings of this study and yet treatment of reverse culture shock is absent from My Plan. Including content
related to why reverse culture shock occurs and how to respond to it would add value and diversify the My Plan content.

- Dealing with doubts. Dealing with doubts has been addressed in a number of sermons of the Church but could be more explicitly addressed in the My Plan program. Many of those who left the Church had doubts or had been confronted with anti-Mormon literature and did not know how to critically evaluate or sift through the material presented, or cope with the cognitive dissonance the material created. Currently the My Plan approach seems to be spiritually proactive rather than reactive, however, providing missionaries with the knowledge they seek and the thinking skills they need to cope with disorienting dilemmas could increase organizational commitment and retention.

New delivery methods. While the current format of My Plan is both comprehensive and flexible, the program currently excludes relevant stakeholder groups and lacks ceremony. By reaching out to additional stakeholder groups and adding pomp and circumstance to the return, missionaries may feel a great sense of support and closure. For example, informants mentioned that their release was remarkably unremarkable especially in comparison to the call to serve which is full of preparatory and transitional rituals and rites such as Melkezidek priesthood ordination, the receipt of a patriarchal blessing, a formal interview and setting apart, a receipt and opening of the call, the receipt of one’s temple endowment, and a more formalized farewell ceremony (Shepherd & Shepherd, 1998). The return typically includes the private removal of the
tag, a report to the high council, and a homecoming talk, however, the release process is fairly quick and uneventful from the perspective of the missionary.

Emphasizing and ritualizing the return could signify to the missionary that his or her efforts were valued and increase his or her enthusiasm to reenlist in the work. Maruna (2011) suggests that failure to incorporate rituals can create “spiritual sinkholes” marked by identity confusion, lack of motivation, alienation, and moratorium. She also posits that when implemented well, rituals should be symbolic, emotive, repeated, communal, and focused on challenge and achievement. She warns that too many reintegration rituals risk becoming routine. Simple changes and consistency to existing rituals might address this issue in the Church, however, new rituals might also be considered. Changes to existing rituals could include adding structure and value to exit interviews and group meetings, inviting significant others to participate in the removal of a missionary’s name tag, consistently reading letters from a missionary’s Mission President over the pulpit and publicly recognizing their service, etc. The Church often celebrates accomplishments with formal banquets or ceremonies such as the Eagle court of honor, seminary graduation, or the young women’s in excellence evening. The Church also uses certificates and medallions to visibly recognize and award members for accomplishments such as the completion of personal progress or Duty to God requirements. Incorporating these types of elements into a more ceremonious experience for RMs could provide more closure, engage the ward community, and better signify to the missionary that his or her service is recognized and valued.
Current iterations of My Plan also require limited involvement of significant others despite abundant research that suggests significant others both (a) have reentry difficulties of their own, and (b) can become a supportive resource during the reentry process. Instead, significant others currently add additional complexity and challenge to reentry that most RMs seem unprepared for. For example, missionaries may return to a household where family members are not members of the Church or are failing to live by its teachings. Understanding how they can approach their family with love and logic in these settings could alleviate stress and anxiety for RMs. Helping family members understand how their missionary may have changed and what their needs are could also reduce tension and emotional distance in the home. Thus, a separate section on helping missionaries work with significant others and even a separate manual that specifically prepares significant others for reentry could minimize a number of reentry challenges.

Involving family members or significant others in the development and implementation of a missionary’s reentry plan could also provide an added source of support and accountability for the missionary and a more natural outlet for sharing experiences and needs with family members who may gain a greater understanding and empathy through the process. Giving families more responsibility in the reentry process could also alleviate the burden placed on Church leaders.

A number of missionaries spoke about the mission “family” and the desire to maintain relationships with converts, members, and missionaries from the field. My Plan could facilitate this relationship maintenance by shifting to an online platform with networking, sharing, and community building capabilities. Missionaries could share their
challenges and successes with other missionaries, reconnect with former converts and members, or otherwise find support and connections on these platforms. While Facebook and other mainstream platforms have these capabilities, a Church sponsored platform could provide a one stop shop for social support, communication, resources, sharing/blogging etc. and also be an easy data collection hub for the research division of the Church as they seek to evaluate and adapt the program. Additionally, while mission reunions seem to be a meaningful way of reuniting missionaires with their mission “family,” these reunions are somewhat inaccessible to those who do not live in or near Utah, where the reunions are typically held. Virtual reunions could be held on an online platform or a portion of the missionary fund could be used to scholarship RMs who desire but cannot afford to attend a reunion.

Currently my plan refers missionaries to the counselling services available by the Church but just as the Church requires a temple interview upon return, Church leaders may wish to make a single counseling session an expectation for RMs as well. As noted earlier, the use of reflective therapies in particular can be helpful to missionaries seeking to either build connections or find closure. Given that reentry distress is often tied to mental health issues and given the Church’s increased openness and changing dialogue about mental health (demystifying and destigmatizing mental health), provision of counselling services seems particularly relevant. According to Long (2004) and from a member care perspective, one could argue that the Church has an obligation towards its members regarding the promotion or maintenance of health, particularly the health of
missionaries who have provided voluntary and dedicated service at a critical juncture in their lives.

**Demographic and individual considerations.** While the Church continues to wax more progressive and now has as many members outside of the U.S. as it does inside, the Church is still headquartered in the U.S. and functions as a patriarchal order. These realities necessitate programming adaptations that acknowledge nuanced cultural and gendered experiences in the Church. For example, despite the increasing number of women serving and returning from missions, leaders seemed unprepared to counsel returning sister missionaries. Because males traditionally lead out in LDS dating and marriage and have clearer paths to leadership in the Church, counselling and setting goals with returning elders is a clearer cut process than working with sisters. Thus, leaders ought to be trained on how to counsel sisters in a way that is appropriate and acknowledges the opportunities and challenges for women in the Church. This is especially true given that returning sisters have leadership, teaching, and life skills that are comparable to elders, all of which can strengthen the Church and help Church leaders to accomplish its mission. Other questions that should be considered are whether or not the My Plan program is culturally relevant. Perhaps the individuation and ambiguity of the plan, coupled with the focus on spiritual rather than temporal needs is an attempt to make the plan as cross-cultural and adaptable as possible. However, investigating whether or not the format and learning activities in the plan resonate across cultures may be appropriate as well. Regarding Church culture, one could also ask whether or not there are content and delivery
considerations that apply to converts, or members of less-active families, that might not apply to a mission returning to a family of life-long, active members.

**Implications for the Broader Reentry Scholarship**

The present study established links between reentry and a number of topics/theories that have previously been understudied in the reentry literature. For example, social comparison theory clarified the need to be productive and the source of dating and marriage pressure, the theory of emerging adulthood broadened understanding of the identity related needs of RMs, and theories of place/people attachment helped clarify the process of how missionary relationships are formed and maintained. Each theory provides additional understanding regarding the challenges of reentry, their source, and their long term consequences and could have application in a variety of contexts.

The My Plan program and markers of reentry in the Church could have application in other contexts where reentry continues to be an issue. Specifically, both the **content** and **delivery** of the My Plan program could be adopted by other missional organizations and the broader field of reentry. In terms of content, the concepts of vision, goal setting and planning, mentoring, and resource distribution seem the most pertinent to the widest audience. For informants in the present study, taking time to develop a vision (before returning) was one of the most meaningful activities they performed in preparation for their return. Even if they did not regularly and consciously think about their written vision statement, taking the time to craft the statement and plan and set goals related to it provided stability and steerage in their lives. As organizations prepare to send
expatriates home, they might consider taking time to help repatriates craft and communicate their vision to relevant stakeholders (e.g., employers, significant others).

The use of mentors as proposed by the Church has popped up in the corporate repatriation and international education literature, and could provide repatriates with a “friend” and guide through the uncharted reentry process. Mentors who have experience with repatriation tend to be the most effective and the most capable of empathizing with the new reentrants. Ensuring the repatriates are familiar with and have access to a wide variety of resources has and will continue to be a hallmark of successful repatriation services. Regarding delivery, the timing, structure, and format of My Plan add to its effectiveness and could be learned from. For example, the program is initiated at pre-departure, continued in the field, and perpetuated during reentry. Both field offices and the sending organization are involved in the process and accounting of the Plan. The plan is offered in individual and group formats. And, the program itself consists of different components such as studying, reflecting, sharing, and applying, all of which have distinct cognitive and practical benefits. These patterns and processes allow for flexibility and adaptability in the delivery of content, which are likely the most important considerations when designing a reentry program.

Other programs and activities have been identified to address reentry distress, some of which may be particularly beneficial to emerging adult reentrants. For instance, La Brack (2006) proposed 12 activities/approaches to help returning student travelers adjust well. A few of these activities include: letting students review, relive and retell their story; connecting students with peers who have had similar experiences; setting
goals with students to help them plan for the future, get involved in local/international issues and organizations, and perhaps return overseas; and ‘un-packing’ the experience as one of many life experiences rather than an isolated, compartmentalized event. These activities create outlets for emerging adults to express their changed worldviews, test altered lifestyles, and continue to explore how their transformed identities fit into their home context.

However, engaging [emphasis added] students in reentry programs is not nearly as challenging as recruiting [emphasis added] students to these programs. Marketing for these programs should de-emphasize pathological connotations such as ‘coping’ or dealing with ‘reverse culture shock’ and highlight social and practical programmatic elements (La Brack, 2006). Additionally, institutions should employ alternative formats for providing reentry support that facilitate the transition to adulthood more directly, such as “social gatherings where students can interact informally, counseling sessions, alumni panels, peer-mentor programs, credit-bearing courses, resume workshops, [and] mock job interviews...” (La Brack, 2006, p. 64). A strategy to recruit and engage reentrants, which may be better suited to emerging adult populations, is to create an online community and forum where reentrants can fulfill needs, influence others, feel belonging, and share emotional connections (Loomis & Friesen, 2011). For instance, microblogging has been shown to have a positive effect during reentry by increasing connectedness, understanding, and intimacy (Zheng, 2013). The ease and familiarity of these online platforms may be attractive to tech-savvy emerging adult reentrants and could potentially facilitate continued exploration of relationships and/or worldviews. As an additional
thought, following trends in the field of military reintegration, the Church might also wish to consider the role of recreation and leisure as a tool to de-pathologize and increase health seeking behaviors or participation in reentry programming. These recreational activities could parallel the ‘high adventure’ style camps common in the current youth programming.

A number of questions still remain that cannot be answered with the data collected in the present study. For example, are there differences in how reentry is experienced based on the region one is departing from or departing to? One might presume that cultural or economic differences in the sending or receiving countries (or differences) between the two would result in differential mission and reentry experiences. While the findings of this study provide some indication that international missionaries had some additional challenges (i.e., retaining their mission language and culture, relearning their native language and culture, and maintaining contact with people in distant foreign locales) these challenges actually seemed pretty minimal in contrast to other more pressing concerns. Further research with a larger sample size and more targeted questions may more accurately address this question. Given that the sample in this study was comprised of missionaries from the same stake in a single region of the country, future research including other stakes outside of this region and outside of the U.S. could also help provide cross-cultural and global understandings of reentry in the Church.

Another question worth exploring, is whether or not the data collected via the Radian6 software would have been possible to collect in a face-to-face or direct format
(i.e., in person or phone interview)? The answer is likely “no” given that most of the platforms where these responses came from provided a great deal of anonymity, and in many cases the individuals that were posting had disclosed their ‘true’ feelings online but not to significant others in their embodied social world. In that regard, online communities functioned as a place to find belonging, to express one’s authentic and honest feelings and have those feelings validated. Loomis and Friesen (2011) found that missionary kids in their study similarly looked online for a sense of community. Feeling detached from both their home and host communities, or rather struggling to conceptualize home, they found belonging in an online community of travelers that felt similarly in-between places and identities. These insights open the door to the study of reentry in the realm of digital geographies in two ways. First, due to globalization, attachments and social groups have become increasingly independent of geographic space and place and may be easier to coordinate and develop online. Second, due to the anonymity created in many online platforms, more ‘authentic’ and diverse perspectives may be obtained from these sources than from traditional data collection strategies that are often hampered by social desirability and interviewer effects, and other biases or sources of error. As an additional thought, it was also interesting to see how some of these online communities facilitated a space for counter discourses to emerge, with a distinct language to guide how members of the community talked about the Church and its members. For example, Ex-Mormons (Ex-Mos) on these sites referred to the Church as “The So-Called Church” (TCC) and referred to active members as “True Blue
Mormons” challenging the Church’s claims to being God’s chosen Church and casting a mocking label on members who remain susceptible to those claims.

**Toward a New Discourses of Reentry in the Church**

Though the focus of this dissertation was on voluntary, human repatriation, this section will discuss literature related to both non-human and involuntary repatriation, recognizing that how we talk about, perceive, and experience voluntary, human repatriation may be influenced by other related but perpendicular bodies of literature. A broader review of reentry scholarship reveals highly politicized and contested forms of repatriation, problematic repatriation language, and a colonization of repatriation knowledge. A handful of studies will be presented here to highlight some of these discursive phenomenon as they relate to the present study in an effort to contextualize and reform the discourse of reentry in the Church.

**Non-human Repatriation.** Two categories of so-called non-human repatriation worth noting here are the repatriation of fallen soldiers by families, communities, and society, and the repatriation of cultural artifacts/human remains by first nation or indigenous groups. The former category has elicited earnest discourses about the politics of respect, the valuation of military sacrifice, and how both are influenced by whether or not the present conflict is supported or contested (Martinsen, 2016; Walklate, Mythen, & McGarry, 2015). The latter category has produced discursive debates about ownership, stewardship, legitimacy, identity politics, and universal benefit (Bienkowski, 2016; Kakaliouras, 2017; Stutz, 2016). Bienkowski (2016) described the competing interests of the indigenous and scientific communities, and suggested the following:
Current restitution [i.e., repatriation] processes tend to privilege the Universalist claims of science, the nation state, and an essentialist view of cultural groups. This means that the search for knowledge is the most important criterion, self-evidently of universal benefit, transcending national and cultural borders. (p. 37)

While legislation has was created in the 1990’s (National American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act) to protect indigenous claims to cultural property and establish a process for reclaiming said property (Kakaliouras, 2017), Bienkowski (2016) posited establishing cultural legitimacy is a complex process requiring indigenous groups to “practice a ‘pristine’ culture, lead a traditional lifestyle, and be able to demonstrate genealogical links and close cultural continuity with past cultures” (p. 37). This places the scientific community or nation-state in a position of power over first nation peoples, dictating who has legitimate claims or not. Kakaliouras (2017) speaks in favor of this arbitration, stressing that perhaps the discourse of repatriation in this context has been overly focused on ownership/benefits rather than stewardship/responsibility. Stutz (2016), in contrast, argued that the current standards for establishing legitimacy are problematic in that they stem from colonial and static interpretations of the past and present (staged authenticity), and an even more problematic expectation of continuity between past and present.

**Voluntariness.** Hammond (1999) noted that for many years human repatriation was primarily focused on decision making (i.e., whether or not returning was voluntary, safe, and dignified or coercive, dangerous, and inhumane) and physical mobility (i.e., literal, geographic movement of people). Only in the last two decades have scholars begun to consider the quality of life and long term process of reintegration that occurs
after one has been relocated (Hammond, 2014). In that regard, Hammond (1999) posited that repatriation becomes more complex and discursive when movement (deportation, exile, voluntary mobility) is motivated by conflict or tension at ‘home,’ when the period of expatriation is prolonged and when circumstances at ‘home’ make ‘returning’ less plausible or anticipated. For example, referring to refugees specifically, Hammond (1999) suggests that the region they had previously occupied may have become uninhabitable. Likewise, refugees may find themselves competing for land rights and resources with occupiers or those who remained behind rather than joining in the exodus. Refugees may also have experienced a transformation during expatriation and developed new knowledge, skills, social networks, gender roles, political identities, and economic interests, all of which could influence their desire and ability to return to their country of origin (Hammond, 1999; 2014). In this case, the refugee ought to have the option of choosing between whether to return to their country of origin (i.e., homemaking) or to migrate to a new place or in a new way (i.e., emplacement; Hammond, 2014). Where, traditionally, external actors have dictated the terms of repatriation, the refugees ought to have the power to make informed decisions about their futures. Where refugees do have more voice, questions about who makes decisions in households (e.g., young males, have more decision making power than women or the elderly) prevail. This discourse of voluntariness may be particularly relevant in a RM scenario, where Church members and leaders or family members often dictate the terms of repatriation and where Elders have historically received greater resources and attention.
**Problematic terminology.** Regarding language, Hammond (1999) argues that “we need to question our assumptions about the meanings we give to concepts of ‘return’, ‘home’, and place while at the same time reassessing the terms we use to describe post-repatriation life” (p. 227). According to Hammond (1999) much of the language of repatriation is “borrowed” from the “international aid regime, its sub discipline disaster management, and outdated migration theories” (p. 228). First, this language frames repatriation as a homecoming, where ‘home’ is a static, sedentary, time-bound, and place-based concept, suggesting that separation or departure from home results in “pathological rootlessness… deterritorialization…and dehistorization” (p. 232). In other words, the only plausible solution to situations involving mobility as described here is to restore the expatriate to his or her country of origin. Walter (2008) similarly contends that the idea of ‘home’ is inextricably connected to concepts such as “roofs (i.e., shelter, protection), relationships (i.e., social, emotional), and roots (i.e., identity, culture, and context)”, and therefore the absence of these things (i.e., “comfort, familiarity, or belonging”) culminates in theoretical ‘homelessness’ (p.1). However, she also argues that globalization and modernity have made place-based notions of ‘home’ more problematic and that ‘homes’ (i.e., identities and communities) can be separated from geographic locations or nation-states and evolve over time.

**The discourse of reentry in the Church.** The discourse of reentry in the Church raises many of the same questions regarding (a) voluntariness, (b) diverse views about what it means to ‘return’ with dignity or what constitutes ‘home’, and (c) who dictates the reason for and terms of repatriation (Bradley, 2013; Bradley, 2014; Fresia, 2014;
Hammond, 1999; Pocock & McIntosh, 2013; Walters, 2008). In many ways, reentry discourses in the Church also raise questions of representation to the fore, as in the case of female missionaries and early returnees whose perspectives and voices are often underrepresented (Johnson, 2016; Nash & Colwell-Chanthaphonh, 2010; Stutz, 2013).

Likewise, early return in the Church sometimes resembles the controversial repatriation and celebration of both living and deceased military personnel – particularly in the context of unpopular wars or conflicts (Martinussen, 2016; Walklate, Mythen, & McGarry, 2015). In other words, early returnees are often viewed with the same cynicism and stigma, rather than celebrated and supported for their service. “The RM,” a film about a young returned missionary who has an endlessly miserable reentry experience, points to the use of religious clichés (i.e., cultural scripts) intended to provide comfort to the distressed (e.g., “keep an eternal perspective,” “God works in mysterious ways,” and “you’ll be blessed for your service”). However, this type of language often undermines rather than increasing faith, overlooks the complexity of human experience, and fails to resolve the immediate needs of the individual.

With these problematic discourses in mind, Hammond (2014) called for alternative conceptualizations of repatriation that focus less on reintegration, returning, rebuilding, etc. and that recognize the complexity of human life and potential. This alternative form would include language such as “construction, creativity, innovation, and improvisation” and allow repatriates to make decisions (i.e., pursuing transnational mobility) that betters their station in life rather than restoration to a former state (p. 243). In the context of the present study, as missionaries become more attached to their
mission places, build families within their mission units, and are transformed through their service, their concept of ‘home’ may shift. Reentry programming and support that allows for recognizes the new ‘homes’ missionaries create, may help them to transition more successfully. Hammond (2014) also called for the development of standards that more clearly define what successful, long-term repatriation looks like. These standards would like be applied in a nuanced manner to different populations based on the nature of their departure and return. Future research that clarifies “successful repatriation” and “standards of success” in the context could be interesting, however, the same questions regarding who defines these measures of success ought to be addressed.

**Reflections, Reflexivity, and Insider Research**

Being an *insider* (emic) can be a “boon” to research when compared to being an *outsider* (etic). For example, insiders are often able to: (a) quickly identify key informants, thereby narrowing the *field of study* (Katz, 1994), (b) easily establish rapport with respondents (e.g., case study informants, interview subjects), thereby eliciting more genuine, thick descriptions (Phillimore & Goodson, 2004), and (c) actively engage in a participatory research process that often adopts an action orientation (McDowell, 1992). Insiders are also able to generate relevant research questions that stem from their personal experiences/observations and less arbitrarily define the field of study – since they are already a part of the field (Katz, 1994). However, having insider status also requires that the researcher consider his or her closeness to the research topic and respondent(s), and the influence of his or her insider status on the overall design, interpretation, and representation of the research. That said, a researcher may be able to ‘check’ his or her
insider status by engaging in a reflexive process and applying Baxter and Eyrles’ (1997; 1999) evaluative criteria and questions for establishing qualitative rigor (see also Flick, 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). With this in mind, the purpose of this section is to: (a) discuss the issues associated with being an inside researcher and (b) discuss potential strategies for resolving or minimizing those issues. In order to fully address this topic, I will begin by engaging with paradigmatic debates among qualitative researchers about the role of rigor in qualitative research and the need, or lack thereof, to establish objectivity, validity, and reliability.

‘Establishing Quality in Qualitative Research.’ Flick (2008) succinctly summarized the ongoing dispute among qualitative researchers regarding the role of rigor in qualitative research. On one side of the debate, the concept of rigor is strongly, negatively associated with post-positivist notions of objectivity, validity, and reliability all of which allegedly run counter to the fundamental critical, constructivist, and/or interpretivist assumptions that guide the majority of qualitative studies. Researchers on the other side of the argument, are typically more pragmatic and contend that in order for qualitative research to be deemed acceptable or legitimate in the broader scientific community and, therefore, have scientific meaning or utility, quality controls of some kind must be put in place. This practical party recognizes that while objectivity may not be an appropriate outcome or expectation of qualitative research, it is reasonable to use a metric of some kind to assess the honesty, integrity, and confirmability of research.

The resistance to terms like objectivity, validity, and reliability originates, in large part, with critical and constructivist paradigms that argue for multiple realities and ways
of knowing (Drake, 2010). Feminist researchers have, in many ways, led out in this debate and challenged traditional, masculine ways of knowing that assume the possibility of uncovering a single, observable truth (McDowell, 1992; Ateljevic et al., 2005). Feminist researchers have also challenged the notion of an objective, impartial, unbiased researcher and, therefore, called for greater reflexivity in the research process (Ateljevic et al., 2005). Specifically, feminist research methods and reflexivity are concerned with increasing awareness of inequitable power structures and drawing attention to the dehumanization of the research process brought about through traditional, imperialistic approaches (Smith, 1999). More precisely, reflexivity is concerned with uncovering and encountering one’s positionality (e.g., the relationship and position of and between subjects, researchers, and their socio-political context), intersectionality (e.g., the multiple facets of the self or multiple oppressions – racism, sexism – that one may experience), and ideology/authority (e.g., the power, privilege, and discursive scripts that influence positionality/intersectionality and responsibility to represent them as objectively/honestly as possible; Ateljevic et al., 2005). Taken together, these literatures (i.e., feminism, reflexivity) shed light on the challenge of being an inside researcher, including the inevitability of influencing the research process, and address different perspectives on how to curb or embrace one’s insider status.

The challenge(s) of insider research. Insider research, while beneficial in a number of ways can also elicit a number of challenges. For example, Rose (1997) described how the intimacy of qualitative research and, arguably, the added intimacy of insider qualitative research, can create situations of dependence and/or betrayal. In the
situations described by Rose, the researcher becomes a pseudo-therapist or a confidant such that the respondent discloses ‘private’ information to the researcher on the condition that the researcher will not divulge the information. This problematic relationship can create a number of uncomfortable and ethical issues related to the balance between trust and trustworthiness in qualitative research. For example, a researcher may wish to convey all [emphasis added] of the information shared by a respondent in order to be as true to the data as possible and consequently break trust with the respondent, who requested that certain information be withheld from publication. This breach of trust could damage the researcher-participant relationship and the possibility of future data collection.

A related issue concerns the reciprocity expected of the insider researcher. As an insider, an interviewer is likely to have experiences or challenges in common with the subject, begging the question: “to what extent does the researcher disclose his or her shared experiences with the subject?” Particularly, reciprocity is concerned with the nature and quantity of information the researcher shares about his or herself, or on the topic of study (Jennings, 2005). If too much information is shared the interviewer could steer the interview, lead the subject, or create a dynamic in which the subject wishes to please the interviewer with socially desirable responses. In these cases, the idea of a detached, impartial researcher, which is so widely criticized by qualitative scholars, becomes more appealing. Mansfield (2007) recommends that researchers walk a fine line between intimacy/reciprocity and distance/impartiality – what he calls involved-detachment. Involved detachment suggests that a researcher, especially a passionate insider, should develop rapport in order to solicit more genuine and detailed constructions
of knowledge, while simultaneously maintaining some relational distance to avoid steering the interview or leading the subject.

As an insider or an outsider, most qualitative scholars agree that the researcher cannot fully know or remove his or her bias and is, therefore, a co-producer of knowledge. However, some argue that the researcher should do his or her best to avoid ‘contaminating’ the data or minimizing bias (a more post-positivistic attitude), while others argue that the researcher should embrace his or her bias and let that bias play a part in the construction of knowledge (a more constructivist mentality). Riley (1996) aligns with the former of these two paradigmatic perspectives and further contends that minimal bias is desirable, not because it approaches some objective reality, but because it allows the subject to construct the majority of the narrative and meaning. He suggests that a researcher can create a climate where the subject is the source of knowledge by: (a) meeting on familiar ground, (b) stating and minimizing power discrepancies as much as possible, (c) strategically probing, and (d) avoiding “why” questions – since these tend to prompt defensiveness. Again, the goal is not necessarily to approach an objective reality but rather to let the respondent construct the narrative as much as possible (Riley, 1996). That said, England (1994) argues that in asking anyone a question we are disrupting their normal thinking and, therefore, anything that comes out of their mouth thereafter is an artefact of our questioning. England (1994) further contends that researchers who think they are being reflexive often appropriate, colonize, or fetishize the subject by overemphasizing the ‘Otherness’ of the participant’s ‘foreign’, constructed perspective.
Reflexive tools, evaluative criteria, and their limitations. A number of reflexive tools and discourses have emerged to assist the qualitative scholar, which may be of particular utility to the insider researcher. First and foremost, the term insider researcher is fallacious and overly simplistic. That is, the researcher may be an ‘insider’ in many regards but is likely an outsider in other ways. A number of researchers have addressed this issue as in relation to gender and feminism. For example, early feminists described gender as a uni-dimensional construct and focused their attention on challenging patronizing and patriarchal views of feminist research or asserting the role of gender in the research process (and in societal institutions generally; Aitchison, 2005). Herod (1993), for instance, discussed how gender influences the interview/research process and the extent to which different gendered pairings (e.g., male researcher, female subject; male researcher, male subject; female researcher, female subject; female researcher, female subject) influence how an interview is perceived/received by both the researcher and subject. Herod asserted that gender plays a role at all stages of the research process including topic selection, choice of methods, analysis, and interpretation. Westwood et al. (2006) likewise agreed that gender influenced the research process but noticed, for example, that not all males responded the same to a female interviewer and suggested that an interviewer could (and perhaps should) alter their persona to elicit different/more authentic responses (e.g., acting more submissive to solicit a more machismo response or acting more emboldened to solicit a fair-minded response). In either case, gender is construed as a singular construct with little dimension or variation, which neither represents the diversity of female experiences nor acknowledges that males
are also influenced by socially constructed gender roles. Challenging these narrow constructions of gender, Ateljevic et al. (2005) listed a number of reflexive entanglements including intersectionality which assumes that individuals have multiple identities (e.g., middle-aged, White, male) or experience multiple forms of oppression (e.g. ageism, racism, sexism) that are inseparable and interrelated. Similarly, Crang (2003) addressed this topic and posited that qualitative researchers often assume/claim that the researcher or subject’s identity and position are somehow static or fixed and, therefore, can be acknowledged, controlled for, and then packaged up and set aside. In contrast, Crang proposes that one’s position is constantly evolving as a product of broader socio-political discourses or changes in the field or interviewer-subject relationship (individually and collectively), and, therefore, must constantly be re-evaluated and restated. He further argues that the ability to be continuously and meaningfully reflective is nearly impossible in the context of the “publish or perish” mentality adopted by institutions of higher education. For example, the structure of academic publishing often seeks to remove the author’s voice and once the written work has been published, there is no limit to the number of ways the work will be read, represented, and reinterpreted though citations or otherwise. As in all research, reflexive or not, responses are typically an artifact of questions that are asked.

The act of reflexivity consists of acknowledging one’s prejudice (e.g., biases, assumptions, and norms), position (e.g., personal characteristics), and power (e.g., relation to subject and socio-political context) as they pertain to all stages of the research project and influence one’s relationship with the research subject (Ateljevic et al. 2005;
Drake, 2010; Feighery, 2006b). Part of reflexivity is a critical scrutiny of one’s identity, decision making processes, biases, and partiality. To be truly reflexive, requires one to acknowledge the situatedness of his or her research and to constantly reflect on and reexamine his or her assumptions, relationships, and actions. In sum, reflexivity posits that we are inseparable from the field, research process, and research production and therefore ought to disclose our biography, role, or decision making and its potential influence (Katz, 1994). The true aim of reflexivity is to create a space for new types of scientific practice and thought or to “loosen the moorings” so to speak (Edensor, 2000; Feighery, 2006b). While many would argue that reflexivity is about creating standards of rigor that mirror quantitative measures of validity and reliability, reflexivity is more concerned with transparency—an admission that we (in the ivory tower) do not know or control the research process or product as much or as well as we would like to (England, 1994; Rose, 1997). In many ways then, the purpose of reflexivity is multifaceted: it is about power; it is about trustworthiness or reliability; it is about transparency; it is about acknowledging that research, even published research, is never ‘finished’ but constantly open to reinterpretation and representation.

A number of criticisms have been raised regarding reflexivity and its practice (Cohen, 2013; England, 1994; Rose, 1997; Westwood et al., 2006). The first is as much a caution as it is a criticism and points towards “reflexivity’s tendency towards infinite regress” (Feighery, 2006b, p. 278). That is, there is a penchant to continue to deconstruct, unravel, scrutinize, and critique such that one never concludes, presents, or shares the work. With this warning in mind, Feighery (2006b) distinguished between two types of
reflexivity: D-reflexivity; i.e., reflexivity intended to deconstruct, defend, declaim, or destabilize and R-reflexivity; i.e., reflexivity intended to reconstruct, reframe, reclaim, and re-present. He recommends that the latter of the two has more merit and demonstrates a shift towards “productive reflexivity” (p. 278). Another common critique of reflexive practice is that reflexivity is simply a replication of masculine, hegemonic ideals. For example, some reflexive scholars claim that by recognizing one’s position and power, one is more aware of and able to arrive more closely to the reality of the phenomenon being studied. In that regard, reflexive scholars are accused of making some of the same validity/truth claims that they vehemently abandoned and opposed. In other words, feminist, critical, and interpretive methods typically ascribe to a many truths philosophy that challenges the idea that there is a one known reality that can be discovered. However, some proponents of reflexivity have suggested that the practice elicits or elucidates a truer reality, which would be counter to their core philosophy (Westwood et al., 2006). Another criticism that has been raised questions our cognitive ability to be reflexive (Rose, 1997). This critique posits that reflexive scholars naively assume that one’s position and its influence are consciously knowable and fixed which is rarely true. One’s identity and position is constantly evolving (Crang, 2003). That we are capable of “stepping back from our culturally laden prejudice” especially when it is so dynamic, is unlikely. This is especially true in the context of a growing body of scholarship that characterizes prejudice, bias, and assumptions as implicit and part of the unconscious functioning of our brains (Greenwald & Krieger, 2006). The clearest constraints to reflexivity, in my opinion, are that it is both difficult and disruptive. When
we engage in research we disrupt the subject’s normative routines and train of thought with unsolicited questions. Thus, we are asking people to think about a topic in a time, place, and manner calling the question the responses given. As Graves (2013) suggests, individuals are more than happy to answer questions they do not know the answer to. Thus, there are some barriers that even reflexivity cannot transcend. Feminist scholars also posit that being reflexive about one’s position in relation to the field and the research subject can remove gaps in power that exist between the researcher and the researcher. In contrast, critics point to the impossibility of total empowerment suggesting that in the end, the researcher has the final say and is ultimately privileged by his/her position in the academy. In fact some scholars goes as far as to suggest that the practice of reflexivity can even reinforce insider/outsider dichotomies that further marginalizes ‘others’ by drawing attention to sensationalizing difference (England, 1994).

A number of other approaches, beyond reflexivity, have also been proposed to address the validity and reliability of data which may be useful to an insider researcher interested in minimizing his or her bias. For example, Baxter and Eyrles (1997) introduced four evaluative criteria and eight questions that can assist with a more ‘rigorous’ research process. Their evaluative criteria are derived from the work of Lincoln and Guba (1985) who suggest that rather than seeking validity and reliability, qualitative research is concerned with establishing trustworthiness – the extent to which the data collection methods, data analysis, and represented meanings can be trusted. The criteria include:
1. Credibility – the soundness of the method and methodology. Ensured in my dissertation through data triangulation (six sources of evidence; see Lincoln & Guba, 1985, Yin, 2009), prolonged engagement (my reentry experience and continued Church membership), and peer debriefing (devil’s advocates).

2. Transferability – the extent to which the method and result can be reproduced. Ensured in my dissertation through thick description, a case database (Yin, 2009).

3. Confirmability – the extent to which the data has been checked by members/experts. Ensured in my dissertation through checks with key informants.

4. Dependability – the extent to which the method and result can be traced or verified. Ensured through the use of an audit trail (Halpern, 1983; Schwandt & Halpern, 1988) and logic modeling (Yin, 2009).

In a later work, Baxter and Eyrles (1999) delved into challenges associated with evaluating quality using these criteria. Specifically they questioned strategies for establishing confirmability (e.g., member checking) and dependability (e.g., triangulation). For instance, they asked questions like: “Who should ‘check’ the data?” (i.e., the respondent, experts, fellow researchers?), and “To what extent should coders be in agreement when analyzing data” (i.e., how many matches are enough? or how many mismatched codes are acceptable?). This latter check is particularly important to an insider researcher who often needs to incorporate outside collaborators to provide a different lens or perspective. Those collaborators can participate in the coding process in
an effort to arrive at intercoder agreement, or play devil’s advocate requiring the insider
to defend each developed code or theme. Beyond the criteria listed above, eight strategic
questions were also asked, such as: “how was the data collected?” “how was the sample
determined?” and “how will the data be presented?” The latter of these concerns deals
with representation, which can be an equally challenging aspect of the research process
for the inside researcher who may have conflicts of interest, or feel a need to protect or
conversely expose, concerning findings related to the population being studied. Inside
researchers may feel the need to limit their critiques of an organization or sugar coat
meanings. They may selectively present positive quotes and hide or ignore negative
narratives or alternative perspectives. For this reason, guidelines for establishing quality
in qualitative research become all the more critical. However, even with rigorous
evaluative strategies in place, what is published will inevitably be a re-presentation of
what was said/meant, and that audiences will interpret meanings differently than what
was intended by the author (see Drake, 2010 on plurality of meanings/interpretations).
Thus, analysis and interpretation are never ending in qualitative research.

While being an insider can be advantageous in many regards, it can also
problematize the research process and research relationship. Reflexivity and qualitative
criteria have been proposed as means to address the issues associated with being an
insider. However, Cohen (2013) contends that as tourism scholars, we are at least 10
years behind the broader social sciences in our efforts to be reflexive and tend to contain
our reflexive praxis to safe spaces such as the methods section of the paper. In his 2013
remarks Cohen wrestled with his own positionality as a researcher and discussed how,
had he been more reflexive as a young insider researcher working on his dissertation, he might have asked questions differently that allowed for more diverse and ‘authentic’ meanings to be represented. The question of how to be reflexive or write oneself into a publication is still unclear. Feighery (2006b) provided five examples of how this has been done, including: (a) seemingly accidental approaches (i.e., the tone and rhythm of the paper is different but not enough to exclude from post-positivist journals), (b) the methods chapter, (c) the benign approach, (d) textual guerrilla warfare (i.e., much like Cohen’s (2013) wrestle with his positionality; typically embraces emergent writing styles such as prose, poetry, etc.), and (e) the socio-political approach (i.e., the researcher is transparent about his or her biased agenda and pursues it vigorously). Regardless of the approach, the emic researcher needs to be aware that he or she will most definitely influence the research process, be visible and transparent about how he or she influenced the process, and decide whether or not he or she is part of the camp that embraces bias as part of a co-created research process or minimizes bias in an effort to let the subject speak for his/herself (Drake, 2010; see also Feighery, 2006b regarding the myth of the voiceless researcher).

In the context of my dissertation I attempted to be reflexive in a number of ways. First, I pursued an involved detachment approach, taking advantage of my insider status to build rapport and initiate the exchange of dialogue and stories but also keeping interviews and conversations open and inviting to ensure the participants provided authentic, intrinsically motivated narratives. Second, I employed a mix of Feighery’s (2006b) approaches by (a) using a shifting tone (first person, third person) in the
dissertation that resemble the seemingly accidental strategy, and (b) keeping reflexive notes throughout the research process. As part of this approach, I attempted to hold onto paper and electronic copies where I brainstormed ideas, recorded notes about casual lunches or Church meetings where the topic of reentry came up in some form or another, or documented changes in my approach and what motivated those changes, and (c) included a section in the introduction chapter where I reflect on my personal reentry experience (much like the methods chapter).

A Final Reflection

As an additional point of reference and final reflexive act, I will discuss what happened to me as a scholar, returned missionary, member, and leader in the Church as a result of engaging in this research. To be brief and to the point, I will present this section as a self-interrogation, where I pose a question and then respond.

How did you view other returning missionaries? What did you expect of them? When I first returned from my mission, I played the constant comparison game referenced by participants in this study. If someone was going on a date and I was not, their success was my failure. In that regard, the immediate post-mission life was a competitive environment for me which proved to be exhausting. As I matured and became less concerned with my own status in relation to others, my view of returning missionaries became a bit more cynical. I remember teaching a Sunday School class with another returned missionary and he would either not show up or come unprepared. From my perception he was incompetent, unreliable, and probably not very obedient for that matter. I remember thinking “I know exactly what kind of missionary you were” and
assuming that he had served for the wrong reasons or had been a ‘problem’ missionary.

Generally my thoughts about returning missionaries usually went one of two ways. First, I viewed their optimism with a mix of envy, disgust, and pity. Envy, because for a moment I would remember the highs of my mission and have a fleeting desire to reenlist and recapture those highs. Disgust because I sometimes felt like missionary and returning missionary behavior was contrived. The word performance comes to mind, as missionaries are constantly on stage, being watched by companions, host families, ward members, leaders, etc. Essentially it felt like the eyes of the world were upon us and our response was to play the part we had been assigned. With that in mind, and in my opinion, missionaries (and returned missionaries) have a way of speaking that is somewhat unique; a more deliberate, upbeat tone and cadence. I call it the “spirit voice” and I could not help but feel like it was a bit unnatural and unnerving (after I had lost my spirit voice of course). This way of speaking irritated me for the reasons indicated above and I would sometimes measure a person’s adjustment timeline based on when they began to talk like a ‘normal’ human again. Typically, their behavior matched their vocal patterns such that they were high energy and excited to change the world, which usually made me feel guilty and tired for not matching their pace (see, more cynicism). Pity, because I suspected that their excitement would be short lived. The realities and business of post-mission life would soon catch up with them and they would realize that many of the people sitting in the pews next to them just did not care that much, that life gets busy, and that maintaining the spirit of missionary life is difficult. Second, I viewed their
incompetence (see prior story about Sunday School teacher) with frustration and confusion. Like Sophia, I could not help but think “you should know better!”

How did you treat returned missionaries during your tenure as a leader in the Church? To what extent did you perpetuate or confront the discourse and expectations outlined in this dissertation research? As a leader in the Church I had high expectations for returning missionaries and I assumed that they had high expectations for themselves. I often assumed that (a) they needed and wanted to be busy, (b) they had loads of free time, (c) they were great at all Churchy things (e.g., teaching, ministering, speaking), and (d) they would say yes when I asked them to fulfill an assignment and do it well. I was often wrong on most counts. In interview after interview I was struck by how what missionaries wanted and needed were way off base from what I wanted from them as a leader. The thing that really struck me, was that what they were saying is exactly what I wanted and needed as a younger returned missionary, though I likely could not articulate it then and probably convinced myself otherwise. I remember listening to Jayce during his interview as he talked about how he was tired of being asked to do everything (and noted that when asking for volunteers in future Church meetings). I felt the same way when I returned. Basically, while I still enjoyed Church work and wanted to be involved, I was tired and felt like I had “served my time.” I also remember when Grayson talked about how one of the most meaningful things anyone had done for him when he got back was to ask him if he wanted to hang out and go kayaking, no strings attached.
How have your views evolved? Did you change anything about how you live and lead in the Church as a result of this research? After these interviews, I tried to (a) view each missionary as an individual and get to know them well enough to know whether or not a task or assignment would actually help them, (b) avoid asking questions about certain topics (e.g., dating and marriage) that might discourage them, and (c) focus on friendship rather than stewardship. At the end of the day, returned missionaries seem torn between these conflicting desires of wanting to feel normal and wanting to be exceptional. My goal has been to listen, and try to help them achieve both.

Conclusion

While my experiences are certainly not isolated or unique, they represent only one example of the RM experience. In an effort to understand the experience of other missionaries, this dissertation research investigated (a) a representative case in a rural southeastern community, and (b) delved into the discourse(s) that emerged through interviews and other data collected from RMs in that community. The dissertation also (c) linked the findings of the case study and discourse analyses to literatures focused on reentry and emerging adult transitions and commitments, in hopes of arriving at a more ‘sophisticated’ consensus about how to serve RMs.

The first article revealed that while full-time missionary service offers a hosts of opportunities and benefits; e.g. increased maturity, language acquisition, leadership and communication skill development, the promotion of religious knowledge, and typically involves substantial mobility; e.g. travel overseas or out of one’s resident state (Pepper, 2014), it can also create challenges that may later undermine or diminish those gains.
(Didier, 1977; Perry, 2001). For example, RMs experience maladjustment as evidenced by their feeling a lack of purpose, an inability to relate to others, anxiety associated with socio-cultural pressures to date and marry, and disillusionment with Western ideals, such as consumerism (Parry, 1929; Brigham, 1978).

While many of these issues are well documented and experienced by other travelers, religious or otherwise (see Gaw, 2000; Szkudlarek, 2010), other issues are somewhat unique to or, in the least, more common among missionaries in the Church of Jesus Christ who (1) have distinctive daily routines and guidelines associated with their work; e.g. regimented schedules, daily service and teaching obligations, and an anticipated lack of concern for housing and finances (Church of Jesus Christ, 2006), (2) have limited contact with home and family (Bordelon, 2013), (3) may experience greater marginalization and stigmatization as a result of breached social norms (Doty et al., 2016; Doty et al., 2017), and (4) have a more natural and deliberately “soulful” experience.

The second article adds to the growing body of knowledge relating to discourses of repatriation by moving beyond the highly politicized military, refugee, and indigenous repatriation experiences. Though questions of voluntariness and what it means to return were evident in the present study, new avenues for understanding repatriation discourses in the context of gendered experiences, institutional and religious culture, and spirituality were considered. Based on the results of this article it was clear that some of the issues described in the first article were a product of ideological discourses that make missionary service obligatory v. optional, that put pressure on returning missionaries to date and marry quickly, and that discourage discussions of doubts.
The third article posited that these issues become more complex when viewed through a human development lens and considered in the context of the recently reduced missionary age. More specifically, many young adults who ordinarily would have taken anywhere from 1 to 3 years to live on their own, work, or attend school prior to going on a mission, are now heading straight into the mission field. Thus, the opportunity to develop life skills and take on certain adult responsibilities is now being postponed until after the mission, or being abdicated to mission presidencies and staff during the mission (Church of Jesus Christ, 2006). This leaves newly returning, younger missionaries less equipped to face the already trying challenges of reentry and the transition to adulthood. Likewise, young members of the Church are confronted even earlier with choices regarding their religious identity and commitment, with some choosing to leave the Church after their missions and others choosing to remain loyal to it. It is possible that more members are choosing to serve in order to find their faith rather than serving because of their faith; as a result, the Church may see more Owen’s, Braxton’s, and Bella’s. Young members who either hide their disbelief and troubles on one hand, or who disaffiliate and choose alternative paths on the other.

Given that the Church typically does research internally – and selectively publishes or alters policy and programs from within the organization – the findings associated with their efforts are not always accessible and interpretation/actions are often undisclosed. In the last decade, however, Church leaders have made efforts to be more transparent and illuminate areas that had previously been viewed by Church members and the general public as hidden or opaque (Otterson, 2015). Mirroring the Church’s efforts
to be more transparent, supportive, and inclusive, I believe this dissertation has shed light on important reentry issues and efforts in the Church, which may help improve the reentry experience for its members and the reentrants in other settings.
Appendix A
The Process of Calling and Assigning a Missionary

Typically, prospective missionaries will go through the following steps in order to receive their calling to serve and assignment to labor:

1. Participate in an initial interview with their local bishop, the leader of a congregation, to discuss spiritual, emotional, physical and financial preparation.

2. Explain their readiness for missionary service via a set of online forms, which include questions about an applicant’s desire and preparation to serve a mission, language skills, work experience, education, health, and leadership experience.

3. Undergo an assessment by both a doctor and a dentist to confirm that they are physically prepared to serve.

4. Meet with the bishop and the stake president (leader of a group of congregations) and receive both of their recommendations to serve.

(Newsroom, 2013, para. 15)

Following this procedure, a missionary’s application is then sent to the Church’s headquarters in Salt Lake City, UT where the application is processed and an assignment is determined.

The placement procedure has been outlined as follows:
1. A member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles kneels in prayer with a staff member from the Missionary Department and asks God to “to know ‘perfectly’ where the missionaries should be assigned.”

2. A prospective missionary’s picture comes up on the screen (Figure 3.1) alongside notes from the missionary’s application or ecclesiastical leader.

3. Another screen displays the areas and missions throughout the world where the prospective missionary could be assigned.

4. Finally, “as prompted by the spirit” an assignment is made. (Rasband, 2010, para. 14-18)

**Figure 3.1** Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles assigns a missionary to an area (Cudworth, 2015).

The Brethren of the Church speak about this opportunity to give missionary assignments with fondness and reverence. Despite their heavy workloads, the work of assigning missionaries is reserved to the Apostles, which Signifies the importance of these events. After an assignment is made a letter is mailed to the individual announcing his or her call
and report date. In the Church, this is typically an exciting time, where family and friends gather in anxious anticipation. In the Discourse of the Church, certain locations seem to be more prestigious than others. For example, foreign or international mission locations are often regarded more highly than domestic locations by members. In response to this trend, the Brethren of the Church gave a sermon at the worldwide General Conference of the Church that discouraged the practice of privileging certain locations more than others. Specifically, they clarified the subtle wording in the letter received by missionaries, indicating that individuals are “called to serve” as a missionary in the Church, then “assigned to labor” in a specific location (Bednar, 2017). The former, Church leaders argue, is significant, and the latter somewhat irrelevant. In other words, while the labor assignments are inspired, they can be changed and are less important than the ‘call.’
# Pre-Interview Questionnaire and Interview Guide

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-Interview Survey</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is your date of birth (MM/DD/YYYY): __________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your highest level of education:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ No schooling completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Nursery school to 8th grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Some high school, no diploma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ High school graduate, diploma or the equivalent (for example: GED)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Some college credit, no degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Trade/technical/vocational training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Associate degree</td>
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<tr>
<td>□ Bachelor’s degree</td>
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<tr>
<td>□ Master’s degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Professional degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Doctorate degree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Are you currently employed?  
□ Yes  
  ○ If yes, where are you currently employed: __________________________  
  ○ How long have you been employed with this company (in years): ____________  
□ No  
  ○ If no, how long have you been unemployed: __________________________  
  ○ Are you currently seeking employment (yes/no)?

What is your marital status:  
□ Never married  
□ Divorce  
□ Widowed  
□ Separated  
□ Married  
□ Other (Please specify): __________________________

What racial group do you most strongly identify with:
☐ White, non-Hispanic  
☐ Hispanic or Latino  
☐ Black or African American  
☐ Native American or American Indian  
☐ Asian / Pacific Islander  
☐ Other (Please specify): ____________________

What is your gender:  
☐ Cis Male  
☐ Cis Female  
☐ Other (Please specify): ____________________

What is your current membership status (as determined by you, not the records of the Church):  
☐ Affiliated, Active  
☐ Affiliated, Less-Active  
☐ Not Affiliated, by choice (name recorded in Church records)  
☐ Not Affiliated, by choice (removed name from Church records)  
☐ Not Affiliated, by excommunication or Church disciplinary action  
☐ Other (Please specify): ____________________

Are you a convert?  
☐ Yes, baptized on (MM/DD/YYYY): ________  
☐ No

What date did you report to the MTC (MM/DD/YYYY):  
________________________________________

What date were you released from your mission (MM/DD/YYYY):  
________________________________________

Where did you serve (mission, city, country):  
________________________________________
Introduction Script

Good [morning/afternoon/evening]. Thank you for taking the time to meet with me and talk about your mission and release experiences. My name is Garrett and I am a Ph.D. student with Clemson University’s Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management. For your information, I am not representing the Church nor am I obligated to report the findings of the study to local or general Church leaders. Any information that you share will be de-identified and aggregated so it can in not be traced directly to you. That said, the Church is aware of the parameters of my study and while they do not know who agreed to participate, they do know who the pool of participants were. If you have any concerns about things you say being reported to Church leaders, please let me know.

You were invited to participate in this interview because you were released from you mission in the last two years and are/were a member of the [insert name of stake] of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I would like to learn more about your perspective on your mission, release, and post-mission experience. The results of this interview will be used to inform a larger study about the challenges and opportunities faced by returning missionaries in the [insert name of stake] and beyond. I will also be conducting interviews with other missionaries who have returned from your stake.

Guidelines
There are no wrong answers, but rather differing points of view. Please feel free to share your point of view even if it differs from what others in the Church may think. Keep in mind that I am just as interested in ‘negative’ comments as ‘positive’ comments, and at times the negative comments are the most helpful in terms of bringing about change.

I will audio record the interview because I do not want to miss any of your comments. Also, it is likely that I cannot write fast enough to get down all of the helpful things you may have to say. While we will be on a first name basis and while I may use your thoughts in writing documents and reports, I will not use your name or other specific identifiers. You may be assured of complete confidentiality. The reports may be shared with the Church for future planning and also be used to understand reentry in tourism research.

My role as an interviewer will be to ask you questions and then to listen. I want to hear about your experience and views about your mission and post-mission life. Before we begin, let me give you a little bit of background about myself…
### Life History Question Bank

Tell me about yourself…

1) How long did you live in the [insert name of stake]?  
   i) Were you born and raised in the area? If not, where are you from originally?  
2) Did you grow up in the Church or are you a convert?  
   i) If a convert, when, how, and why did you join?  
3) Where did you serve your mission?

### Experience Question Bank

#### Pre-Mission

1) What was your motivation for serving a mission? (Why did you serve?)  
   i) Probe: Did you feel pressure to serve?  
   ii) Probe: Did any of your family member’s serve missions?  
2) What was opening your call like?  
   i) Who was there?  
   ii) How did you feel about your call?  
3) Was your MTC experience more positive or negative? Why?  
4) Do you feel the MTC adequately prepared you for your mission?

#### Mission

1) How would you describe your mission experience overall?  
2) How do you feel about it now that you are back?  
   i) Probe: Overall positive or negative? Why?  
3) Do you feel closer to the Church now as a result of your mission? Why or why not?  
4) What counsel, if any, did you receive from your mission president or others before returning home?  
5) Was that counsel more helpful or hurtful? How so?

#### Post-Mission

1) When were you released from your mission?  
2) How long has it been since you were released?  
3) What do you remember about your last few days in the mission field?  
4) What do you remember about your first few days back in the U.S.?  
   i) Did you or your family celebrate or have a home coming party?  
   ii) Did you give a home coming talk in Church?  
   iii) What other homecoming rituals or experiences do your recall?  
5) How would you describe your transition home? Were there any surprises? If so, what?  
   i) Probe: Has your adjustment been easier or more difficult than anticipated?  
   ii) Probe: If difficult, how have you responded?  
   iii) Probe: If difficult, what kind of support have you received since you’ve been home? From whom?
6) How have you spent your time since you’ve been back? (What have you been doing?)
7) What has your experience been like in the [amount of time] since you’ve been back from your mission?
   i) Overall more positive or more negative?
8) What expectations did you have about being a returned missionary? How closely did your expectations match with reality?
9) What do you feel you are supposed to do next now that your mission is over? Why? Says who?
   i) Probe: Marriage? School? Dating?
   ii) Probe: Have you felt any pressure to do any of those things? What is the source of this pressure? How does the Church add to or mitigate that pressure?
10) Do you think you’ve changed at all? How so?
    i) Have others noticed these changes and if so how have they responded? How can you tell?
    ii) Have you attempted to maintain or integrate those changes since you’ve returned? What has been the result?
11) How have your relationships with family and friends been? How have they changed, if at all?
    i) Probe: What did your family and home ward do to either help or hinder your transition?
    ii) Probe: What has been the most helpful resource?
    iii) Probe: Who has been the most helpful person?
12) Have you had any trouble fitting in? With friends? Family? Culture? Church?
13) Have you ever heard the phrase “return with honor?” Do you know where it comes from? What do you think it means?
14) What do you think a “good” returned missionary looks like?
15) How do you know an RM has transitioned well or finally “arrived”?

Reflections Questions Bank
1) If you could, would you go back out and serve? Why?
2) Do you feel you were adequately prepared for your transition home?
3) What do you wish you knew then (when you first returned) that you know now?
4) What advice would you give to individuals who have recently been or will soon be released?
5) If you could do things over again, what would you do differently?

Conclusion Script
Thank you for chatting with me today. I really enjoyed hearing about your experience and appreciate your honesty and sincerity.
After we part ways, I will transcribe or type up the recording of the interview and any notes, observations, or reflections I have about our meeting. After all the interviews are completed I will analyze the data looking for patterns and themes and write up a report which I will share with you to “check” to ensure that you feel like your perspective is accurately represented.

It is possible that as I conduct future interviews I may come up with other questions or may need to follow up to clarify some of the things that you have said today. What is the best way to reach you in the future? Great, Thank you again. I will be in touch.
Appendix C

Additional Reentry Portraits Organized by Profile

Committed Traditionalists

Ava. As a convert to the Church, Ava was the first to serve a mission in her family. She and a few other family members joined the Church when she was 9 years old; however, their faith and involvement in the Church wavered in the years that followed. When she turned 16, Ava made a decision to become more committed to living the Gospel and to helping her mother do so as well. From that point on both Ava and her mother went “full on” and became “super strong” members of the Church. Her mother was endowed a few years later and this turning point, as well as subsequent blessings (i.e., perceived positive events tied to her commitment to the Church), strengthened Ava’s belief in the Gospel and her desire to share it. She recalls:

*I wanted to share [the Gospel] because I’d seen the difference in my family. In my mom’s life, in my life, being a convert in the gospel and then being full on. Once I started living the Gospel as best as I could, I received so many blessings that the reason I wanted to serve a mission was to thank God for all the blessings. And to also help other people realize how they can all...receive those blessings through the Gospel.*

Soon after her mother received her endowment, Ava was called to serve a mission in the southeastern United States. At first she was unsure about her mission call, but she quickly determined that God had deliberately sent her to that place so she could utilize her existing talents and abilities (i.e., she spoke Spanish) and reconnect with family (i.e., her biological father). Because she was a convert, Ava felt out of place as a missionary – unfamiliar with the lingo, organization, tempo, and norms associated with missionary
work and life. It was exhausting work, and her trainer, a sister missionary who would soon be headed home, was “trunky” (i.e., her trunks/luggage were literally and metaphorically packed) and consequently provided minimal support or instruction. After a few months, Ava began to acclimate to mission life and find commonalities between the culture of her mission area and her own culture; in many ways, the mission started to feel like home. She loved the people and the work required of a missionary – talking to and teaching people.

As her mission drew to a close, Ava was encouraged to prepare for her return home by engaging in the My Plan program. For Ava, My Plan was helpful because it gave her “permission” to start thinking about home without feeling guilty. As a self-proclaimed procrastinator, Ava also valued My Plan because it forced her to start developing a post-mission strategy:

*I think My Plan helps you with realizing that it's not just “what will happen will happen.” You need a plan if you want to keep being a missionary. At home you need a plan if you're going to keep having success.*

For Ava, success at home meant continuing her work as a member missionary. My Plan helped solidify this goal. In addition to My Plan, Ava also met with her Mission President for an exit interview. Ava’s interview was “powerful” in that her Mission President provided a clear warning regarding the challenges she would face within the walls of her own home, when she returned. He gave her the following counsel:

*Remember when you are home, to think about yourself. It doesn't matter what situation you are in. Don't stand anywhere to try and help your family... If you are spiritually in any danger, or you feel you aren't progressing, you need to get out and leave. No matter what, it's not worth sacrificing yourself over trying to help other people.*
This advice resonated with Ava who had anticipated that she might easily “lean into” her family’s ‘bad’ habits, causing her to lose the valuable spiritual practices and experiences she had acquired as a missionary. She also realized that applying this counsel would be difficult, and even contrary to the selfless work she had been performing for the last 18 months. She thought to herself:

*You are going to have to be really strong and recognize that...some people make bad things look okay, but you know what it is, so don’t sacrifice it for anything.... If it's affecting you so much spiritually then you have to leave and God will help you...always seek to be obedient and be sensitive to the spirit. And if it's not there, leave.*

The counsel from her Mission President turned out to be prophetic, because soon after returning Ava was confronted with multiple family dilemmas. First, as promised, her family had not cultivated the same Gospel habits or standards that she had during her 18 months of missionary service. She was hoping they would share her dedication and excitement for the Gospel, but they did not. The harder challenge for Ava was figuring out how to balance her desire to help her family change with the realization that she could not control their behavior, and likely would push them away if she tried. Ultimately she came to accept that her family was not perfect and resolved that the best thing she could do was set a good example. Second, because she was a convert and the first missionary in the home, other family members – particularly her mother – did not understand her experience or needs:

*Transitioning home was a little bit hard... I was the first missionary, my mom is a convert, she didn't quite understand or know what a returned missionary would be... so I came home and I just wanted to do missionary work. And I ... didn’t want things for me ... But she wanted to just pretty much spoil me, and make it*
about me and have me relax and just have one on one time with her all the time. And for me that was almost one of the last things I wanted to do. Because ... Not that I didn’t miss them. I did miss my mom and I love her and was happy but I wanted to be out and working....I didn't expect that I would react that way. That I was just going to need distance and space from my family when I came home. Because... I wanted to keep being a missionary.

Ava’s mother continued to be highly involved in her post-mission life. She insisted that Ava accompany her on multiple trips to visit family in another country, which created instability, postponed career and educational pursuits, and stifled Ava’s ability and desire to be productive; however, during one of these trips Ava met her future husband, who would become a source of support and happiness.

Part of the disruption in Ava’s relationship with her mother stemmed from a desire to continue her work as a missionary after her release. For Ava, this continuity was a key indicator of her post-mission progress or success and a general indicator of what it means to be a good RM:

Where I've struggled...a lot is feeling that if I'm not doing missionary work, I don't feel like I'm progressing. And that's funny because I'll look at other companions or other people in my mission and they might do missionary work but they are not married ... or they haven't progressed in other ways and they feel like they are not progressing....That has been very contradicting, because I have been progressing [married and pregnant] yet I feel like because I've put so much attention on those things, obviously I can't be a full time missionary anymore. So it's just been a kind of a desire of always wanting to be a disciple of Christ and share the gospel more...

For Ava, family, work, and school became priorities in her post-mission life, often at the expense of member missionary work. She noticed this pattern in others, who similarly
started the next phases of life (e.g., family, work, or school) after returning home and who, therefore, lacked time to engage in member missionary opportunities:

They quickly...come home and just go into the world, not like sinning or doing bad stuff, but school and work becoming much more important. They are like, "I've done my part. I'm done with the mission." And they do church callings and everything, just the basics, but not the over and above to where someone can know me and be like, "You know what? That person, her number one priority is definitely to share the gospel."

For Ava, school and work were good things but the number one thing that would bring happiness, in her mind, was helping others come unto Christ. Interestingly, and perhaps ironically, Ava did not feel ‘released’ from her official service as a missionary until after she started volunteering to help the full-time missionaries in her home ward:

I just remember when I went out with [the missionaries] I felt I could clearly see that there was a difference ... a tiny difference of the teaching mantle that is placed on them, versus me. I could still teach and it would still be great, but I had a different role now and it was a different teaching mantle. And it was different. And so that's when I felt I was released and I was able to see that I wasn't them anymore. That wasn't my role, my responsibility, and the spirit led me in a different way than it did being a missionary.

Ava had been formally released by her Stake President weeks earlier and had already given an accounting of her mission experiences (and the “miracles” that happened there) to the Stake High Council, and yet she continued to feel like a missionary for some time thereafter. She realized the missionary “mantle” had been lifted after she attempted to recreate her mission experience at home by volunteering with local missionaries.

Ava has been home for nine months (at the time of the interview); she is now married, working part-time, and she and her husband are preparing to welcome a new baby into the world. For Ava, getting married was both a blessing and a challenge:
Getting married that soon was definitely like ... It was almost the clearest revelation that I received, especially after my mission...

The revelation to get married, in many ways, was a strengthening moment for Ava, confirming that she still had some connection to God after her mission. Together she and her husband actively work to maintain mission habits, a struggle, especially for her husband who at times has become distracted by more “worldly” pursuits:

We've both been trying to really go back to those times in the mission, because those habits that we learned were for the rest of our lives. They shouldn't have just been for that period. And it really ... Especially because we both served missions and are companions, it makes a difference. Like when we've done those things. And done companionship scripture study and individual scripture study that's more than just ten or fifteen, thirty minutes, there's like a stronger spiritual connection between us. And ... If both of us can try and be better missionaries, our attitudes are a lot better and we both help people come into Christ... you see more blessings.

Reiterated in these statements is the belief that despite getting married and achieving other markers of success (by the Church and the ‘world’s’ standards), true success will come when she and her husband can recapture the missionary attitudes they once possessed. What would Ava tell a soon to be RM?

I would definitely tell them don't try to change anyone. Just love them...If you love them that will help them change their behavior. And the other thing is to stay busy. Definitely stay busy and active. Keep doing missionary work so you don't miss it or think about it as much...

... It's only going to keep getting better. So whatever you do from now as long as you are obedient, it will keep getting better. Better than your mission!

Benjamin. Benjamin served a Spanish speaking mission in South America and longed to return in order to a) be with the people he grew to love and b) continue in so
great a cause. Though challenging, even humbling at first, the mission was transformative for Benjamin. For one, before his mission, spiritual things always came second – post-mission, they garnered greater importance in his life. Similarly, his goals and overall outlook on life changed as a result of his mission.

Before leaving the mission, Benjamin met with his Mission President. This meeting was focused on setting goals in both spiritual (e.g., continue to strengthen testimony) and temporal (e.g., get a good education) aspects of his life and also included a commitment to seek out his home ward Bishop in order to receive an assignment:

[The Mission President] said to get two names from my Bishop of people that I could help within the ward - mainly less-actives. To get an assignment, because he knew that I wasn't going to be home for super long...focusing on the spiritual aspect of things is harder when you're at home so to have that ... assignment, kind of grounds you.

The Mission President also indicated that getting married was a “high priority” and provided advice about how to develop a healthy relationship, advice that was welcomed by Benjamin.

After a short period in the mission home, Benjamin flew to his country of origin and was greeted at the airport by his parents, some close friends, and a few people from his home ward. He recalls that this reception was nice but also “strange” seeing everyone again, especially given the limited contact proscribed to missionaries by the Church. He immediately went to get released by his Stake President. Though short, this interview/experience was “touching” and provided an opportunity for closure and connection:
I was able to go into the room with my family and the stake president, and I got to share an experience from the mission which was definitely ... awesome because it felt like it was the first experience I shared with my family in person and got them to kind of get a taste of what it was like. It was a very touching moment and then my mom got to take off my plaque which was...hard but definitely a good moment to have with the family... [Together] we're going to the next chapter of life.

The Stake President also encouraged Benjamin to become a temple worker/stay focused on the temple. At the local level, Benjamin’s Bishop and other leaders periodically checked in with him to give advice and review his goals and plans to achieve them.

Even with the support of his ward leaders and family, the transition home was harder than anticipated for Benjamin.

I definitely thought it was gonna be pretty easy, just come back. In the mission they talk about all the fun things that you're gonna do. "Oh I'll get to whatever" you know, "hang out with my friends. I'll get to do this or that" but it's ... it's a lot more than that. There are a lot more emotional things that go into it and having to adjust is definitely a hard experience. Not as easy as I had expected. To feel that you're actually needed and that you're helping in a noble cause, I guess you could say ... a cause that's worthwhile, is not easy to accomplish, especially after you've been doing it 24-7.

Aside from maintaining the same sense of purpose without the identical daily dose of spiritual experiences, adjusting to life at home affected Benjamin’s identity. He wondered whether he would ever be “normal” again.

At the beginning I was kind of stressed about ... like am I gonna be normal again? Like, am I going to ... enjoy ... At the beginning I didn't even enjoy sitting around the table talking with my family about anything. I just felt like I was wasting my time...I just wanted to be normal again because that's not what I ... that's how I felt.

Benjamin particularly struggled to feel “normal” in the context of dating and interacting with members of the opposite sex. For example, while he expressed the following idea
with a laugh, he admitted that “females…scare me…I just don't feel comfortable.”

This lack of comfort extended to other social interactions as well. Soon after returning, Benjamin attended a Stake dance for young single adults. Recalling that experience, he said:

*It was just ... it was strange. And I didn't know anybody and I didn't even know what to talk to people about. I was sort of like ... I don't even know what to say to these people...I ended up finding some people that I had known from before the mission, and I talked to them and stuff. And so it was all right. It wasn't as bad as perceived it at first but ... I felt like that one guy that stands on the side of the dances, you know?*

He continued:

*It's hard because, a lot of people don't understand because they've never been there in that situation ... I mean once you ... can talk about your mission. It's kind of fun but after a while people just kind of ... you know. They're like "yeah, okay, that's cool....move on." But it's kind of hard because like, it was your life for two years and it's such a ... you can't move on that quick.*

Clearly, some of Benjamin’s social difficulties stemmed from his inability to converse about anything but his mission – a central part of his life – but this issue was exacerbated by disinterest or lack of understanding from friends and acquaintances.

Fortunately for Benjamin, he did have people he could turn to who were willing to listen and capable of understanding. Specifically, Benjamin communicated via phone or Skype with his brother, who was now married and returned from a mission about five years prior:

*He's been encouraging. He's been understanding. He's been there. I kind of feel like he knows what it feels like as well. I love to talk about the mission...It sounds weird but I like to talk about it and he always likes to talk about it as well because we served ... he served in [South America]. And so, the countries have a lot in
common as far as ... I guess just the way people live and the culture... so we definitely talk a lot about that and how it is, and how it feels, and everything. I feel like that helps me to talk about the mission and kind of the experiences and stuff.

The desire and ability to keep the mission experience alive was evident in Benjamin’s routines when he returned home. For example, he continued to make an agenda for each day, as he had done in the mission, and he struggled to just sit without something productive to do.

As an RM Benjamin also felt “bombarded” with “pressure from the outside world” which made maintenance of the spiritual aspects of his life, including mission lifestyle and values more difficult. As an antidote to the worldly voices competing for his attention, Benjamin found that listening to uplifting music, studying the scriptures, and watching uplifting Mormon Messages added a bit of spirituality and positivity to each day.

Another challenge associated with the disparities between Benjamin’s mission life and home life hinged on the cultural differences between the two spaces. In his mind, adjusting to home was much like adjusting to the culture of the mission; at first, the food was not as good, the people were not as friendly, and grasping the language was a struggle. Likewise, after seeing real poverty and living a rather minimalistic lifestyle himself as a missionary, Benjamin also felt repulsed by the materialistic, consumptive attitudes of his fellow Americans. For example, when he first got off the plane, Benjamin was caught off guard by the excess of amenities that lined the street, the cleanliness of the streets, and the size of his family’s home (which he had never realized was so large). The
operative word throughout all of these social, cultural, and spiritual difficulties was “strange,” and returning from a mission was certainly that.

Benjamin has been home for just two months now (at the time of the interview); he is living at home, working part-time, and plans to attend a Church affiliated school in a STEM field. He hopes to get married – “God’s next step” (and a personal goal) – while at school, where there are more “opportunities” (i.e., women who are members of the Church), and to continue to serve in the Church as occasions arise. In spite of these somewhat concrete plans and aspirations, Benjamin still does not feel that he has fully returned:

... I still feel like I'm in kind of a limbo state right now, just because I'm living at home and stuff...I've just been on my own for so long it feels strange to live with my family. I'm kind of trying to wait to see when I get out to [school] if I don't feel any different, which I kind of think I will because I'll be out there away with other youth that might ... that have had the same experiences and stuff...I'm still wondering if I'm here or what ... where am I?

In other words, Benjamin seemed to be feeling in-between places and identities. What advice would Benjamin give to RM's?

Don't be too hard on yourself...I guess it's kind of the same advice that I'd give to ... one of the guys I trained on my mission in adjusting into the missionary life. Don't stress out too hard. Stay busy either with work or with callings. Constantly be engaged in some type of uplifting activity whether that's studying the scriptures or helping the missionaries or doing something...it comes, little by little.

Caden. Caden was the first to serve a mission in his family, and he volunteered even though his parents and siblings were inconsistent in their Church attendance over the years. Ward and family members were encouraging and supportive of Caden’s decision to serve, though not to the point of being coercive. Caden always felt that the decision to serve, or not, was ultimately his to make. Despite the fact that he was called to
a dangerous region of the world, Caden viewed his mission positively, and felt that he was watched over and protected by God during that period of his life. The mission was “life-changing” for Caden, sometimes in ways that were perceptible only to those who knew him:

I’d say that it was definitely a life changing experience for the good because ... Well, it helped me grow up a lot. I look back at what I was before my mission and ... you know I don’t see the change directly but everyone I talk to ... Like my mom or my dad or my relatives or friends are like "Wow, you've really changed." And like, I don’t think I have. I mean ... (laughs) everyone tells me. I guess it’s true, right? I'm probably more mature...

Caden would go on to say that he became more fiscally responsible, clean, and organized as a result of his missionary service. He also became more diligent, and determined to avoid putting off or procrastinating tasks. Caden was transformed spiritually as well. For example, he became more involved in the Church and more willing to accept assignments whereas, before his mission, he was “passive” toward the Church. He also became less materialistic and more discriminating about music and media choices. Ultimately, Caden expressed that he was happier than he had ever been, happier than he thought possible.

Beyond maturity and spirituality, Caden developed increased emotional intelligence (i.e., empathy, discernment), which allowed him to see others differently:

I'm definitely a better people person (laughs)...that was an inevitable change 'cause you're always talking to people. I feel like I can read people better than I used to be able to and now, I can see when someone's feeling under the weather, but they're hiding it kinda thing. I can tell that something maybe is off but then, sometimes talking to them makes their day better.
Likewise, Caden’s perspective about himself and the world changed, such that he felt more optimistic about the opportunities that lay before him and more confident in his ability to seize those opportunities:

*I feel like being on a mission prepares you to accept those opportunities that you probably wouldn't have accepted before your mission. You know? Because you're so scared of what's going to happen..."I don't think I can move there... Move across the country by myself. That's crazy. Why would I do that?" You know. And the mission, it kind of opens a perspective in your mind...Kinda like that third door is open and you're like, "Oh yeah, I guess I could go in that direction."

As his mission came to a close, Caden was given the chance to counsel with his Mission President and reflect on his various mission assignments. He recalled that he had been called to a specific area for nine months, which was unusual for his mission – most missionaries stayed in an area for no longer than four and a half months. His Mission President divulged the reasoning behind this uncharacteristically long assignment, and asserted his confidence in Caden:

*[My Mission President] told me in that instance that he actually...changed me out of that area [on the mission board]...he actually moved me to a different area and then he just stared at the board and was like, "No, he’s not done there." So he took my picture and stuck it back and moved my companion. (Laughs) And so... I guess I spent a lot of time in that area and learned a lot, and he said...He didn't worry about where he put me. He always put me in the areas that most missionaries were dreading, because he said, "You know, I trusted that you would be a hard worker in those areas."...He was like, "I just thought anywhere I put you, you're gonna make a difference." I was like, "Aw, thanks."

Following this personal affirmation, the Mission President proceeded to tell Caden that he should look for opportunities to serve anyone at any given time:

*[My Mission President] said that if I'm not doing anything in The Church, there's a problem with that (laughs) and that I need to go and talk to the bishop and tell
him, "Hey, I need something to do. Or can I help you with something?" 'Cause he
told me that the best thing I can do is to serve other people, and I would agree
with that.

Like other missionaries, Caden developed a deep love and respect for his Mission
President and these words of affirmation and counsel remained with him as he returned
home.

Caden’s transition home was relatively uneventful, in part due to his easy going
approach to life. He also no longer had to worry about the possibility of food borne
illness, was able to maintain regular contact with people from his mission, reconnected
with extended family, and continued to share the Gospel with confidence. His greatest
challenge was trying to figure out what to do with his extra time:

I just remember, for like a good month after work I would come home and be like,
"Now what? Now what do I do?" Because, I feel like on the mission, you're going
like a million miles an hour and...you wake up early and you work until 9:30 and
don't go to bed until 10:30. And I felt like, when I got home [from work] at 5, I
didn't know what I was doing. (Laughs) So like I wasn't doing the right thing,
since I wasn’t walking around ... (Laughs) 'cause I didn't have anything to do
when I got home. I was like, "Well, now what?" (Laughs)

To pass the time, Caden would often go for drives – since he had not been able to drive
for two years – and revisit places from his past. And when times became particularly
stressful, he relied on skills he had acquired as a missionary such as goal setting and
planning:

The mission gave me the tools to cope with stress; to take it one step at a time and
make a plan on how to do it. 'Cause the mission teaches you goals and teaches
you how to make them, you're making them every week, every month... that's one
thing that's kind of stuck with me...I'm always setting goals for what I want, and
how can I achieve that goal....The mission taught me that. I just kind of winged it
before ...The mission can teach you a lot... if you're willing to apply what you've learned afterwards...

Though equipped with skills, Caden was not alone. He had local leaders who directed him to the young single adult ward for social support and who gave him a calling to serve in the Church’s local scout troop. This calling proved to be inspired, as some of Caden’s fondest memories of the Church were acquired during his participation in scouting as a younger man, and in his new position as scout leader.

Caden has been home for about a year (at the time of the interview) and is now living and working in the state of Utah, pursuing education related to his work in the medical field. He is engaged to a young women he met in his home ward, where he resided for about five months before moving to Utah. At this point Caden’s primary expectation for himself is that he remains independent. While he acknowledges his parents are willing to help, he also feels that he has reached a point in his life where he needs to become self-reliant. What advice would Caden give to a RM?

Don’t worry about what’s going to happen. I guess I went through this with my cousin actually 'cause he just got back a couple days ago. I went and visited him and I guess he was like, "How are you handling it, how did you cope when you got back?" I was like, "You know you're going to feel like life has slowed down immensely. But, time's still going by and you might as well, enjoy what you're doing and not stress so much about "what am I going to do now, what am I going to do now, what am I going to do now, I need to do this, this, this, this ..." that kinda thing. Enjoy the time with your family that you have right now and things are going to start falling into place really quickly.

**Carter.** Carter’s mission experience was distinctive in that he returned home early for health reasons and then went back into the field to complete his service. In other words, he departed and subsequently returned twice, experiencing unique opportunities.
and challenges with both returns. He served in the southwestern United States, and described his mission as somewhat ‘foreign’ (despite being in his country of origin) because he was exposed to unfamiliar languages, cultures, and economic backgrounds.

Overall Carter viewed his mission positively. Like others in this study, Carter attributed his positive outlook on his mission to the changes he experienced as a missionary. Specifically, he felt like he was “refined” as a result of difficult relationships with various mission companions:

*I know that I grew in a lot of ways. I mean I grew spiritually, I grew mentally, and I grew emotionally. Like, I had a couple hard companions. I had to babysit a couple companions. I had other companions that we could work as hard as we wanted to... But the times that I had the hard companions were the times that I think I grew the most; where I understood, "Okay, I really can do this." When hard times come my way, I realized that I can do it through the strength of the Lord; through the Lord I can do all things.*

Encounters with tough companions helped him develop charity, diligence, confidence, and other Christ-like attributes. The mission also brought Carter closer to the Church and to Christ by increasing his understanding of the Church and bringing to light his own personal convictions.

Carter’s last moments in the mission were not particularly memorable. He met briefly with his Mission President, who counselled him on the topics of marriage (e.g., marry someone with similar standards) and spirituality (e.g., maintain those “simple core” activities such as study and prayer that had helped him as a missionary).

Interestingly, these were two areas that Carter specifically identified as being challenging when he returned. For example, Carter had set some personal goals regarding dating and marriage, and felt he was “terrible” at meeting those goals:
I said I was gonna go on a date a week and I haven't been very good about that. I ...
have been terrible about that. I haven't been able to. I would go on one maybe once every other month. So that's kind of why I feel like I'm doing terrible job on it.

Carter had set similar goals related to prayer and study of the Church’s scriptural canon and struggled to find time to study as much as he would like. Rather than studying for two hours a day like he had as a missionary, he would spend more like 10 minutes daily. Despite the decreased study time, Carter indicated that he still had a strong testimony of the scriptures – specifically testifying that the Book of Mormon is the keystone of the Mormon religion. He argued that his testimony of the Book of Mormon is what helped him sift through the mounds of anti-Mormon literature that friends shared with him when he returned home to the southeast. In addition to his testimony of the Book of Mormon, Carter found that attending a Church affiliated school was helpful because he was surrounded by people with similar standards, working towards similar spiritual goals.

Due to an unexpected flight delay at an airport near his mission, Carter had the opportunity to visit his mission with his family, which he found to be a great blessing. Nevertheless, the most impactful resource for post-mission life came from Carter’s participation in the newly minted My Plan program:

For the last six weeks of your mission, you go through this course, and for like an hour ...
I don't remember, it was like an hour or two a week that you would go through this course trying to help you be able to learn how you can adjust better to- ...
I guess you'd call it civilian life, not being on a mission. And for me, that is the thing that helped me the most in my transition home.
Specifically, Carter referred to one of the My Plan tasks that benefitted him the most – creating a personal mission statement. This is something that continues to influence his behavior today:

In the My Plan course, one thing that actually truly impacted me was- you needed to make a personal mission statement ... I loved being able to do that. And it’s truly what’s helped guide me...I remember [my Mission President] saying, "If you live your personal mission statement, you will be able to do anything you want in your life." And surely as I’ve lived it, I’ve seen that. The My Plan course taught me how I can be able to live my mission outside of the mission.

Though lengthy, I asked Carter if he’d be willing to share his mission statement, and he did so as follows:

As a fully converted disciple of Jesus Christ, I will constantly strive to increase my testimony of the Gospel through charity for my fellow men. I will center my life around the teachings of my Savior, Jesus Christ, though this will not just be in my ecclesiastical duties, but also my familial and my occupational responsibility. I will be an example of Christ ‘at all times and in all things and in all places’ that I will be in my life. The centering of my life around my Savior will be based upon charity, for ‘charity never faileth.' I will constantly strive to show forth good works until He comes so that I can be known as a member of the fellowship of the unashamed. In pursuit of knowledge of the heavenly, I will be a lifelong learner of both spiritual and temporal matters. I will use this knowledge in my career to help further the work of the Lord through diligence in and obtaining an income to support a family and many members of the community. Through all these things, I will attain my ultimate goal and desire, the Celestial Kingdom.

For Carter, this mission statement could be boiled down into one word – charity – a word and ideal that reverberated throughout his interview and post mission life. Beyond the mission statement, My Plan required Carter to set one, three, and five year goals and included probing questions that would help him develop specific strategies to accomplish
those goals. For Carter, these concrete plans, when reviewed regularly, removed concern and doubt about how he could maintain study habits, begin dating, and more.

Though My Plan helped alleviate many hardships associated with the transition home, Carter still had his fair share of reentry challenges. Being released and re-set apart was particularly difficult for Carter. For example, he recalls that the first time he returned his ward members were very supportive. They greeted him at the airport, he was welcomed and invited to share his testimony in Sacrament meeting on Sunday, and in general, they were there when he needed them. In contrast, during his second bout of service his family moved, so he returned to an unfamiliar ward where he felt neglected. Despite the stark difference in these two returns Carter actually felt that the first return was more difficult because it was so unexpected and sudden. He also departed for his second round of missionary service without the buffer zone created by the missionary training center, which made for a more challenging adjustment.

On the whole, people understood and were kind to Carter when he returned early; however, he still experienced the stigmatizing attitudes and behaviors that are sometimes directed at early returned missionaries (ERMs). However, because he knew that he would be returning to his mission after being treated for his health condition, he was less affected by stigmatizing remarks:

*There was only one time when someone said it and honestly... I didn't really care what people said because I knew I was going back out on my mission. And so I just ... I didn't even care. But yes, there is that stigma where you can see people talking behind your back about it and you can ... actually hear them judging you about it...I'm sure that there is something that it has contributed with a lot of... Less activity with missionaries that return home with the judging, whether it is for health reasons or for the past transgressions, both ways.*
To help restore confidence and curb stigmatization, Carter’s local leaders announced over the pulpit that he “came home because of health reasons and not because of any past transgressions or transgressions he committed on his mission.” This overt and official message seemed to help minimize the judgment and gossip. Likewise, although he could not recall the details of his second release, Carter expressed that his Stake President was “amazing.” So much so that Carter left the Stake President’s office with a renewed dedication and desire to maintain his mission attitude and attributes.

Carter has now been home for about six months (at the time of the interview) and is studying information technology at a Church affiliated school. What advice would Carter give to a RM?

Follow the My Plan course to a T...and...
If possible, go to temple on a weekly basis...That single thing is what has sustained me the most. Be able to go to the temple and to be able to worship there is ... the best thing for me to be able to do. It was the strongest thing for me to be able to do and it helped me grow in my faith even more, even after I had ended my mission. I know a lot of people say that their missions were the best two years of their life. For me, I like to say my mission were my best two years up to that point, because since then I've had so many experiences that have taught me, that have helped me understand, that a testimony in Jesus Christ doesn't have to just be grown, when you're serving him 24/7/365 ...as a full time missionary. If you will ...do the standard Mormon answers, go to church, read your scriptures, pray, attend the temple, you'll be fine. Just do them, don't say you're going to do them but actually do those answers. And keep the commandments. If you keep the commandments then you have safety, you have peace, you'll have the Holy Ghost, he'll direct you, exactly what you need to do.

Jackson. Growing up in the Church Jackson had been taught that when you come of age, you go on a mission. However, as the time to serve a mission approached, Jackson no longer desired to be involved in the Church and was not planning to serve. At about
the same time, the local full-time missionaries started coming to his home to teach the Gospel to his stepfather, who was not a member of the Church. Though they had not come to teach Jackson, these missionaries had a major impact on him, which caused him to pause and reconsider his decision to serve a mission. He recalled:

*Close to the end of my senior year of high school, we had a missionary come to our house a lot because my stepdad wasn't baptized yet, and so he'd always be sitting in there listening to the lesson... I remember one particular elder that was teaching and is a really nice guy, really personable and me and him... became really good friends, and I was learning a lot from him. And he said he'd been through the same experiences I have. So he was really relatable, and he gave me some really good advice... I can't remember exactly how he put it, but he pretty much just said the importance of a mission, and he quoted that scripture... "If you lose yourself in my work, 'obviously the Lord's work,' then you find yourself, 'find who you are.'" And... Not immediately did I change my mind of planning to go on a mission, but after I graduated I thought about it, talked to my Bishop and everything and got a lot of encouragement from home, and... decided to go.*

This turning point for Jackson altered his trajectory, and his motivation to serve a mission increased, shifting from external (i.e., because service was the norm/expectation) to internal (i.e., because he had gained his own testimony and wanted to share it; because he desired to help people and help them see the blessings of living the Gospel).

Jackson was called to serve in the northwestern United States, speaking English. Though he was initially a little shocked and even angry that he did not get called to serve in a more exotic location, he soon realized that he had been called where the Lord wanted him to go. Looking back, he regarded his mission as “spectacular,” an experience he “would not trade for anything” due to his connections with the people and place. The mission, he observed, impacted his perspective of himself, his family, and his relationship to God; however, in many cases, he did not realize the impact of his mission until after
his return. For instance, he had not realized that during his mission he developed
confidence and competence in areas such as interpersonal communication (e.g., ability to
converse with strangers, observe body language, and discern deeper needs and thoughts)
and study skills (e.g., ability to learn and apply concepts to real life situations). He also
learned more about himself and who he was:

I definitely realized what kind of a person I am. It's sort of like ... You find a
deeper meaning of yourself...You find out, really who you are, and that will
obviously help you out for the rest of your life, knowing who you are and how you
react to certain things.

Similarly, because he spent so much time away from his family as a missionary, he came
to develop a newfound love, respect, and gratitude for them. He realized that he relied on
them, even in simple ways; for instance, he recalled how living on his own, he no longer
had a fridge full of prepared food he could reach into, which he had previously taken for
granted.

Jackson also learned to love God and listen to His Spirit. In one situation he
learned that ignoring a warning from the Spirit could cost him dearly:

I definitely learned to rely on the spirit a lot more. I had a lot of experiences with
that... there was one time in particular that I remember, where we were going into
a dinner appointment. We were riding bikes- I had a prompting to lock our bikes
up. I was like, "Nah, we're in [a safe area]. Nothing ever happens. We've done it a
million times, left them on the front lawn. But I kept getting that feeling, and I was
like, "No, no, that's okay." We go inside, have the dinner, we come out, and my
bike is gone. And, oh man. I was upset, one, I lost my bike, but more that I
completely disobeyed the spirit. And boy was that a learning moment right there
(laughs)....the small things, the things that you don't think would really matter, oh,
don't they. They just- they'll hit you.
The themes of reliance on God and focusing on the small things, identified in this anecdote, would reappear later in Jackson’s exit interview with his Mission President. He recalled his Mission President’s counsel:

*Stay focused on the Lord, put him first, and the small things will fall into place. That includes marriage, everything. But if you put the Lord, if he’s the center, then everything else will be a little slow coming in and if you’re relying on the spirit, you’ll know what to do when those situations or circumstances arise.*

His mission president also emphasized that he (Jackson) should “go home and get married” and that the commitment pattern Jackson had learned as a missionary (i.e., “will you”…) was a template for the direct approach he should use when asking his future wife to marry him.

Soon after this meeting, Jackson returned home, and in contrast to the grandiose homecoming parties he had observed in the “Utah bubble,” he enjoyed a rather uneventful return. His hope was that people would not treat him differently, like he was somehow “special” for serving a mission. Jackson had observed that RMs are often viewed as “perfect,” that they are expected to know everything and “get right back into life without a skip.” In his mind, this was all wrong and either pushes missionaries away or weighs them down.

*I think [impossibly high expectations] are another reason why it’s hard for returning missionaries ... so much is expected of them to stay in church, to get married, go to college, start a life. There’s so much that people expect of them to do, and if you put all of that on one person it’s gonna weigh them down with all this worry and stress and it’s hard to handle, if... you don’t have the right support getting home, the right friends. So I feel like, what people expect of RMs is kind of, unreachable, in some aspects. I mean, obviously there are things you can do and eventually you’ll get what they expected of you, but it may not be in the time slot that they expect or that you expect. And if you’re a competitive person,
especially like I am, when you're expected to do something by a certain time, depending on what it is, you want to get it done. You're like, "Oh, I'm gonna do it by, like ... I don't care how hard it's gonna be on me, I'm gonna do it." ...and I think that's where a lot of people, or a lot of return missionaries, struggle with their spirituality just because they have so much to do, so much is expected of them and they're trying as hard as they can and it just feels like they're not doing good enough for those around them.

Fortunately for Jackson, his ward did not place him on a pedestal or measure his progress against unrealistic expectations. Instead they welcomed him home as the child they had loved and sent into the field, with an additional measure of respect for the man he had become.

For the most part, his first few weeks at home were quite relaxing. He would wake up and study, occasionally visit with friends or search for jobs, and then sit at home and watch movies. That said, his return was not entirely carefree, and the unstructured/leisurely pace of his life became unbearably monotonous:

> It's tough not having a daily schedule, having to wake up at a certain time. Man, those first couple of weeks home, you're ... haven't gotten a job yet and you're just, kind of, sleeping in. Sleeping in's pretty good. Not gonna lie. That was ... It was pretty good to sleep in the first few nights. But then you're just kinda thinking to yourself, "What do I do now? Plus, I don't have a phone yet, I don't have a car, I can't talk to anyone, can't go anywhere. What am I supposed to do?" That was, that was really tough — trying to find things to do.

Furthermore, Jackson realized that as a missionary he had not really had many ‘worldly’ concerns. Now, he was faced with the prospect of starting a life and having to pay bills or figure things out on his own. This reality was exacerbated by the realization that he no longer had the support and protection of a 24/7 “safeguard” – a missionary companion who could make sure he did not head down the wrong road (literally and metaphorically).
Interestingly, his biggest worry about coming home – the loss of missionary purpose – did not come to fruition or align with reality:

*I'm so used to ... for two years serving the Lord, and one day, the very next day, you don't have ... it's not necessarily that you stop serving the Lord, it's just, you're not, a missionary. You're not called, set apart as a missionary anymore, and that, that was a weird thought, coming home, that I'm ... I'm not gonna be doing this anymore. I have to actually start a life....That was ... That was definitely the biggest thing for me, that whole, "I'm not gonna be a missionary." But once I ... really got home and got into it, put my mind to it, it's definitely a lot easier than I made it out to be.*

Jackson explained that he was able to maintain a feeling of purpose and navigate some of the hardships associated with his return by staying busy and relying on supportive ward members, leaders, and friends. Specifically, Jackson had heard stories about other missionaries who had struggled with returning and had mentally prepared himself for that possibility:

*I knew what I had to do...I had to continue to be busy, continue to do work. I mean, they say nowadays, 50% of the missionaries that come home go less-active... because they lose that schedule. They lose that daily plan. So I knew I had to continue to be proactive in the planning and trying to find something to do that would keep me working, so that I wouldn't lose focus... not only as a church member, but lose focus of everything in life.*

He continued:

.. Some people lose their place. You felt important for two years, or 18 months, and then you come back, and you lose the name, the badge and you just, kind of, forget who you are and the person and you lose sight of why you went on the mission in the first place. You stop going to church, the small things that we always taught about...the small things that matter...when you get back sometimes

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30 The term less-active is often used to describe individuals who are still listed on the records of the Church but do not regularly attend meetings, pay tithing, or engage in other outward expressions of faith.
you just go back to your old ways and you don't keep up with what you've learned on the mission until you just, kinda, fall back into old routines and lose sight of what's important to you and make a new visual where church isn't the most important thing.

Guided by this knowledge, Jackson worked hard to secure a job as soon as possible and was successful in doing so. He also worked at doing the “small things,” what he called CPR – church, prayer, and reading the Book of Mormon. Moreover, Jackson had friends who had recently returned from missions who “were going through the same thing” and they developed a system where they could “help each other, learn from each other, keep each other in check...” Positive relationships with his Bishop and ward members also created a sense of belonging and shared purpose, and kept him humble and focused on his spiritual goals.

Jackson has been home for about four months (at the time of the interview). He is currently working at a manufacturing plant, and was recently married to a girl he met at a young adult conference hosted by the Church. According to Jackson, he and his wife are just starting life, figuring out what they want and where they want to be, and setting goals – “just like a mission.” What advice would Jackson give to RMIs?

Let's say the one thing that comes to mind is that it's different for every missionary, especially where they served. I mean, coming from...a highly populated area I was still connected to a lot of things, so it wasn't as bad because I still knew a lot of things and could talk to people and they'd know about what's going on in the United States and around the world. But certain missionaries, they go to third world countries or they didn't know anything- what's, like, really happening. You're just, kind of, cutoff from pretty much everything that you grew up around and so, for two years, you get used to that and then coming straight back into first world countries, it's a little ... definitely a culture shock for sure. And I just think it's definitely different for every ...return missionary, coming home, depending on where they serve.
Jayce. Jayce was raised in a devout LDS household but never felt pressure from family members to serve a mission. Any pressure to serve actually came from outside of the home and the Church. For instance, he felt that he needed to set a good example for his non-member peers at school, who were familiar with his religious affiliation and his plan to serve a mission. Ultimately, his unyielding resolve to serve a mission was motivated by an experience he had as a child. He recounted the following:

*I don't remember things from when I was younger. But there was one experience. My grandparents served a couple missions and I remember we went to their house ... when they were coming home from, I think, Guatemala? And so my cousins were there...I was, I don't know maybe six or seven ... And we sang Families Can Be Together Forever when they came in and they got home and everything and it was kind of from there. It kind of sparked my interest ... So from then on it just wasn't really a question I was just like, yeah I was going.*

Like other missionaries, Jayce had a critical spiritual experience at an early age that triggered the desire to serve a mission.

Jayce’s mission to Central America was unique, compared to the experience of other missionaries in the Church, in that he spent nearly half of his time working directly with the Mission President in the mission office. In this capacity, he was able to interact with hundreds of individuals as their missions came to a close and as they prepared to return to their country of origin. This experience changed the way he viewed and prepared for his own return, which he believed occurred in two stages – the transition home (stage 1) and the transition to school (stage 2). Jayce’s mission experience also pushed him out of his comfort zone in many ways, and broadened his perspective of the world and the people in it.
I think the biggest thing that I've noticed is I'm a lot less judgmental. Like I never vocalized it before but I’d always think things, you know. But now after seeing all the different experiences and circumstances people are in, I just- if I ever think those things, honestly, I kind of go back to, “what if” scenarios. I knew people, and so I feel like I'm a lot more open ... to people and situations than I used to be.

Likewise, Jayce became more open to opportunities to develop his language skills and to pursue additional international experiences abroad.

In the last days of his mission, Jayce was permitted to visit former areas he had been assigned to within the mission. He also participated in a job interview preparation seminar (primarily mock interviews), a dinner and testimony meeting at the Mission Home, and a joint temple-trip with his cohort of RM. Jayce also had an exit interview with his Mission President that was short, to the point, and went something like this:

*You know I'm not gonna give you a lecture on getting married or any of that because you already know all that... You did a good job... You know what you have to do to stay strong in the gospel... make sure you're reading the scriptures and things like that.*

Because of the nature of his assignment to the mission office, Jayce became well acquainted with his Mission President and many of the elders in his mission. These relationships ended up being important sources of support during Jayce’s transition home. For example, using various media (e.g., Facebook, email, phone, Skype) Jayce maintained contact with the Mission President and his wife, or tracked life updates of the people living in his mission area. He also deepened post mission friendships with former mission companions and acquaintances who were attending the same school as him, many of whom he wrote to after leaving the mission. Jayce viewed his mission relationships as more meaningful than others, because they grew out of interactions that
were motivated by love and affected by the Spirit. The further away he gets from the mission and those relationships, the more he misses and desires to interact with people or things from the mission. In other words, for Jayce, “absence makes the heart grow fonder.”

Jayce experienced a number of social, spiritual, and cultural difficulties as part of his transition home, many of which reinforced feelings of loss and longing for his mission. Some of the social difficulties Jayce encountered stemmed from other people’s lack of understanding of what his missionary life was like, and how central the mission continued to be in his post-mission life:

_The mission kind of becomes your life... in more ways than one I guess. Everything gets blown out of proportion within the mission... be it gossip, culture, whatever. Everything is the end of the world. And then you get home and nobody cares. Like, nobody cares! Nobody knows what went on in your mission, no one cares, and no one has any idea and then... no matter what, everyone goes back to their normal life and ... And all that is gone... as soon as those people go home then that's the end. And so that's definitely it. Weird how important things are there that don't matter here..._

Coming home and facing such a foreign social climate caused Jayce to do a social 180 and totally withdraw. He became more “introverted” or “reclusive,” and minimized his interactions with others. Spaces like Church, that had previously been safe spaces, now felt overwhelming because there were too many people, many with their eyes and attention focused on him – the newly minted RM. When he left for school, things changed to some extent; however, Jayce indicated that he felt compelled to be social at school in order to succeed in his career, the Church, and life:
I went out to college and I was like ... forced to be [social]... It felt kind of overwhelming just having to go out and do things. The school work not so much but just the social...it was kind of like ... I guess I kind of base it off my mission because I wasn’t ... quite sure how to go back into that. The only social interaction I had was about my mission. With people at church they talked about, "oh how was your mission?" ...So I was just used to talking about my mission. So getting back into a social situation and not talking about that ... I was like, "I don't know what to talk about, I don't know" But I also had been told by people that the first couple weeks are the make or break it. You've got time; you gotta make friends, get to know people because it's the easiest. So I kind of felt like I had to get out there and do something or I'd just end up, you know ... Without any social interaction. So it's just (sighs), a lot, and I just got tired really easy... So I prefer to be home, and alone.

Though not a major concern, Jayce also referenced the stigma (particularly at Church affiliated schools) and expectation associated with getting married, as an RM. Some of the pressure to date and marry came as a result of social comparisons between him and family or friends who returned and were married quickly; however, Jayce also noted that people from his mission would frequently ask for updates on his dating and marital status.

Beyond social difficulties, Jayce also struggled to adjust to the sudden shift in language and culture. For instance, he immediately noticed the differences in income status, education level, and family structure between his mission region and his home community. He also noticed that his English language vocabulary had shrunk dramatically and he felt like he struggled to keep up in Sunday meetings, particularly in Elders Quorum where everyone spoke quickly and articulately about the Gospel.

Despite his social and cultural hardships, Jayce was given a heavy work load when he returned. Though he craved something productive to do, the onslaught of
assignments from ward and stake leaders became overwhelming and, in some ways, disorienting:

My first couple weeks I got asked to do everything. It wasn’t just the homecoming talk [or high council report]. I was expecting that. But then I was asked to do a lot of other things in church....Which is what a lot of my [mission] areas were like. I served in three branches and one ward...So I was conducting the music, and we were giving the talks, and we were teaching the classes. We were doing everything. So when I got back and I was doing all that in church again – obviously not nearly to that extent – but I was given a lot of these opportunities ... It felt like I was ... like it almost made the divide even bigger with church. It was like going back to the mission again....it felt like ... Like two worlds I guess. Like Sunday was just a different life; it was like I was going back to my mission and then I'd come back home and like I’d be done for the week and then go back. So it’s just ... it was weird ... So maybe it was good because I kept getting experience. Maybe it was negative because it was weird, I don't know. But it was definitely a divide between the two different ... the two different lives.

At another point in his interview, Jayce commented that he felt he was released from his mission when he took off the tag. Without the tag and what the tag represented, missionary work at home was just not the same. But as evidenced in the prior passage, the transition from mission life to ‘civilian’ life was not so tidy. As missionaries passed through the mission office and home to end their journey, Jayce witnessed the gamut of emotions associated with endings of this kind:

... I sent home probably 120 to 150 people while I was in the office. I sort of watched them all. There were different people who were happy to go home, they were like, “I’m done” people who were really sad and wanted to stay and begged to stay longer and I was just like “your time is over” or whatever. But at the same time, in the conclusion of everything, everyone knew – it’s done... “I’m going home and I’m ... And I’m starting the next part”.

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Jayce has been home for about six months (at the time of his interview). He is currently pre-med, attending school in the northwest region of the United States and “starting the next part” of his life.

**Jayden.** Jayden grew up in a large family, and is the youngest of three children to have served missions in the family. Though he grew up in the Church both of his parents are converts. Because he had a large family where money was tight, Jayden raised the majority of funds for his mission with some assistance from an extended family member.

Jayden’s motivations for serving a mission were mixed, rooted in pivotal spiritual experiences from his youth, an altruistic desire to help people, and the norms and expectations associated with his membership in the Church – “it was the thing that we all needed to do, you know? (laughs)” At one point his brother, who is a less-active member of the Church, tried to dissuade him from going on a mission but he remained firm in his resolve to serve in light of counsel he received in his patriarchal blessing and in a hope of securing blessings for himself and his family. When the Church officially lowered the age of missionary service, he formalized his commitment to serve.

Though originally called to serve in South America, visa and health issues rerouted Jayden to the northeast United States. Despite not being able to serve in the place he was originally called, Jayden fell in love with his mission and the people. He also acquired skills such as an even temperament, a listening ear, and the ability to plan and set goals, which would set him on a path towards a “helping” career when he returned. Beyond these skills, Jayden’s relationship with his parents also changed, for the better:
My relationship with my parents changed. A lot. Before I was like that weird 90s teenager that thought that I knew everything, and my parents didn’t know what I was going through, and all that other stuff. But when I came back, I decided to change my tune a little bit. And start actually talking with my parents. It’s a better relationship between my parents and me.

Jayden’s last days in the mission were unremarkable, in part because his Mission President had only been on site for three weeks. The gist of the message Jayden received from his Mission President was this: “go home, start your next chapter of life, and be fearless about it.” Jayden also recalled a final group meeting focused on “getting out of your personal bubble” and the idea that “you can actually talk to girls now...dating is not a bad thing.” Armed with very little in the way of training or preparation, Jayden’s transition was admittedly “rough.” He struggled to balance the demands and expectations from parents and Church leaders to “figure out” work, school, and a social life, particularly without the structure and schedule of a mission:

The transition has been rough (exasperated sigh). It’s rough to go from waking up at 6:30, studying for three hours, having all that time, going out and working, doing something that you absolutely love, you don’t care whoever talks about it, to coming back to the real world and having a completely different schedule and all this other stuff. It’s hard to keep scripture study in line and all that other stuff.

With his current job, Jayden does not have a set, stable schedule. He also struggled to make relationships work and things, like not being able to maintain the mission language and culture, seemed to be piling up. He got in a “rut” of not having time to study the scriptures or pray but felt like the only way to get out of the rut was to “go back to the Lord.”
Aside from God and his parents, Jayden has had few people he could turn to for support, particularly since he had a hard time trusting and confiding in others. Generally, when people reached out to Jayden, he turned them away, in order to avoid being perceived as a burden to them. On the flip side, he hated being alone – a challenging dichotomy:

*I'm one of those people that they tend to be like, "I'm doing fine, guys. Just leave me alone."... I just don't like- I don't want to burden people with my problems. And that's how my mentality goes when it comes to my struggles like that. There are some people that I'm like, "All right, I will tell you what's going on," but ...I don't like being alone. That's, that's one of my things. Especially, that's one of the things about being a missionary that was so nice is that you're never alone. With being home, you can go out, I can take my car, and I can just go drive and I can be by myself. I can have those times alone. At the same time, I can just go home and be with people that I know.*

One person who was a huge help during the transition was Jayden’s former girlfriend.

While the romantic aspect of their relationship was over, they continued to be friends and she continued to act as a sounding board for Jayden; she reminded him to keep doing the “basics” (e.g., prayer, study) and is one of the few people outside of his family who Jayden would open up to about his struggles.

Another person who supported Jayden was a good friend and RM in the stake, Noah (name changed). He appreciated having someone who understood him and who he could commiserate with, but when Noah became engaged Jayden began to compare his situation to Noah’s and get down on himself for not having similar dating and marriage success:

*Oh, man, [progress towards dating and marriage] is awful (laughs). Everyone else is getting married and stuff...other return missionaries that I know. There's*
Jayden would go on to say that he was not too stressed about his current dating situation – he figured the occupational hazards that made dating problematic would change when his circumstances changed.

Jayden has been home for about 18 months (at the time of the interview). He is currently living at home and working in the criminal justice system; however, even though he has struggled to stay in contact with people from his mission, he is considering moving back to that region to pursue a degree in a “helping” field. Besides pursuing “the primary answers of, marriage and all that good jazzy stuff” his goal now is to “just see where the Lord takes me, and where He wants to change me. He likes to challenge us.”

Jayden did not have any advice to give RM's, but he did have some interesting things to say about what it means, to him, to be a RM:

*I don't even know if we ever really return. I guess you can say we're always returning. We're just in the land of never ending P-days...*

...We're missionaries. That's who we are. It's not just something that you can put on for two years (or 18 months for the ladies) and then just take off. It's something that you are. You know, you're always a missionary. Like, you're never released as a missionary. You're just, "All right, you're not a full-time missionary anymore." Prophets have said, you're, always a missionary. All members are missionaries, so ... For a full-time mission, I just said that I returned when I took off the badge, but as a member-missionary, I still am, if that makes any sense.
Liam. Liam’s path to missionary service, started long before his 18th birthday, when he would first be eligible to enter the field:

*I was four, and we had a Sunday school class, and we got mock mission calls, and I got one to Montana. And ...ever since then, I kind of look on that as when it first went through my mind, like, I guess one day I'm gonna serve a mission.*

Being raised in the Church, the mission was always both an expectation and a topic of conversation for Liam:

*There's always that, whether we want to recognize it or not, that social push, your family, your church. Everyone's expecting you to go and always talking about it, and so you don't want to let those people down. And so that definitely is a factor in it. But it's definitely not the most important.*

The motivation to serve as a missionary was solidified when Liam’s brother entered the field. Liam saw the transformation that occurred while his brother served and desired those blessings for himself.

*Seeing the incredible personal development that [my brother] had, and then being able to see the amazing experiences that he was having...put a mission more realistically in my mind, like, "Yes, this is like the benefit that you get from a mission. This is why you do it because this is what happens. These people's lives change...your life changes...and so on and so on." And so he was like a great example; that next push, and then whenever it came time for my own [mission], it was a mix of, wanting to be able to undergo that same personal change and development. I felt a push, like an inner desire, to be able to do so.*

When the Church lowered the age of missionary service, Liam was forced to consider whether or not he still wanted to serve and if so, whether or not he would serve at an earlier age – the answer to both questions, was a resounding yes.

Liam served in the northwest United States. Prior to being called, he had received a premonition of sorts that he would serve in that area, so when he opened his call he was
both unsurprised and a little disappointed. He was mainly disappointed because he struggled to be excited with family and friends who, unlike Liam, were hearing the news of his assignment for the first time. Though he enjoyed his mission, and changed in some positive ways, Liam wished that he developed more and in different ways as a result of serving:

_I definitely feel like I was able to mature and change and had many, meaningful experiences that were able to strengthen my testimony and help me to be able to continue stronger and to rely upon Him (Jesus Christ). But, there's definitely... several things that I wish could have been able to further develop when I was on the mission...but I feel like I didn't get to achieve as much._

Liam was also surprised to find that, in some ways, he actually regressed after his mission. Specifically Liam, formerly a straight ‘A’ student, felt that his study habits and academic abilities had declined post-mission.

_I thought that going on the mission – where you'd be studying every day – my study habits would be perfect when I got back. But they've actually been horrible. Ever since I've been back from the mission... being able to sit down, and study for classes, and focus has been extremely difficult...I've always been, like, straight As and I did my associate's degree at a college while in high school...like I'm used to a strong work load. And then I come back here, and I have a hard time just doing the daily reading and making that click. I thought the mission would transition that through to be better._

Despite these disappointments and declines, Liam viewed his mission positively; he enjoyed being able to teach, testify, and witness others transform their lives. While missionary service was the hardest thing he had ever done, it was well worth the effort.

That said, most of Liam’s recollections of his mission emphasized hardships or negative experiences. For example, he noted how difficult it was to get rejected or see someone choose not to accept the message of the Gospel. He had poured his heart and
soul into people, saw how the Gospel could change their lives, saw them fall in love with the Gospel, and then watched them reject it (and by association, reject him). Further, Liam had a hard time grasping the mission language, struggled with the monotony of the rigid and repetitions schedule, and longed for more social diversity and freedom (as opposed to the 24/7 companionship and limited social sphere he had as a missionary). Finally, whereas other missionaries often return home with deep, long-term bonds (with members, missionaries, or converts), Liam felt that his mission relationships were few and shallow.

As his mission drew to a close, Liam completed the work required by the newly introduced My Plan reentry program. While he saw My Plan as potentially worthwhile for other RMUs, the program did not seem to help him prepare for the realities of his post-mission life. Moreover, neither his Stake President nor his Bishop had been trained on or took the time to follow up with him on his plan. His exit interview with his Mission President was similarly lackluster. He recalls receiving some dating advice that he did not feel was particularly helpful and a simple reminder to keep up his “good” habits. Liam noted that in the past, the Mission Presidency had required all the missionaries to attend a formal dating training, but this practice was discontinued since missionaries were not taking the training seriously. As an additional part of his exit interview, Liam’s Mission President also questioned him about his mission and goals – did he (Liam) feel like he had served an honorable mission? What were his plans for after the mission? Etc. One helpful resource the mission provided was a career-strengths test. The outcome of the test – a list of five key strengths and related careers – turned out to be very influential for
Liam and helped direct his choice of major, minor, clubs, and subsequent international experiences.

Because his parents moved while he was away, Liam returned to a new ‘home.’ Though he was still able to spend some time in the town he grew up in for 18 years, he did not feel like he had enough time to reunite with everyone he wanted to after his mission. In spite of the time crunch, he was grateful that he returned to school without much delay instead of sitting at home with nothing to do, because he soon discovered it was easy to waste time on his phone or asleep in bed rather than engaging in other more productive pursuits. For the first few months of school he was house sitting for a brother and while he had a large house to himself, fully stocked with food and amenities, he soon realized that in addition to being bored, he was lonely. He then began searching for friends to fill that void:

*I quickly realized I need friends. I need social experiences. I need to do more than just ... So ... then I went ahead and bought a contract...at an apartment complex out here, and I decided to start going to that ward on Sundays. I met the people, but still...never really had friends. And then they have a game night on Sunday, so I would always go to the game night and I was able to have a fun experience and be around people. But it still wasn't like, friends who I would hang out with...like outside of that game night. And so, it still wasn't enough....So, that was the hardest part about coming back ...being able to find friends again.*

Liam’s social difficulties also spilled into his dating life. For Liam the dating stars just did not seem to align – either he liked a girl and she did not like him, or vice versa. Because of this, he felt unprepared to start a relationship unless he was certain the feelings between he and the girl were mutual. Even though dating was hard, eventually Liam wanted to be married and he was working towards that goal; however, since
returning from his mission, Liam had struggled with his ability to focus and felt like he needed to get himself into a more stable mindset – better able to handle the pressures associated with marriage – before starting a committed relationship. He recognized that if it was hard living with a missionary companion 24/7, it would be hard living and being with a person for the rest of time and eternity.

The other real challenge for Liam, was keeping up with the spiritual habits and goals that he and others expected of him. For two years he taught people that they needed to read scriptures, pray, attend the temple, and fulfill their Church responsibilities in order to be happy; now, however, without the missionary schedule and purpose it was much more difficult to put those habits into practice:

*I'm still not where I want to be. I mean...my prayer and like scripture study, super sporadic and super bad. It's embarrassing...to come off of your mission and that's not something that you're effectively doing. But it's super hard to be able to keep up with that.*

Liam acknowledged that RMs are expected to live at the same spiritual level they did before, when they had no obligations and could commit to the spiritual life 24/7. For him, these expectations are daunting, and yet he continues to pursue them because every time he kneels down to pray or sits down to study, “it’s always a meaningful experience.”

Former President of the Church, Gordon B. Hinckley has said that new converts (and perhaps recently RMs) need to succeed is a friend, a calling, and nourishment from the good word of God. These were the things that helped keep Liam going when he felt discouraged or distressed. For one, his college required him to take a religious class, which he felt was helpful, since he found it was easy to get out of habits (e.g., prayer,
study) that invited the Spirit into his life. He also was called to be an instructor at Church, which similarly forced him to stay up to date with spiritual habits and reminded him of the joys of teaching he experienced as a missionary. Finally, he had a Bishop who loved and cared for him and a supportive Brother who he lived with for a time after returning. Eventually, after much prayer, he also found a group of friends who he could relate to and rely on.

Liam has been home for about 18 months (at the time of his interview); following advice he received from another RM he decided not to postpone his education, and now he is attending a Church affiliated university studying international business management and periodically travelling for educational experiences abroad. What did Liam learn from his experiences that he thinks RMs should know?

*Don’t expect that just because you served a mission for spirituality to come easy. Start working on it immediately and stay on it...*

*...Surround yourself with the kind of people that you want to be like. Surround yourself with people that make you do better, that will be there to support you. Get that support network of friends right off the bat – ones that will say "hey, let’s go to the temple. Let’s go do this. Let’s go watch devotional". Get a group of friends that act and behave the way you want to be.*

*...Try as many new experiences as you can. Put yourself out there in the most diverse ways that you possibly can. The time after your mission, most of us are going into college. We will never have another time where we will have so much flexibility in our experiences. Once we get into a professional job our structure will be work, will be rigid. But in here we can go and do something completely different every single summer. Go live in a different county. Go work in a different field. You can meet so many different people. You can do so many different clubs. You can go to so many different lectures and learn things. Just go and try new things.*
...Reach out...find as many meaningful ways to serve as possible, because it's so easy for us, once we spend two years of turning outward, to come home and without that structure to get you to do it every single day, we're more likely to get turned inward. And so just being able to serve as many ways as you can small or big helps you to be able to facilitate turning outward and helps motivate you, encourage you and sustain you into maintaining that and being a lot happier.

Luke. As an active member of the Church, a mission was always on Luke’s radar; however, missionary service became a reality for him as a young deacon when he participated in a Sunday school lesson on missionary work:

When you grow up in the Church, they'll always be like, "Hey you want to go on a mission?" And you always talk about it, but for [me]...when it became a real thing was probably when I became a deacon....I remember seeing the priesthood, where it was like, “hey, this is an actual, real, event”. You know? This is actually gonna happen, so I should probably start actually working for it...looking back at it, we had a lesson on our mission and that's when it became like- I started seriously thinking about it.

Luke continued to work towards a mission and was called to serve in Western Europe, speaking English. Luke’s mission was one of the best things that he had ever done. He came home more mature and feeling richly blessed. Regarding the blessings of serving he said:

I think one of the best blessings is that I came home with the ability to control my emotions better....to "act instead of being acted upon." ... I guess I just came home not having to worry about what the world thinks I can do. I guess I found who I was, you know? I didn't have the feeling like I had to live up to anyone’s standards but my own, or I guess the Lord's, you know?

In addition to feeling more agentic and identity secure, Luke felt like the mission taught him temporal and spiritual skills that would serve him throughout his life. For example,
he gained a deeper understanding of the Church’s doctrines, improved his study skills, and acquired the ability to create and maintain a budget.

During his last days in the mission field, Luke received a great deal of counsel both in his individual exit interview and in trainings directed toward his entire cohort of RMs. In his exit interview, the Mission President talked about goal setting generally and then narrowed the discussion to topics like career preparation, marriage, and spirituality.

First, Luke’s Mission President had been very successful in his prior career, even nationally recognized. He communicated to Luke that career success came as a result of hard work and diligence and that Luke could be the best in his chosen career if he was willing to put in the time and effort required. Second, Luke’s Mission President indicated that marriage was “the next horizon” in Luke’s life, and that he should start developing qualities in himself now, that he would hope to find in a future spouse. Finally, Luke was encouraged to stay spiritually strong by attending priesthood meetings, studying the scriptures, avoiding Anti-Mormon literature, moderating technology use, and ultimately becoming a “Priesthood Man.”

That's something that I always wanted to be was a priesthood man...How he defined that was “being a man that Heavenly Father can always trust. Doing things not because it's a habit, or [obligation], but doing things because you know that's what Heavenly Father expects of you – because you want to do it, because he wants you to do it. So just shaping yourself into the person that Heavenly Father wants you to be, because you love Him. So, being a priesthood man is something that I've always striving to be, even when I got home.

In the cohort training, Luke’s Mission President helped the missionaries review and reframe their mission experience, especially the hard/negative aspects of it:
The big thing I remember from that [training] is that he used an analogy of a consecration camp versus... a concentration camp.... he said that when you view your mission as the former, you didn't come up here just to suffer, but you came here for a purpose. You consecrated yourself to the Lord... I think it's kind of reflecting about your mission. When you look back at it, you don't necessarily look back at all the hardships that you had. Looking back you look at the sacrifices that you made. And that it was great in the eyes of the Lord. It was definitely worth it. And it's something that you should remember...the rest of your life.

Soon after this counsel was given, Luke departed for home. He recalled that his flight was delayed for 12 hours, so he did not arrive back in the United States until 2:00am. Despite the early hour, there were nearly 50 people there at the airport waiting to greet him – a homecoming reception that nearly brought him to tears. Among the crowd was the Stake President, who officially released Luke that morning. Unlike the welcome at the airport, the release had very little fanfare, and left Luke wanting for more:

We drove over to the Stake, it was like 2:30 in the morning, and he released me then.... It was pretty sad, actually. And it just happened all of a sudden, you know? When you get in, when you get called to be a missionary, they have someone's hands laid on your head, and they officially call you. But when you get home, the Stake president just says, "I release you." There's no great prayer, there's no, unsetting apart, or whatever that would be. He just says, "You're released. Take off your tag." And I kind of felt cheated. I was like, "What, are you kidding? That's it?" (Laughs)...but I also just feel like there was a sadness to it...a good sadness. You're gonna miss it, you know?

Even though his release was anticlimactic, Luke felt like he transitioned well and that the reentry process was easier than anticipated. Sure, he did not always study his scriptures as much as he thought he should, he had not maintained contact with his mission like he thought he might, and a few of his high school and ward friendships dissolved. However, he felt like he was doing “a pretty good job” of staying on the right course and he was
enjoying the opportunity and excitement of creating new friendships rather than trying to resurrect old, tired ones.

Right after his release, Luke’s family went on a vacation, attended a wedding, and then participated in a family reunion. The constant mobility and engagement kept Luke busy, for which he was grateful. Another thing that helped him in his transition was serving in the temple:

\[ I \text{ started working in the temple. I figured what better way to prepare myself than being an ordinance worker? ...When you get home, you don’t have that daily fulfillment. You don’t have that daily dose of missionary work. But when I’m in a temple, that’s where I get that dose of the spirit. And that was just something that was great for me...being an ordinance worker helped me.}\]

In addition to working in the temple, attending the YSA ward helped Luke make the adjustment home. While attending the YSA ward, he began to feel normal and ‘broke’ the mission rules for the first time. He also felt like the YSA ward helped him get back into the dating game and he eventually met his fiancé there. Luke added that he felt less “awkward” dating in the YSA ward because the first few dates he had at home were with people he had known for most of his life, friends that he felt comfortable with. In other words, the stakes were low on his first few dates, which allowed him to be himself and focus on having fun without the pressure or expectation of courtship that would lead to marriage.

Luke has now been home for about 18 months (at the time of the interview); he is currently a studying a business related degree at a southeastern university in the U.S. and was recently engaged to a young women he met at his university ward. What advice would Luke give to a RM?
Well, I think that the two big ones are: you have to stay busy. You can't just sit around and watch TV or just sit around and reflect on your mission. Yeah, that's great, you should do that. But, you can't just sit around all day reading letters and emails and look at pictures, because that's just gonna get you sad and depressed. And then two… I would highly suggest getting out. You know, like, moving out of your house. Because when you get home, the longer you stay around, I think the harder it's gonna be... if you're gonna go to school, great. Go to school. If you're gonna stay local for school, that's good too. Just go to school. Start something! Start a job if you don't want to go back to school. Just do something. Don't wait around forever to start your life.

Mason. Mason served on the western coast of the United States and describes his mission as “the greatest experience of [his] life.” Much of what he learned and gained from his mission came as a direct result of his belated entry into the mission field. Unlike many of his companions who were, by definition, still teens, Mason was 25 years old when he was called to serve. From working with these young missionaries, Mason learned patience, leadership, how to teach with love and firmness, and how to ennoble rather than enable. Mason also learned to appreciate and see these missionaries the way God sees them. In one particular instance he even found himself defending younger missionaries, and reminding others of the legitimacy of their divinely appointed calling:

I dunno, I kinda stood up and said “hey, I don't look at it like that because the Lord doesn't look at it like that. He looks at it as, this is a representative of Him, and he [the young elder] has the same commission, the same calling, the same authority that I do. And...is very capable...probably more capable than you would think.” So ... he's called by the same God as I am...that's the mindset that I took going in to it. And that helped me.

From his younger compadres, Mason learned that in the midst of all of life’s tasks and troubles, one ought to have a light heart and have a little fun. Lastly, all of his social
interactions taught him to be more empathic and flexible in his thinking, and to accept that other people could and do change.

At the conclusion of his mission, Mason participated in My Plan, the reentry program of the Church. Though he does not pull out and review his plan as much as he would like, he has found the plan to be “pretty useful.” He described My Plan and its importance this way:

[My Plan is] a six week process of just like praying and adjusting for home, you set goals and that type of thing...I felt it was helpful just to get me in the mindset that this is real...the reality that I've got to step back into the world and jobs, goals, careers, school, dating, all those things.... when I came home, I thought I would come home and be like this normal guy, right? ...it's not always that way. So I think in some cases it helps as far as just preparing you mentally, like saying “hey, this is a real thing, like you're gonna have to adjust back.” And I did like that it asked us to kind of make a plan and an outline...it really made you stay in tune with God as far as like developing some plan.

Setting goals and making plans was a central part of Mason’s mission experience and, thanks to My Plan, became a central part of his post-mission life. He set goals in multiple life domains, and My Plan forced him to drill down to the specifics of those goals. For instance, the Plan includes probing questions like: “how many hours are you planning to study or how many days do you plan on studying? How are you going to do that?” In addition to setting goals and making specific plans, missionaries also develop a guiding mission statement for their life. Mason adopted his mission’s slogan as his mission statement:

We kinda came up with what we felt like the mission statement- mission slogan would be..."we are one with the Savior in doing the will of the Father." And...it was definitely directed by the spirit and everyone there kind of felt that and understood it. And we also understood what it means, which is to do our very best
to be like the Savior...That's the one thing the Savior did that everyone saw the most...he was willing to do the absolute will of the Father. And so that was the mission statement that I took with me...I didn't really need to be that original. I felt like “hey, this is basically what sums it all up right here”. Because it was very much a part of my testimony, going out when I was 25 years-old, you know, an old missionary. The reason that I was going is because I 100% believed that it was the will of the Father. And so, that was the perfect coin for me to take and make mine whenever we came up with that as a mission.

Mason had clearly internalized the mission slogan, as the slogan had become a reality for him.

Mason’s exit interview was similarly personal and meaningful. His Mission President began the meeting by reflecting on what he and Mason had seen and accomplished together in their nine months of overlapping service (Mason had three different Mission President’s during his two year term of service). The President then proceeded to provide counsel on topics like spiritual and career preparation. First, the Mission President observed that Mason had developed a “softness” – a state of charity and humility – and encouraged Mason to hold on to those attributes. He taught Mason that as long as he continued to put forth effort, he would continue to change and develop additional Christ-like attributes. Second, the Mission President encouraged Mason to make career choices that would provide him with skills, rather than making career choices based on income.

One thing he told me though is - he never took a job just solely based on the money....So there was always some type of skills related that he thought he was going to gain, and in some cases...he felt like he was led into certain jobs ... by God. He said that at one point he took like a 40% pay cut. But he felt like he needed to take the job. And ... then it was the job after that one that he was led to where he ended up making more money and gaining more skills than basically the two previous jobs combined.
When Mason returned home, there was very little follow up (from the Stake President and local leaders) with either My Plan or the spiritual and career advice he’d received from the Mission President. He had even brought his binder, full of My Plan materials, and was prepared to discuss the plan in his release interview. At first, Mason made excuses for his leader’s lack of follow-up – maybe they had not been trained yet or did not think it was worth starting the process since Mason would be moving on soon. He acknowledged that most missionaries, experience a great deal of mobility when they return, as they head off to school or to start careers. This increased mobility naturally makes continuity and follow up a challenge.

Though his local leaders neglected to follow up with his My Plan material, they were helpful in other ways. For instance, he regularly brought ideas/tough decisions to his Bishop and asked for counsel or direction.

*[The Bishop]* has actually been super helpful and been beneficial to my adjustment, more than just about anybody else. Because I learned on my mission, to follow your key holders and to learn what type of counsel they could have for you... And so I actually would go to him with different things. I would just set up an appointment and be like “hey, what counsel do you have in this situation?” It might have been school or a job... Like I went to him and talked to him about it. And he didn't ever just outright answer my question, which I know he was following the spirit, but he was giving me good counsel by sharing some experiences, that he had... I think we all just kind of forget...we pray and feel that the Lord will give us answers when we need ’em but sometimes those answers will come through our key holders. Because often times the Lord will answer our prayers through other people...And that’s one thing that I probably learned the most since I've been home. Is that a lot of my prayers have been answered through other people.

In addition to the Bishop, Mason’s mom was a source of sound counsel and spiritual support. She helped Mason recognize the Spirit helped him have confidence that his
decisions aligned with the directions he received from the Spirit. The most helpful thing during reentry, for Mason, was having an intentional, daily connection with God through study and prayer.

_Probably the thing that has been the most helpful would just be doing whatever I can to stay spiritually connected to God and my studies – continuing to study the scriptures. There have been days where, seriously, I feel completely overwhelmed. I especially remember coming home, the first month was like- if I was not studying my scriptures still every day I was gonna wreck. Because I was almost a near wreck just adjusting back to different things and figuring out school plans and dating- if I had not been studying my scriptures and keeping that conscious reminder of peace. And Christ is the author and finisher of peace, and so I felt like studying my scriptures…just starts my day with peace. And then there’s been days where I didn’t- start my day with peace, I didn’t start my day where I studied my scriptures, maybe I did it halfway through or maybe... I was too lazy or I didn’t get up. And, I can absolutely feel different - tell a difference when I connect with God and incorporate him in my day. I have peace.

As a missionary, maintaining this connection to God was easier, because he was constantly studying, praying, serving, teaching, and doing things that drew him closer to the Spirit, closer to God. Likewise, as a missionary, he had more time, energy, focus, and a commission from God to help people. At home, without this singular focus and mandate, he struggled to care for others and help bear their burdens. Specifically, Mason wished there was more he could do to help family members who he felt needed spiritual strengthening. He frequently asked himself: “what do I leave up to them to work on and what do I help support them in?” Figuring out this balance was emotionally taxing and forced him to counsel more with the Lord.
Overall, Mason expressed that, at the time of the interview, he was still adjusting and that he was a lot “weirder” – as an RM – than he expected to be. Reflecting on the expectation-reality gap, he said:

...the adjustment back to the reality in the world is definitely not something that I expected to be as difficult as it was. I think there’s no real preparation for that, no real training for that. And I think really what that is, is just a new transfer into ... having to gain revelation and direction from God still. The post mission experience is good; it's just not something that you're ever really prepared for.

Mason has now been home for nine months (at the time of the interview); he has traveled across the country and back in an effort to follow God’s direction, sometimes acting in direct conflict with his personal goals and desires. His focus has been and continues to be on “pursuing the next covenant,” which in his case is marriage. What advice would Mason give to a recently RM?

I would just say, stay busy. It doesn't all have to be reading your scriptures and going out with the missionaries, but just stay busy. As long as you're doing something.

Michael. Michael decided to serve a mission after enrolling in school and attending the nearby Spanish branch, which was very missionary-oriented. The branch had recently been assigned two missionaries who Michael connected well with and who had great success, in terms of bringing converts to the Church (sixteen individuals were baptized over the course of the year Michael was there, versus zero the year prior). Influenced by his positive interactions with missionary-minded members and inspired by the success of the local missionaries he submitted his mission papers and was called to serve in Eastern Europe.
Michael’s mission experience was somewhat unique in that it focused more on Church administration than on proselytizing. In other words, because the branches were so small\(^{31}\) the missionaries were often responsible for planning activities, conducting meetings, managing finances, and completing other tasks. Michael felt unprepared for this reality. The Missionary Training Center had prepared him to teach Gospel centered lessons, in the native language, but his actual opportunities to teach in the country were few and far between.

Adjusting to the culture of the mission was difficult for Michael. At the outset, people were cold and distant. However, he eventually adopted and now prefers the customs and social etiquette of his mission country. In some ways, this cultural adaptation created social problems for Michael when he returned to the states.

*"A lot of people say it's the missionary awkwardness...but I feel like it's more like the cultural awkwardness because... [the people in my mission] aren't very nice people. And so, I came back and I felt like I wasn't that nice, you know what I mean? ...you go to the store in America, somebody'll be like, "Hey, how are you doing," all this stuff, and in [my mission], they don't even look at you. So I came back to the store, back here...and I didn't like it when people would try to talk to me at the store. I just wanted to be shopping or something... I kinda had to ... think before I spoke- Or said anything, just because I didn't want to offend people.*

Perhaps in light of this cultural distance, Michael often found himself thinking about and pining for his mission, or at least the people.

*I think about a mission like every single day, and like, I don't think there's been a day where I haven't thought about it....I don't [miss] being a missionary...just the people I guess.*

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\(^{31}\) Between the two countries where Michael served, there were only 500 members.
In addition to missing the people, Michael missed the 24/7 companionship he once enjoyed. When he first returned home people wanted to be around him all the time, but his novelty quickly wore off, and he found himself alone. He did have friends in the ward, some of whom were also RM s, but they were all busy working, trying to start their own post-mission lives. One thing that helped to district from the loneliness was going out with the local missionaries, who regularly invited Michael to accompany them on visits. Michael also found that once he started working and preparing for school again, he felt less isolated or alone.

Michael explained that his home ward was particularly helpful when it came to finding work for him and for other RM s. However, his local leaders did little to assist with his reintegration into the ward and community. His advice for Church leaders is to put RM s to work by giving them something to do in the Church:

*Make sure you’re using the returned missionaries and the YSA, and using everybody as much as you can….getting a calling and stuff. I know for me...the ward mission leader- I kind of knew him, and he wanted me to be his assistant ward mission leader, and so pretty soon after I got home, like, within the month, that was my calling. But I know for a lot of other returned missionaries, even missionaries who have been home for a while, they still don’t have callings and stuff in our ward ... [A calling] keeps you busy. And I feel like returned missionaries, and younger people, they have a different perspective, on ... how things should be... how the ... church should be run.*

Michael also felt that Church leaders could better serve the YSA, at least in his home stake. He felt like the YSA in the stake were looked over, in part because there were so few of them compared to other stakes in the Church.
Michael was equally underwhelmed by the counsel and support he received from his Mission President before heading home. His exit interview was shorter and less thoughtful than he had imagined it would be.

... [I] thought he would say something profound or give me like some super deep advice that I would take home my whole life. But it wasn't really ... it was pretty much like, "Hey, what are you gonna do when you go home?" like, "Just stay strong in the gospel," ... "Continue your scripture reading habits," and stuff.

Michael’s group interview emphasized chastity, personal development (particularly physical development and exercise), and spiritual and temporal self-reliance. The Mission President was also a “big business” guy, a former CEO of a property management company, and so he was interested in what the missionaries were going to do, career wise, when they returned home. He had every missionary read the book “How to win friends and influence people” and develop a Success Formula, which was essentially an outline of their vision, goals, and plans for the future. Michael’s vision was “to be happy...finish up school, get married in the temple and stuff like that.”

Before serving a mission, temple marriage was not really a priority for Michael. But his mission experience changed his perspective on this topic.

Temple marriage... I don't know ... before the mission I didn't really care as much... if I get married to somebody, like it could be a member, it could be like, a non-member, it doesn't really matter as much to me. But I think the mission kinda changed me ... I want to be married in the temple. Probably because it's easier, to live with somebody who has the same religious background as you. Also ... 'cause we were taught in church that we had all these blessings from temple marriages and stuff, and knowing that has influenced me, too.

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32 The Church had recently developed a new self-reliance initiative focused on topics like personal finance, finding gainful employment, starting a business, etc.
Michael also commented that in the Church there is a perception that most RMs come home and get married right away. In his opinion, this perception is false, but those types of accounts are typically the ones that are “publicized” and “praised.”

Michael has now been home for about eight months (at the time of the interview); he is currently living at home, working for a member of his stake. In the fall he will continue studying the natural sciences at a university in the southeast United States.

Oliver. Oliver was called to serve a mission when he was 19, but had to work through some personal difficulties and delayed his service until he turned 23. Though he was a little unsure about how he would fit in as an older missionary, he also felt more confident that his decision to serve was motivated by the right reasons. For instance, when he first applied at the age of 19 he was more influenced by the “pressure” and expectation to serve a mission. However, at the age of 23 he felt more intrinsically motivated to serve. He recalled his attitude at the time:

*I wanted to do this because I love serving and helping people and helping draw people closer to God" ...the whole time I was out, I never felt like it was because I had to. And I knew if I really honestly did not like what I was doing, I could go home and be like, "mission president, I don't want to do this anymore." ...the bishop ... he encouraged ... so, I definitely felt encouraged. But, I didn't feel forced.*

The desire to serve again was partially ignited by a critical event, which woke Oliver up to his current state in life. At the time, Oliver was living with seven other guys and he recalled that they were “drinking around one night” and he was just sitting there thinking “this is what I am doing?” Feeling dissatisfied with his situation, he and a friend decided
it was time to try again, and he was soon called to serve in his original mission in the
western United States.

The mission changed Oliver in subtle ways. For instance, he became more
diligent or motivated to get things done on time, and improved in his academic abilities:

*I didn't notice anything necessarily right away...I noticed it more so when I...went
back and did a semester of school. I don't know what it was about before my
mission, but school just did not click. I mean, I would go to class and study and
stuff, but I didn't end up with good grades, and I actually ended up in some weird,
like... probation. But then, for some reason... ever since I've been home, school
magically, like- I still work the same, and I'm not the most timely of getting things
done, but, I've had the best grades I've ever had in my college career, in the past
four semesters.*

Oliver also realized that he was highly influenced by his social environment and made a
conscious decision to surround himself with people “that don’t suck.” He noticed that his
demeanor would change as he spent more time with “negative” people, and decided he
needed to be a “little selfish” and guard himself against these people. In most cases this
meant prioritizing his relationships, rather than cutting people out of his life entirely.

As his mission drew to a close, Oliver observed that while others felt lost or sad,
he looked forward to returning home. He had fulfilled his assignment, and had no regrets.
He was ready to go home.

*...towards the end of my, everyone was like, sad that they were leaving. I was like,
"I'm happy. I get to see my family” ...Everyone's like, "Why are you so, like,
you're too happy. You should be sad." I was like- "I did what I was supposed to. I
don't feel bad. There's no regret...it's time to go home." I kind of just dove right
back into normal stuff.*

Oliver may have had an easier time moving on to the next phase of his life because of the
unique circumstances at the end of his mission. Oliver’s Mission President basically
allowed Oliver to choose the place and the people he would serve with for his last assignment, a rare opportunity. This ability to choose gave Oliver confidence and some closure, and his exit interview served a similar function. In the interview, his Mission President said something to this effect:

Oliver, I could have put you in literally any area, and it would have been fine and you would have made it better because...I can tell...you're different than other people. Like, you care about people...and people can tell.

These words from a respected Mission President, helped signify to Oliver that his work was done. Oliver’s Mission President also gave him some words of counsel. He encouraged Oliver to be active, to date, and to stay involved in the Church. He warned Oliver that reentry would be difficult and that applying what he had learned during his mission to his experiences back home would take time. He encouraged Oliver to avoid unnecessary worry or stress and to enjoy life. This counsel meshed well with Oliver’s care free temperament and helped him feel confident that no matter what came his way, he would be able to make sense of or successfully navigate reentry eventually.

Oliver has been home for about 18 months (at the time of the interview). Aside from some brief periods of awkwardness (i.e., it felt odd not having a 24/7 companion) and initial troubles finding work, his transition home was relatively smooth. He is currently pursuing a liberal arts degree at a university in the northwest United States. What would Oliver tell a newly RM?

It's going to be weird at first...but it'll be fine. Just realize it's okay to go do some stuff...just go do it...do something that you haven't been able to do in a while. Go get that out of the way. Like, go do something fun with your family right when you get back.... Don't feel bad.
... Don't feel regret...don't fret about missed opportunities because eventually ... The way I kinda worded it was like "everybody's going to hear [the Gospel], that was basically a promise given by God and the Savior. Everybody will have a fair opportunity to hear the Gospel either now or later, and as long as you tried and didn't just, like, loaf around a lot- You're good."

**Ryan.** Ryan served his mission in South America and seemed to have made the decision to serve somewhat reluctantly. He recalled:

*Well, it was probably nine months before I left. And I had come up here to school and I didn't really want to go on a mission and I just decided I had to pray about it. And I felt like I should go. And it was at that point that I decided to go on a mission...*

He continued:

*... I grew up with the idea that I should go on a mission, and when I came out to school, I had the mindset, “wait, I'm my own person, I can make my own decisions, and that's when I didn't want to go,” but I prayed and felt like I should.*

The first few months in the mission were a struggle for Ryan. He did not know what to do because the clothing, customs, and cooking were so different to what he was accustomed to. However, once he learned the language, the cultural adjustment came much faster. Overall, Ryan viewed his mission as a positive experience, and has no regrets about serving. During his mission he learned how to work hard to pursue his goals. He learned how to love and appreciate his family, to talk to them with respect, and to serve or support them in their duties. Constant immersion in spiritual activities, as a missionary, also strengthened his commitment to the Church.

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33 The term Savior is another name given to Jesus Christ and is suggestive of his ability to save or redeem individuals from sin and death.
Before, I don't know, I guess growing up I felt like I had to go [to Church], and then when I came to school, I didn't go less active or anything, I just didn't have a strong desire to go to church. And now that I've served my mission and all that, I do have a strong desire to go to church and that's really what changed about me is my spiritual aspect in life....On the mission, you're fully immersed doing stuff for the Church constantly. Before I had a testimony, I didn't have a strong testimony but going on my mission and having spiritual experiences, I mean, teaching the Gospel and feeling the Spirit, praying every day, all day, studying the Scriptures, and doing, as they say, "the primary answers," it really made a difference. And then on top of that, you're constantly serving so you just have more love in your heart so that, that's what kinda made the difference for me going into my mission, feeling the love of God in my life...

At the conclusion of his mission, Ryan met with both his Mission President (departing) and his Stake President (returning). The Mission President asked him what he was most worried about and structured the interview around those topics, things like marriage and schooling. Above all else, his Mission President stressed the importance of maintaining daily spiritual habits (e.g., prayer, studying the scriptures), and avoiding idleness – “At the very least,” he said, “dig a hole in the backyard…just do something.” In hindsight, Ryan saw the value of this counsel. His first week home he had little to do and quickly fell into a slump. But then he went back to work and noted that being active and doing something helped him feel productive. He also implemented the counsel to study and pray, not just on his own, but with his family as well.

During his interview with his Stake President Ryan had opportunities to reflect on his mission and describe meaningful experiences. After the interview, Ryan’s family was brought in to the room and he was released. For Ryan, the release was both disorienting and emotional. He recalled:
After the interview, we got together with my family and I guess I wasn't a missionary anymore. They took the tag off. And that was very emotional moment I don't cry very often, but I did cry when they took the tag off. (laughs)

I asked Ryan why the removal of his name tag was so hard. His response suggests that the tag became a symbol of his relationship to God and of the Spirit and power he had felt/held as a missionary.

So I guess what [the tag] represented to me was just being a servant of the Lord, following everything he wants me to do, I mean, I felt like I was in touch with the Spirit. I didn't feel the Spirit all the time, but I was in touch with the Spirit all the time, and there's a special spirit about being a missionary that one feels. And when they take the tag off, you can kinda feel that spirit leave. So it's just like there's a special part of you that is leaving. I mean, after being a missionary, you can still be a missionary, go out with the missionaries, teach and everything, it's just it's not the same spirit as being a missionary.

Coming home was easier for Ryan than anticipated. At first, he had to step outside of his comfort zone and into a whole new environment with unforeseen challenges. For example, despite having developed the confidence and ability to talk to strangers during his missionary service, Ryan remembered going to a Church dance soon after returning and how awkward he felt. Maintain some of the more tangible spiritual behaviors he had mastered as a missionary such as praying and studying the scriptures was also difficult for Ryan; however, the less tangible attributes and behaviors such as love and service seemed easier to maintain. Ryan was also let down by some of the small changes that had occurred to family routines and rituals while he was away. For example, the family no longer celebrated Christmas in the same way and had let go of some of the traditional activities such as eating breakfast and opening gifts together as a family.
Ryan has been home for about 15 months (at the time of the interview); he is currently a student at a Church affiliated university. What does advice does Ryan have for RMs?

*I think having a friend there, maybe a friend that's already returned from his mission would be best, but at least a friend that is a good example. I guess, you don't- it's hard coming home and finding somebody that has taken a turn for the worst. For example, I have a cousin that was one of my best friends, and on my mission, he pretty much left the Church- not pretty much, he did leave the Church and he turned to smoking and alcohol and all that. And I feel like that wouldn’t have been much help, but having a righteous friend that was doing what he needed to is what really helped me. He’s the one that brought me to the dance and got me dancing with girls and talking to friends and all that.*

**Selective Adherents**

**Grayson.** Grayson served in the South America, speaking Portuguese. Though he was one of the first to serve a mission in his family (his brother received his mission call on the same day), he had ample support from home and was later followed into the mission field by a third sibling. As a result of his service Grayson felt like he became more patient, loving, affectionate, and easy going. He recalled times before his mission where he and a sibling were constantly competing and expressed that he no longer felt this need to jockey for power. In many ways his change in demeanor aligned with his adoption of the mission culture. He saw the people of his mission as a more affectionate and passive people – traits that had become a part of his identity as an RM.

Grayson’s embrace of South American culture would later become a source of frustration. For one, he had an accent and way of speaking that was sometimes difficult for others in his home community to understand. More frustrating, however, were the
differences in behavior he observed between individuals in his home and mission communities. North American’s, he found, were more closed off, not just to conversations about God, but to conversations about anything, with anyone they did not know. Family and friends also struggled to understand his experiences. He cited one event in particular that was extremely irritating, even though in retrospect it was quite trivial:

...my mom and dad, they wanted me to like, cook for them. And they wanted beans and rice. But I learned to cook like, 'cause we didn't have a lot of money in our mission. We were on a smaller mission. So we ate a lot of beans and rice and members would cook for us so I could cook it... This is just something that sticks out to me. It's kind of petty, but... [my parents] didn't have the proper ingredients, and I would be like, "No, this is what we need to cook," and like every person is like, "Uh, no, why do you need this?" and I'd make it, and it wouldn't taste the same, and I'd get really frustrated. I'm like, "You guys don't understand. This is not good."

Situations like these created a sense of loss and longing for his mission. To cope, he would sometimes go on drives or lay awake in bed late into the night, reliving his mission in his mind.

You just kind of lay in your bed, and you miss- for me, it was a culture thing. I really missed the culture, and people seemed nicer there. Or meaner. A lot of people were rude, but you just kind of, that's all you know. I was having dietary problems a little bit when I got home too 'cause I'd eaten so many beans and rice. (Laughs) So, I just kind of laid up in bed, at night – I couldn't sleep – and I would just think about that. I would just lay up, thinking about my mission... I would go through Google Maps and just walk through the streets and the people I taught for the first while, and it was difficult. And so, I tried not to think about it, but now I can...'cause it's been a year and a half, and I'm not a crybaby. I didn't cry when I got home. 'Cause a lot people they're like, "Oh they had to rip my name tag away." No, I wasn't emotional. I was just like, "Okay." I was called for two years. I did two years." I was pretty much done, but, after a few weeks, I really did miss it.
This pattern of coping persisted for some time until eventually Grayson moved in with two other young men that had returned from the same mission. They were able to commiserate and celebrate with one another as they navigated the hardships and victories of reentry. Another coping resource for Grayson was the temple. In his words, the temple was “like gold” or an additional place he could go to find peace and strength when he struggled with life at home.

Aside from reverse culture shock, Grayson’s concerns mainly revolved around dating and marriage, and maintaining “good” behaviors and habits. Grayson had been writing a girl for his entire mission, and they started dating when he returned. He quickly realized things were not going to work out so they parted ways. Reflecting on this separation, he described how his expectations and the realities of dating had not always meshed, especially since he was out of practice interacting with members of the opposite sex:

...you're gone. You don't talk to girls for an entire time, and then you come home and it's just like, you have to learn how to talk and all this stuff. It's a little overwhelming...

After that incident, Grayson was content to be single; however, he continued to be inundated with unsolicited advice on the topic of dating and marriage:

I came home, gave my talk. Everyone gives a talk. And I walked around afterwards and everyone's like, "Oh you've just got to do this. You've just got to do this." Like, "Stay away from girls," and other people are like, "No, hang out with a lot of girls. You've got to get married." I was like, "I'm just going to do what I want to do." Let me live my life
This advice primarily came from outside the home, particularly when he went out to school where there was a) a higher concentration of members, b) an expectation that they should get married quickly, and c) a perception that return missionaries do get married quickly.

With the mission over and without marriage as a near-future prospect, Grayson did not really have anything to work towards or “be good” for. Working towards the mission – a seminal rite of passage – had acted as a motivation and excuse to stay on the straight and narrow path. Without a new, clearly defined marker before him, the question of why “be good” became more difficult to answer after his mission:

I mean, off your mission, it’s not so easy to be good, and, I couldn’t do everything I wanted to. I’d slip up; I’d do something; I’d be bad. Like not bad, but I’d slip up, do something that I shouldn’t have done. And I’d be like, "Oh, I’m a returned missionary. I have to do this." ’Cause my whole life beforehand, I had been working to be a missionary, and so I was like, I could have an excuse for anything. Like, I’d go to a party, someone would offer me something, I’d be like, "Oh, no, no, no, no, no." ’Cause I had in the back of my mind, "You have to be temple worthy." Then I got home, and the mindset like crept in. It's like, "Well you don't have anything else to do." I never drank or anything but it was like with some of the things, I was like, “it doesn't matter.” I mean, what am I working towards now? Marriage? That doesn’t look like it's happening anytime soon.

As he concluded these words, Grayson advised missionaries to avoid that mindset and expressed that he had to constantly work on being a good person. The expectation to be good was packaged with what it means to be a “good” RM. As a RM, he was expected to be more spiritual, to talk more in Sunday meetings, and to have all the answers. However, he did not really buy into these expectations, because they did not align with the expectations (or lack thereof) that he had for himself:
I didn't have any expectation set for myself. I just reverted back to old ways. It was just like...everyone has served a mission here. Like 90%, and if not, they're older, they know this stuff too. It was elder’s quorum.... and a high percentage of people have really good things to say and I don't want to be talking all the time. And that's an expectation that I thought I would have, ’cause [my cousin] told me, but, no. It didn't last very long, ’cause I just talked a little but during class but that's it.

In other words, Grayson observed that some Church members put recently returned RMs on a pedestal, but he was able to look around and acknowledge that even though he had returned recently, he was not much different from others in the room who may have returned years prior or who had gained Gospel knowledge and confidence in other ways.

In addition to reconciling his personal expectations with the expectations of Church members, Grayson also learned that he needed to explain his expectations and behavior to those around him, particularly family. For example, explaining his needs and expectations helped minimize his family’s worry and concerns:

You have to explain what you're doing, ’cause, my parents, they were pretty protective. So, when I got home from my mission, everyone’s expecting me to be like, weird and different, and I was like, ”No, I'm fine. I'm fine.” I was really sad for a couple of days. I didn't feel the same purpose as I did before, but, I remember specifically one day ... I just wanted to be by myself, and you have to explain to your parents, you have to like, ease into stuff, ’cause your parents expect to be around them 24/7... And so don't feed into peoples’ expectations that you’re not doing well or anything just because you act a little different and, you want something like ... just make sure you know that you want out of life...

In contrast to the unsolicited advice and expectations from friends and family, a few people reached out to Grayson in ways that he needed. For example, more than advice or affirmation, he needed companionship. He recalled one member of the elder’s quorum
who reached out a hand to offer this companionship, although because Grayson was so busy with work, the offer never came to fruition.

*I didn't have many friends anymore because you kind of lose contact for two years. They kind of move on with their life and you kind of lose contact with them forever. And so, I didn't have many friends and [a member of the quorum] came out and he's like, "Hey, do you like kayaking?" I was like, "I love kayaking." He's like, "We ought to go kayaking." And, he probably doesn't even remember that he said that, but I remember it to this day. Just like someone, just reaching out a little bit and trying to be your friend, and that really helped a lot. Like, people could say stuff…but like just the action of "hey, welcome home," … not like thanks for your service. You hear "thank you" a million times …That [outreach] is what also helped me realize I was a regular person again. He was like, "Hey, let's hang out, let's do something. That helped more than anything.

Like his interactions with ward members, the support Grayson received from his local leaders was mixed. Though his leaders appeared to be well-intentioned and passionate about their own missionary experiences, they also seemed ill-equipped to help Grayson with his transition. For example, his Bishop was familiar with the Church’s recently developed My Plan program but had not been fully trained in how to implement the program with Grayson. Grayson left his brief encounters with Church leaders with a few job searching websites and the counsel to “Just keep doing what you're doing. Your mission taught you how to be diligent and stay active.” What he really wanted is captured in the following statement:

*I don’t think it’s practical to have a class, but maybe kind of like what they have now [referring to what he knew about My Plan]…kind of ease yourself back into keeping the same practices that you learned on your mission, but more in a worldly perspective. Like, how to do scripture study. Not for an hour at the same time every day, 'cause that doesn't work outside of [the mission]. How to still share the gospel not wearing a name tag where everyone knows already, 'cause it's a lot harder when you're not wearing a name tag…because... when you do
that stuff, I'm just- I feel good. I feel like more- I remember why I did it, and, if they could teach you how to do that in a worldly setting, and not like, "Oh, just share this Facebook post." 'Cause that doesn't have the same gratification as handing a book of Mormon to someone, like someone you've known for a long time. Like, I know how to do it, but how to muster the courage [to do it] now, as you're not a missionary.

Grayson no longer had the status and feeling of being a missionary. Like others, he wanted to know how to continue being a missionary without the official title and training and in a context – ‘home’ – that was simultaneously more familiar yet uncomfortable. For Grayson, missionary confidence and authority was lost when his tag was removed. As a missionary, the tag was an almost universally recognized symbol of his status and purpose. Without it, he was lost and unsure of how to move forward in life.

...there's a few weeks where you're in limbo. Like, where you're just kind of floating. And once you get your grasp, like, a job, and you get a few things down where you figure out your routine...outside of the mission. That's when you've returned...you're, progressing. 'Cause there was a time, right when I was off my mission, I wasn't progressing in any way, shape, or form. I was sick and I was there, and I was just lying there... in like a comatose state (laughs)... I was still in the process of like getting over things... So I think once you're back home progressing and doing good things then I feel like, that's when you've returned.

Grayson has now been home for about 18 months (at the time of the interview). He is currently attending a Church affiliated school where he studies design.

What advice would Grayson give to RMs?

If missionaries ever ask for advice, this is what I tell them...On your mission, you have a constant connection with Heavenly Father. You're praying constantly. You're doing all that, and you're trying to find people all the time, so...you think everything is a prompting, you're just like, "Oh that one flew that way (laughs) ... oh, I have to go that way." (Laughs) And then...when you're back home, sometimes, since he kind of wants to test you, he won't be as prominent. He won't give you like, a specific answer, because it's not as pressing of a matter. You go in to find that specific person at that right time. Nine times out of 10, those may not
be promptings, but he'll put someone in your path that needs to hear the gospel. If you, just started looking and, are faithful. But you're not - now it's time to get an education and focus a bit more on yourself. Be a little bit more selfish. You can still serve, but just realize that sometimes you're just going to have to make your own decisions. The lord will not hold your hand down the entire way. And that was the best piece of advice, 'cause I was focusing too much on like, "Oh should I pray about this and pray ..."and, you just kind of have to live your life and grow up. Like, make your own decisions. And that's what really helped me.

Owen. Owen and his parents grew up in the Church. As an only child, he was the first and only child to serve a mission and he did so just after graduating high school. Owen had not fully committed to going on a mission until a really good friend of his decided to go and he expressed that “it was the influence of friends that got [him] to go.” He was called to serve in a Central European mission, and the majority of his mission was funded by a relative who had passed away and left the money to her descendants, to support their missionary service.

Owen describes his mission as a bittersweet experience. On the positive side, he served in a beautiful country and developed deep friendships with the people he met there. On the negative side, he struggled with people’s general disinterest and constant rejection. These experiences with rejection had an enduring effect, and sullied his experiences at home.

I became, like, more introverted after the mission. I mean, talking to all those people and getting rejected can be hard on a person... I think maybe that made me (pause) less willing to be outgoing and talk to people- I don't know. So, in a way I feel like that kind of hindered my ability to like – I try not to play the victim here – I guess I feel like there's stuff I learned on my mission that kind of made it so I didn't really want to talk to people.
Owen also experienced a great tragedy during his mission, one that I share here with sensitivity and permission. Owen had a missionary companion who was hit by a car and killed. For some time after this event, Owen had a “negative outlook” on life – understandably so – but he felt he reached a point where he “got over it” and integrated the experience into the rest of his life. In light of this experience, Owen considered coming home from his mission early; however, he believed he had the right Mission President at the right time, one with the spiritual sensitivity and insight to be able to look at Owen and say “you’re my priority right now.”

As his term of service came to an end, Owen did not want to come home. Though exhausted from two years of hard work and certainly looked forward to seeing his family, he agonized at the thought of navigating the reentry process.

... I guess I kinda felt like, unprepared, like completely...I would have rather stayed...and not having seen anybody for two years made it so it was easier to stay away. Because I wasn't sure if they'd think I was weird, or felt I had changed a lot and they didn't like it, or [wondered] “who's this person?” I felt like just not having the face-to-face would be easier.

He continued:

... I think I was nervous, I was worried...how are they, going to see this person that I am. They knew that I had changed. And I don't know how I’m going to fit, into this hole that I left when I like, disappeared for two years. So, I was nervous about how that was going to work.

Still, he returned, and his first few weeks at home were a whirlwind. On day one, he was received by family at the airport, had an anticlimactic release with a Stake President he did not really know, got a bite to eat, and then returned home where he “passed out” on his bed. Reentry was, as anticipated, a difficult and complicated time for Owen. Though
he would continue to believe in the Church (and even remarked that the mission brought him closer to it) he eventually lost the motivation to stay actively involved in it. Owen’s reasons for pulling back from the Church were multifaceted, and any one of the challenges he experienced as a RM could have played a part. For instance, living without a 24/7 companion, he no longer had anyone to hold him accountable to a schedule or set of behaviors.

...you always had a companion with you to double check that you did what you were supposed to do. Like, get up at 6:30, exercise for a half hour, eat breakfast, do the scriptures, that kinda thing. And, like, there’s nobody there to make sure I’m in my scriptures, and there’s nobody there to make sure I [in quotations/air quote] “make sure I said my prayer” or like ...That feeling was odd. It was all me. I think that was the biggest surprise.

Left to his own devices, Owen found it much harder to maintain daily habits of prayer and study than expected. He struggled with a lack of purpose and an inability to communicate with others about anything but God and his mission (though this “weird” phase passed quickly). The social aspect was a major deterrent for Owen. His fears about how he would be received caused him to withdraw and become more quiet and introverted. His inability to talk with others about anything but God or the Gospel during his first weeks back was an additional point of concern. These worries were exacerbated when he began attending a university ward where he had did not know anyone and struggled to make friendships. He did put forth effort, at first. For instance, he set a goal to talk to five people he did not know each week; however, when that task became too difficult, he quit trying. At some point, Owen’s paradigm shifted, and he stopped feeling
like he had to push himself so hard to meet some of these ill-defined spiritual and social expectations/goals:

*The biggest part for me was the realization that I had that while I was on my mission, I had to give up control of my agency to God, but [as a returned missionary] like, "I kind of had my agency back; I could just do what I want." I think that realization...was the biggest part for me.*

Owen invoked this idea of agency/autonomy on multiple occasions and reasserted that he enjoyed the freedom that he had discovered in his post-mission life. Looking back, Owen thought that if his ward had given him more notice, he might not have struggled to attend so much. For example, no one in the Bishopric talked to him for the first three months he was in the ward, and while they now know who he is, he still is not sure if they know he is a RM. In many ways, he felt like he slipped through the cracks. He advised bishops, especially in YSA wards, to meet every new person who moves into their ward, and to meet with RMs on a regular basis.

Owen has been home for about 18 months (at the time of the interview); he currently studies a STEM field at a Church affiliated school and works part time for a branch of the student body services. Describing his membership status, Owen says “I’m distant, but not too far,” and for Owen, that seems to be okay. What advice did Owen have for RMs?

*I'd tell them...it’s gonna be hard....just leave it open to interpretation. Because I guess I really feel like for someone to be happy in this life, they have to be doing what they want to be doing. So like if you want – I mean God obviously wants you to read the scriptures, pray every day, go to church, stuff like that – but like, if that's not what you think is going to make you happy, I can't force you to do it. But if you want to do it, then you can do it. I think what the missionary wants to do with their life, is what they need to be happy.*
Irreligious

Bella. Bella left the Church after her mission. In large part, Bella felt like she had been “brainwashed” and while she still appreciated the Church and many people in it, she chose to disaffiliate. She feels she is much happier as a non-member. Bella expressed that her perspective on life did not align with the Church’s tenants, and listed this divergence as one of the reasons she left the Church:

[Now] I live for today. As a Mormon, I lived for tomorrow...every time you make a wrong decision or have a bad or negative thought you feel like you’re gonna go straight to hell.

She further explained that the perceived “live for tomorrow” mentality in the Church can create problems even when members have “repented” and feel they are in the right. According to Bella, these members start looking down on others, from their “pedestal,” and become either concerned for or critical of others’ spiritual wellbeing. In contrast, Bella’s “live for today” philosophy absolved individuals of guilt. This worldview also changed, to some extent, how Bella approached life in the areas of sexuality and commitment. For example, immediately after leaving the Church, Bella became much more sexually active and engaged in non-committal sexual encounters; however, overtime, she realized her views about sex actually aligned more closely with the Church’s stance – to wait for the right time/person/setting.

Leaving the Church was not easy for Bella. She described the difficulty and consequences of transgressing the institutional norms of the Church:
Especially in a Mormon/Tongan community, there are expectations you must live by and if you fail to live by them, everyone looks down on you like a plague that went in the wrong direction.

Knowing that she might be misunderstood and even rejected by family and friends she left the Church with a devil-may-care attitude. Familiar with the culture and discourse of the Church, she understood this negative reaction; however, she still wished her loved ones would try harder to be understanding of her perspective and lifestyle. In her mind, God made everyone different on purpose, but the Church expected everyone to be the same; in other words, according to Bella, life is too short for people to be tethered to “made-up” standards or to live life with worry or regret.

I believe we are all perfect just the way we are...Everyone has their own definition of what is wrong or right, what’s weird and what’s normal. When I finally grasped that perception as reality, I realized that we choose our own paths. We choose what is right and wrong for ourselves...we can be WHOEVER we want to be.

For Bella, coming to these realizations or having her “eyes opened” has made life “soooo much sweeter.”

Bella has been home for about two years. Her sister recently called her with some of her own concerns about the Church and asked for her “two cents.” Bella reportedly gave her a “dollars” worth.

Harper. Harper was active in the Church her entire life. As the oldest sibling in her household, she felt obligated to set an example by serving a mission. During her mission she was exposed to information that led her to doubt the Church and its teachings (specifically information related to prophets, revelation, and the translation of scripture).
Seeking reassurance, she prayed and did not receive a perceptible answer. Without any clear guidance from God she started to second guess herself, and her doubts about the Church began to crystallize.

About four months after returning from her mission she moved in with some friends who had already done some research about the information that had bothered her on her mission. Together, she and her friend’s concluded that this research provided enough evidence to suggest that the Church could not be true. After drawing this conclusion, Harper began trying out different lifestyle choices (e.g., drinking) and belief systems but was unsure about what to do with her life. Reaching out for help on a public forum she said:

*I didn’t realize how much direction the Church gave me. I still want to be happy but I just don’t believe in what is being taught anymore.*

Harper received a great deal of advice from other RMs who had left the Church. Some recommended she redirect her attention to academic and career pursuits and ease into her newly embraced freedoms. Others warned that the transition (out of the Church) would be an emotional roller coaster and that ultimately she needed to “be kind to [her]self” and should continue to stay connected with ex-Mormons who could relate. In light of these supportive remarks, one individual on the forum noted that “the so called Church (TSCC)” does not have a monopoly on “generosity of spirit.” Though still trying to figure things out, Harper seemed grateful to have a network of understanding people who she could look to for support.
Appendix D

Informed Consent Letter

Information about Being in a Research Study

Clemson University

Return with Honor: Investigating the Reentry Experiences and Discourses of Returning Missionaries in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Description of the Study and Your Part in It

Dr. Lauren N. Duffy and Mr. Garrett A. Stone are inviting you to take part in a research study. Dr. Duffy is an Assistant Professor and Garrett Stone is a PhD student at Clemson University. The purpose of this research is to understand the adjustment experiences of returning missionaries in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Your part in the study will be to participate in one face-to-face or Skype (video-call) interview lasting 60-90 minutes. During the interview you will be asked to answer some open-ended questions about your mission and post-mission experiences and, if willing, to share documentation of your post-mission experience (e.g., blog posts, letters, etc.). With your permission, the interviews will be audio recorded and you may be contacted again (via phone) to clarify, expand on, or confirm statements made during your interview. These follow up contacts will take no longer than 20 minutes to complete.

Risks and Discomforts

Some of the information shared during the interview may be personal. Thus, the information shared will be kept confidential and stored in a secure location. Please do not share any information that may be sensitive or make you uncomfortable. You may refuse to answer or leave the discussion at any time if you become uncomfortable.

Possible Benefits

We do not know of any way you would benefit directly from taking part in this study. However, this research may help us to understand opportunities and/or challenges associated with returning from a mission, which could help inform programming and support for missionaries and others who are returning from domestic or overseas placements (e.g., Peace Corps volunteers, corporate expatriates).

Protection of Privacy and Confidentiality

We will do everything we can to protect your privacy and confidentiality. We will not tell anybody outside of the research team that you were in this study or what information we
collected about you in particular. Though we will collect your name and other descriptive information, this information, along with your interview responses will be de-identified and kept in a secure location. Pseudonyms will be used in any reports and identifying information will be removed where direct quotes are used in published works. Thus, while the findings of the study will be published (and, therefore, available to Church leaders or members), only generalized or aggregated responses and de-identified quotations will be included so that you will not be individually identifiable in any presentation or publication that may result from the study.

Choosing to Be in the Study

You do not have to be in this study. You may choose not to take part and you may choose to stop taking part at any time. You will not be punished in any way if you decide not to be in the study or to stop taking part in the study. Your participation will not affect your relationship with the Church.

Contact Information

If you have any questions or concerns about this study or if any problems arise, please contact Dr. Lauren N. Duffy [insert phone contact] or Garrett A. Stone [insert phone contact] at Clemson University.

If you have any questions or concerns about your rights in this research study, please contact the Clemson University Office of Research Compliance (ORC) at 864-656-0636 or irb@clemson.edu. If you are outside of the Upstate South Carolina area, please use the ORC’s toll-free number, 866-297-3071.

You may keep this form for your records.
November 4, 201

[Name of potential participant]

[Address]

[City, State Zip]

Re: Return with Honor: An Investigation of the Reentry Experiences of LDS Returning Missionaries conducted by Garrett A. Stone, M.S.

Dear [Participant],

I am writing to you to let you know about an opportunity to participate in a study about the adjustment experience of returning LDS missionaries. This study is being conducted by Garrett A. Stone, under the supervision of Dr. Lauren N. Duffy, at Clemson University.

You were identified as a potential participant in the study (e.g., a recently returning missionary) through publically available programs at the [insert name of stake] 2015/2016 stake conferences. Though I am a member of the Church and a returned missionary, I am representing myself, not the Church, while conducting this research. Thus, I will not share any information obtained through the study with anyone, including local Church leaders, without your permission, nor will your participation affect your relationship with the Church.

If you choose to participate, you will receive a phone call/email in order to schedule a 60-90 minute face-to-face or Skype (video-call) interview in a place of your choosing. You may also be contacted again (via phone) to clarify, expand on, or confirm statements made during your interview. These follow up contacts will take no longer than 20 minutes to complete. Agreement to be contacted or a request for more information does not obligate you to participate in the study.

If you would like more information about this study or are willing to participate, please contact Garrett Stone (gastone@clemson.edu) or Dr. Lauren Duffy (lduffy@clemson.edu). Thank you again for considering this research opportunity. I look forward to hearing about your experience.

Sincerely,

Garrett A. Stone, M.S.
Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management
Clemson University
Hello, my name is Garrett Stone. I am a graduate student in the Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management at Clemson University. Under the supervision of Dr. Lauren Duffy, a professor at Clemson University, I am conducting research about the adjustment experience of returning LDS missionaries and I am inviting you to participate because you have recently been released from a mission and are a former member of the [insert name of stake].

Participation in this research includes sitting down for a face-to-face or Skype (video-call) interview, which should take approximately 60-90 minutes. You may also be contacted again (via phone) to clarify, expand on, or confirm statements made during your interview. These follow up contacts will take no longer than 20 minutes to complete. Any information you share will be kept confidential; because I am representing myself and the university, not the Church, your responses will only be shared with your permission. Your participation will not affect your relationship with the Church in any way.

[Would you be willing to participate in this study?]

If you would like more information about this study or are willing to participate, I can be reached at [insert contact] or you may contact Dr. Duffy at [insert contact]. Thank you again for considering this research opportunity. I look forward to hearing about your experience.
Appendix F

Thank you Letter

November 4, 2016

[Name of participant]
[Address]
[City, State Zip]

Re: Return with Honor: An Investigation of the Reentry Experiences of LDS Returning Missionaries conducted by Garrett A. Stone, M.S.

Dear [Participant],

Thank you for taking the time to share your experience as a returning missionary. I really enjoyed talking with you about your experience and to have another opportunity to reflect on my own return experience. Your insights will help me to put together recommendations that could help future returning missionaries with their post-mission adjustment process. As I meet with other returning missionaries, I may give you a call to clarify or follow up on your response. These follow up contacts will take no longer than 20 minutes to complete.

If you have decided you would rather not receive additional contacts, please let me know. As we discussed, when the study comes to a close, keep an eye out for a report that summarizes the findings. I would love to have you review and correct any misunderstandings that may be reported in that report. Lastly, if you would like more information about the progress of the study or have any other questions feel free to contact either Garrett [insert contact] or Dr. Duffy [insert contact] at any time. Thank you again.

Sincerely,

Garrett A. Stone, M.S.
Graduate Teaching and Research Assistant
Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management
Appendix G

Member Check

Dear [insert participant name]

Thank you again for participating in my research last winter. I sincerely appreciate your time.

I have completed the transcription of your interview, organized the information into a retelling of your individual story, and put together a summary of interview themes (for all of the participants). Attached to this email, please find three Microsoft Word documents – the transcription, your story, and the group themes. Note, to protect your information I used an alias - Grayson.

As time permits, I invite you to review the attached documents. While revisiting your interview may be a nice way to reflect back on the interview and your experiences, I completely understand if you may be unwilling or unable to take the time to review the documents. Please be assured, I also internally reviewed each interview for accuracy and consistency.

Your input is very important to my study, and I want to be sure that I captured your thoughts correctly. I would be very grateful to know:

(1) That you feel the transcription, story, and themes accurately reflect the conversation we had, and

(2) If there are any additional thoughts you have regarding these topics. If you want to expand upon any earlier comments or include something new, I would love to include that information.

Again, thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Garrett
Appendix H

IRB Approval Letter

Dear Mr. Stone and Dr. Duffy,

The Clemson University Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed the protocol referenced above using exempt review procedures and a determination was made on December 05, 2016 that the proposed activities involving human participants qualify as Exempt under category B2 in accordance with federal regulations 45 CFR 46.101. Your protocol will expire on August 31, 2018.

Please find attached the approved informed consent document to be used with this protocol.

The expiration date indicated above was based on the completion date you entered on the IRB application. If an extension is necessary, the PI should submit an Exempt Protocol Extension Request form, http://www.clemson.edu/research/compliance/irb/forms.html, at least three weeks before the expiration date. Please refer to our website for more information on the extension procedures, http://www.clemson.edu/research/compliance/irb/guidance/reviewprocess.html.

All team members are required to review the IRB policies "Responsibilities of Principal Investigators" and "Responsibilities of Research Team Members" available at http://www.clemson.edu/research/compliance/irb/regulations.html.

No change in this research protocol can be initiated without the IRB’s approval. This includes any proposed revisions or amendments to the protocol or informed consent form(s). Any unanticipated problems involving risk to subjects, complications, and/or adverse events must be reported to the Office of Research Compliance immediately.

The Clemson University IRB is committed to facilitating ethical research and protecting the rights of human subjects. Please contact us if you have any questions and use the IRB number and title when referencing the study in future correspondence.

I wish you the best with your study.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth
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