"I Don't Want to Have a Weird Relationship with You, So I'm Trying": Relational Turning Points and Trajectories of Ex-Member Children and Their Member Parents in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

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"I Don't Want to Have a Weird Relationship with You, So I'm Trying": Relational Turning Points and Trajectories of Ex-Member Children and Their Member Parents in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

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ABSTRACT

Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints face a unique and often turbulent time in their relationship with their parent if the individual decides to leave the Church. To explore this phenomenon, we investigated the turning points and relational trajectories of children who have left the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and their interactions with their parents still active in the Church. Thirty emerging adult children were interviewed using the retrospective interviewing technique (RIT). Through turning point analysis, we identified nine overarching turning points: (1) open conversation, (2) restatement, (3) personal withdrawal, (4) confrontation, (5) conformity, (6) coming out, (7) moving out, (8) third-party events, and (9) boundaries and interference. Four relationship trajectories also emerged: (1) disrupted, (2) turbulent (3) declining, and(4) accelerating. Findings and theoretical implications are discussed.

Religious affiliation and/or disaffiliation is a common practice for many Americans over the course of their lifetime (Gooren, 2010). Disaffiliation is especially common during emerging adulthood (individuals between the ages of 18–30; Arnett, 2007) because this is a stage where young adults develop deeply individualized religious beliefs that are often incompatible with their families of origin (Arnett & Jensen, 2002). These incompatibilities are important to understand considering that when parents and children perceive religious difference, they also report less relational satisfaction and a lack of shared family identity (Colaner, Soliz, & Nelson, 2014). Thus, emerging adulthood is an optimal time to explore how family members manage divergent beliefs surrounding religion, considering how they communicate could have lasting implications on their family relationships moving forward.

When it comes to disaffiliation, the investments and consequences of participating in or disaffiliating from some religions are more costly than others (Iannaccone, 1994; Iannaccone, Olson, & Stark, 1995). Specifically, being a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints begins at birth, requires total commitment, and lasts beyond death (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, n. d.). Indeed, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints believe that family relationships are eternal, such that failure to remain faithful not only has consequences in this life, but also for eternity (Eyring, 2016). Scharp and Beck (2017) go as far to argue that, "Mormonism is considered one of, if not the most, high cost religion in the United States" given the high demands from members, distinct in and out groups, and high integration of its members (p. 132–133). As it follows, people who leave high cost religions, such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, report worse health than those who leave other groups (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010).

Consequences of disaffiliation are likely exacerbated when only some family members choose to disaffiliate while others remain in it because of the way religious life is integrated into all aspects of one's life as members of the church. For example, research suggests that disaffiliation from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints might require those leaving to estrange themselves from their families, forsake their friends, disrupt their communities, relinquish resources, and fully challenge their sense of self (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010). Indeed, the potential for relational consequences are manifest between those who disaffiliate and those who remain in the church.

Research on disaffiliation to date largely focuses on quantitative health outcomes, even though it is clear that disaffiliation is a major relational disruption. Qualitative studies about disaffiliating from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, although they foreshadow the relational importance of disaffiliation, focus on the process by which individuals leave the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Hinderaker & O'Connor, 2015) and the ways these individuals reconstitute their identities post-disaffiliation (Scharp & Beck, 2017). This lack of research is problematic considering ideological differences, such as religious beliefs, among family members can lead to family member marginalization (Dorrance Hall, 2017) and sometimes even parent-child estrangement (Scharp & Thomas, 2016). Thus, attending to the relationship between children who have left the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and their interactions with their parents still active in the church could illuminate the communicative messages and behaviors that help some families remain close or those that lead to family distancing. To fill this gap and advance what we know about the process of differentiating from shared family beliefs, the first goal of this study is to identify the communicative process (via turning points) Church-exiting adult children negotiated with their parents still active in the Church. The second goal is to establish disaffiliation-influenced relational trajectories to contextualize the turning points and the overall relational trajectories of emerging adults. Toward realizing these goals, this study begins by establishing the relational significance of disaffiliating from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints before arguing that a turning points analysis is an ideal method for studying changes in these parent-child relationships during emerging adulthood.

Disaffiliating from the church – implications for family

According to the Pew Research Center (2015) approximately 36% of individuals raised in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints no longer identify with the faith. The population leaving or who has left is growing due to both controversial policies instituted by the church and a generation of religiously skeptic youth (Nielsen, 2017). Leaving the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a process that can be performed in a variety of ways such as not going to religious services or following doctrine. However, it can also involve the more official method of removing one's self from the records of the Church (Hinderaker & O'Connor, 2015). Even though this process has been characterized by fear, uncertainty, and rejection, it also has been described as one of liberation and empowerment (Hinderaker, 2015; Scharp & Beck, 2017).

The ambivalence surrounding disaffiliation and the relational implications of it are likely, in part, due to the role of the family in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. According to leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the family is a divinely created system crucial to life here on earth and the afterlife (Eyring, 2016). One church leader stated:

> It is not enough just to save ourselves. It is equally important that parents, brothers, and sisters are saved in our families. If we return home alone to our Heavenly Father, we will be asked, "Where is the rest of the family?" (Hales, 1996, para. 5)

To faithful members, for a family to stay completely intact after death, each member must live righteously, making the pursuit of an exalted afterlife a family matter.

Because of the centrality of family in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, members are urged to integrate family and religious life. For example, in addition to being instructed that it is their divine mandate to teach their children the gospel of the Church (Nelson, 2001; Viñas, 2010), parents

are also taught that a successful family is one that is based on the principles of the gospel (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1995). Families are encouraged to attend religious services together (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2000a), study scriptures together daily (Durrant, 2018), and meet together at least one night a week, a tradition known as family home evening, to share religious doctrine (Oaks, 2007). Families in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are also expected to gather together for several religious occasions, such as the blessing of a newborn child, baptisms, and when a family member leaves or returns from an extended ecclesiastical mission (Lant, 2008). Such events become points where family relationships are strengthened through their shared religious identification.

Given that parents in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints make religion the focus of family interactions, rituals, and socialization practices (Airhart & Bendroth, 1996; Loser, Klein, Hill, & Dollahite, 2008; Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010), the disruption is significant when children decide to disaffiliate and their parents remain active. Indeed, parents often feel like they have failed and/or that their child has betrayed them (Ellison, Bartkowski, & Segal, 1996). The disassociation can also be a moment of crisis for the parent (Baker, 2016). Christian parents feel that it is a core part of their identity to raise children who are faithful to their religion (Dollahite, Marks, Kear, Lewis, & Stokes, 2018). Within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, parents who fail to instill strong religious beliefs in their children are also seen as having failed future generations of their posterity (Maxwell, 1994). According to leaders of the church, the departure of one's child from the faith can potentially disqualify the child from being with their family in the afterlife and is conceptualized as one of the greatest pains parents active in the church can feel (Bednar, 2014). In other words, not only have children disappointed their family on earth, but many families may feel as though the child has also removed themselves from eternal existence with their family. In Church discourse, errant children are often categorized as deceived (Corbridge, 2019), sinful (Stewart, 1975), and ignorant (Prescott, 2018). Such narratives surrounding inactive children might make it difficult to maintain close and friendly parent-child relationships. Thus, it might come as no surprise that disaffiliation has been associated with less affectionate relationships compared to religiously aligning parent-child relationships (Myers, 2004; Pearce & Axinn, 1998). Overall, as a result of these relational strains and changes, children often feel disenfranchised or marginalized by their own families (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010).

Relational turning points

As argued, children who have left the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints with parents still active in the church might have particularly tumultuous relationships during and after the disaffiliation process. Indeed, the path to disaffiliation is a long road out and occurs in cycles over time (Hinderaker & O'Connor, 2015). Although researchers have done an excellent job charting this process, relational changes to the parent-child relationship during this time still remain unclear. One way to chart relational changes is by exploring a series of meaningful events, called turning points (TP; Baxter & Bullis, 1986). Specifically, a TP is an important event that influences a relationship for better or worse. Unlike quantitative surveys that examines the relationships between variables, a turning points analysis (TPA) captures the relational history of a pair or a group of people; it gives shape to and contextualizes relationships (Graham, 1997). Beyond helping to visualize and contextualize relationships, TPs also provide insight into the key events where relationships develop and transition into new stages (Baxter, Braithwaite, Nicholson, & Demo, 1999). TPs move beyond predetermined stages to capture specific experiences that influence and change the nature of the relationship (Bullis & Bach, 1989). Moreover, TPs enable the participant to identify the important moments or life events, and TPs do not assume that all relationships must progress in the same way (Bullis & Bach, 1989). Given the promise of TPA to guide researchers in identifying important events in tumultuous times, we pose our first research question:

RQ$_1$: What are the communicative events (turning points) that disaffiliated emerging adults identify as influencing their relationship with their parents who are still active in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?

Researchers who are interested in relational TPs do not, however, merely stop with the identification of important events. Instead, they also explore how these events coalesce into a larger picture of relational well-being. In other words, they also plot the trajectories of relationships or what the holistic path looks like that the relationships take (Golish, 2000). Such trajectories give a visual representation of the fluid nature of relationships. For example, five trajectories describe the process that people take to feeling marginalized by their families (Dorrance Hall, 2017). Although this research is clearly distinct from the disaffiliation process, the research on family distancing nonetheless illustrates the potential for some parent-child relationships to fair better or worse than others (Dorrance Hall, 2017). To explore the trajectories in this context, the second research question asks:

RQ$_2$: What patterns of change do emerging adults report in their relationships with their active parents during the child's disaffiliation process with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?

Method

Data collection

With Institutional Review Board approval, we recruited 30 participants who fit the following criteria; participants had to be: (1) between the ages of 18–30, (2) raised in the religion of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, (3) have at least one living parent still active in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and (4) have had at least one conversation with their parent(s) concerning their departure from the religion. To recruit, we posted the research call on social network sites and groups made up of individuals who have left the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Interviews were then conducted by phone, video call, and in person in locations including private library study rooms and a university conference room.

After completing a demographic questionnaire, we employed the retrospective interview technique (RIT; see Baxter & Bullis, 1986). RIT was specifically designed to capture TPs and "minimize measurement error due to faulty recall by means of rechecking information obtained throughout the interview, gathering data in chronological order, and providing contextual cues and a novel task (constructing the graph) to jog memory" (Surra, 1985, p. 360). In accordance with RIT, participants plotted TPs with the time of event occurrence as the x-axis and relational closeness as the y-axis, which ranged from 0%-100% (A 0% rating meaning completely separate and a 100% rating meaning completely close). For interviews that occurred over the phone, participants were sent an electronic copy of the graph to print or to complete with software convenient to the participant and sent back to the interviewer at the completion of the interview. To calibrate the graph, participants were asked at the beginning of the interview to plot how close they felt to their parent (conceptualized as feelings of emotional closeness) at the first significant event where their differing religious beliefs started to influence their relationship with their parent and how close they felt to their parent at the time of the interview. After calibration, participants were asked to plot the events that occurred between the first TP and the time of the interview. As participants marked each point, they were prompted to describe the event and subsequent consequences. To illicit further details regarding how TPs shaped the relationship, the first author often asked additional probes, such as, "How did this affect your perception of the relationship?" and "How did your interactions change because of this event?" If participants exhibited confusion during the graphing process, the interviewer would repeat the instructions as well as give examples of how a participant might mark and title a turning point.

After the participants plotted and discussed each TP, the first author drew a line to connect the points, creating a relationship trajectory that reflected the changes to the parent-child relationship over time.

On average, interviews lasted 34 minutes and ranged from 15 minutes to 53 minutes. Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim by research assistants, during which time all identifying information was removed and replaced by pseudonyms. This process resulted in 275 pages of double-spaced text and 30 TP graphs.

Participant demographics

On average, participants were 23 years old, ranging in age from 18 to 30 years old (SD = 3.64). Of the 30 participants, 19 identified as women (63%), ten identified as men (33%), and one identified as A-gender (3%). The majority identified (n = 28) as White, one participant identified as Black/African American and White, and one participant identified as Asian/Pacific Islander and White. Participants affiliated themselves with four religious categories, 11 participants identified as Agnostic, ten participants identified as Atheist, eight identified as other, and one identified as Christian.

Data analysis

To answer RQ$_1$, we identified TP themes that emerged from the interviews based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step process. Before beginning analysis, we first listed all the TPs marked, using the labels that the participants gave each TP. Participants marked an average of five TPs with a minimum of one and maximum of 12, totaling 150 TPs. Next, we engaged in the first step of the process which required us to read and re-read the data. This allowed us to familiarize ourselves with the data. Next, we examined the self-labeled 150 TP codes. We then engaged in an iterative process by which we grouped and re-grouped those codes as they coalesced into larger systems of meaning (i.e., TP themes). After all of the codes coalesced into a theme, we reviewed the themes, labeled the themes, and selected exemplars to illustrate the themes. Saturation, or the point at which no new TPs emerged, was reached at interview four (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

To identify emergent relational trajectories (RQ$_2$), we began by reviewing the 30 relational trajectories the participants plotted. The researchers selected the first 15 participants' relational trajectories and developed initial categories, grouped according to trajectories' visual and pictorial similarity (Golish, 2000). Subsequently, the researchers compared all 30 graphs with the initial categories and labeled each category according to their characteristics. Through the labeling process, we merged some categories due to their similar attributes (e.g., negative turbulent, positive turbulent, and moderate turbulent trajectories coalesced into the turbulent category). Finally, we compared the graphs and categories with seven common trajectory types from the literature (Sahlstein Parcell, 2013): turbulent, disrupted progress, declining, accelerating, accelerated-arrested, prolonged, and stabilized. From this comparison, we renamed three of our relational trajectories to be in line with those articulated with this research. Specifically, "reconciliation" became "disruption," "diminishing" became "declining," and "minor setback" became "accelerating." Saturation, or the point at which no new trajectory types emerged, was reached at interview nine (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Verification procedures

To ascertain the credibility and trustworthiness of the data, we engaged in four verification procedures: (1) peer-debriefing, (2) negative case analysis, (3) keeping an audit trail, and (4) exemplar identification (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After the first author conducted the data analysis, the second author conducted a separate data analysis four months later. Afterward, the authors discussed their findings, argued through differences, and came to a conclusion. In both analyses, the authors accounted for 100% of the TPs and trajectories which meets the standards for negative case analysis (Kidder, 1981). Negative case analysis is one of the most rigorous forms of identification and was

supported by detailed notes (i.e., the audit trail) and the selection of evocative exemplars (i.e., exemplar identification; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

Turning points (first research question)

Our analysis yielded nine distinct turning points: (1) open conversation, (2) restatement, (3) personal withdrawal, (4) confrontation, (5) conformity, (6) coming out, (7) moving out, (8) third-party events, and (9) boundaries and interference (see Table 1).

Open conversation

Throughout their narratives, participants discussed TP's in which they tried to have open conversations with their parent about their divergence from the church's doctrine or culture. These conversations were often in response to parental curiosity or simply the participant's desire to be understood and sincere. Parental responses to such conversations varied both across participants and within narratives themselves. When children would disclose information openly, parents responded by openly debating the information or passing judgment:

> ALAN: So, I talked to my parents. I said, "Hey I'm gonna be doing this thing where I am not going to go to church anymore." They were upset quite a bit. My mom couldn't stop talking about it at that point. To be honest, it made me feel pretty miserable. I felt like I was the one that was hurting my family. That I had been doing something wrong.

Like Alan, participants felt vilified or marginalized when a parent did not approve of their choices or actively fought to change them.

In other cases, parents reluctantly accepted their child's departure from the church. For instance, Melody described such an event when her mother asked her if she would be participating in church-related activities:

> I told her, "No, I actually don't want to go to church anymore." ... She had been struggling with this for a few years and, I think, at this point she was kind of done trying to convince me to go back to church, and try to rebuild my spirituality in that sense, and she was fairly respectful at the time, but I couldn't tell her everything that I was doing either, and I felt like a disappointment to her, at that time, as well.

Though Melody's mother enacted respectful communication and did not try to push the issue, Melody still felt that her mother did not fully support her decisions.

In contrast, participants also related events where their parents would respond to the disclosure of a participant with explicit support. For example, when describing an interaction with her mother, Rachel said:

> I got another piercing and I was like a little scared to tell her. And she was like "why would you be scared to tell me that? I don't care, I love you for who you are." So just like, she is just really like doing really well to let me know she loves me for who I am and not for following in her footsteps. So [I feel] better? I feel like it'll always be a little awkward just because like we used to have such a good connection and now it's just like not really possible in the same way just because we don't see quite eye to eye but I think it's pretty close to as good as it could be.

Like Rachel, participants often described feeling intrepid or uncertain prior to attempting an open conversation. Receiving support from a parent was often a welcome surprise to the participant. Despite the support that Rachel received however, she still felt that her relationship with her mother was not the same as it had been prior to leaving the church.

Restatement

Participants related that at times, telling their parents only once that they were leaving the church was not sufficient for their parents to understand the finality of their decision. Participants described TP's where they had to either retell or clarify their departure from the church for their parents. After

Table 1. Relational turning points of ex-LDS children with their active LDS parent.

Theme description	Exemplar
1. *Open conversation*: Events where participants had open conversations with their parent about their divergence from Church doctrine or culture.	DEBBIE: I told her about, like, my concerns about you know women's roles in the church and that sort of stuff and then a little bit of my own like drama really because I've been through a lot with the Church and she was really understanding but she also like got scared.
2. *Restatement*: Events where participants had to either retell or clarify their departure from the Church and its doctrine.	IAN: I had to remind my parents that I was still gay that things hadn't changed, because I think my mom had started to hope because I hadn't talked about it a long time.
3. *Personal withdrawal*: Events where participants would avoid points of contention or create distance between them and their parent.	NADIA: I started to notice myself because I kind of started distancing myself from members of the church so and she was, so I kind of distanced myself from her a little bit.
4. *Confrontation*: Events where participants engaged in confrontational conflict with their parents.	BREANNA: We got to a lot of really bitter arguments because I just couldn't understand why gay marriage was wrong and nothing in my head it didn't make sense and … in this context it became very personal very quickly and so my relationship kind of deteriorated from this point.
5. *Conformity*: Events where participant behavior was perceived to be more in line with Church standards by their parent.	LYDIA: And I think that she saw me take out my nose ring. I think that was like a huge thing … And I think she was like, "Oh my gosh. It's happening. Like, she's changing. She's doing the thing that I've always wanted."
6. *Coming out*: Events where the child's sexual orientation or gender identity was revealed to their parents.	BREANNA: I've just been forced out of the closet and they are like completely freaking out over everything I could possibly be doing, right? And I'm like, "this is why I didn't tell you, this right here."
7. *Moving out*: Events where children moved out of their parents' house.	ALICE: I moved to college for my freshman year and this massively improved my relationship with my dad because we were no longer in the same household so there weren't as many areas for us to clash.
8. *Third party events*	
8.1 *Family crisis*: Events where children responded to distressing family incidents.	OAKLEE: My dad died in 2012 and like we kind of grew apart … my family was just, like, we need to pray for his recovery. And I never disbelieved in the church, but I was always just, like, that's not gonna work.
8.2 *Sibling events*: Events where children felt influenced by their parent's treatment of the child's sibling.	MELODY: She said that I was turning out to be like my brother, at that time, and he had left the church. … he was doing drugs, and not-not following the rules exactly, according to her, just being another big disappointment.
9. *Boundaries and interference*	
9.1 *Child boundary-setting*: Events where children set up rules about how to communicate with one another.	FRED: I think we just kind of had our boundary set up about that point, about what things we talk about, and what things we wouldn't talk about.
9.2 *Parent boundary-setting*: Instances where a child felt their parent set up information sharing boundaries.	KELLY: The second [turning point] would have been the first time my parents visited my house after I left the church and all the alcohol I had. I could tell it made them feel uncomfortable. And, I think my dad doesn't stay at my house now because of that.
9.3 *Parent interference*: Events where children felt their parents enacted coercive or intrusive behavior. That violated boundaries.	JOSEPH: They basically forced me to start going to church again there and they were like all right your, like your discovery time's up like get on it so that didn't go very well lots of arguments there.

initially telling his parents that he no longer believed in the church, Alan felt that he had to also tell his parents about his official exit from the church:

I took my parents aside and I said, "Hey I'd like to talk with you guys about something serious, can you please come and talk with me." So we sat down and I told them I was like, "Hey, I don't believe in the church." And they were like, "Yeah, we know." and I was like, "I don't want to be a member of the church anymore, I'm gonna get my records removed." My mom cried and cried and cried and cried and cried and cried. And she's like, "Well you could just not go to church and leave your records." And I said, "I'm sorry mom, but this is one I have to do for my own personal, like journey." And she was really angry for a while as well.

Alan's narrative reflects that despite already knowing about his disbelief in the church, his parents did not fully grasp what his exit would look like. Indeed, participants shared that disclosing this the first time was not the only TP, rather, reaffirming their decision to exit marked another significant change in their relationship with their parents. As such, this event happened multiple times throughout a single relationship. Oscar described how clarifying his exit from the church and his own identity was a reoccurring event in his relationship with his mother:

> I still like wanted to figure things out, so you know we could still maintain our relationship, but I would try to bring it up and try and talk about it and it was always was just bad and ended up like usually my mom crying and … I had felt like I could start to get my point across and then it was like she would refer back to her, just her internalized beliefs about what it means if you're leaving kind of thing. So it felt like I would kind of start to make progress in understanding, and then it would go back down. And it was stuck like that for a while where it was just really like, frustrating is the best word.

Oscar pointed out that for some parents, internalizing a child's faith transition is a process wherein parents must negotiate between preformed thoughts on individuals who have left the church and their conversations with their own child.

Personal withdrawal

Participants described TP's in which they would avoid potential points of conflict with their parents by either sidestepping conversations regarding their feelings about the church or pretending to be an active member. Chandler described such an event:

> I stopped believing in the church and it took me a while to tell anyone about it but it's kind of an immediate result of that I was less open with particularly my close family members because there were just like so much of the personal life my home growing up was centered around the church and so like there was this weird transition where immediately a huge portion of my time at home and with my family was oriented around something that I was pretending to be a part of and it just got a lot less personal.

Chandler and other participants felt that they had to play along with their family's religion and as a result, felt distant or disconnected from their parent.

Confrontation

Participants described how divergent beliefs and behavior often led to confrontation with a parent. Participants discussed having emotional conflict with their parents about the church's stance on homosexuality, the founding of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and rules of the church that participants found discriminatory. Participants consistently stated that such intense disagreements led to feeling less close to parents.

For example, Nadia said:

> I watched this TV show where they staged situations, like someone's being bullied and they see what how people around them react. There was one where this kid was coming out to his friend as gay and this couple in it was like "There's this program that the church does it's like a 12-step program to like help you stop being gay." It's like this like pray the gay away kind of thing like this bull crap. I was like "Haha mom, isn't this the dumbest thing ever?" and she's like, "No this is legit, being gay is like a disease." So we had a really big argument about that. I was screaming, I like ran down the stairs. So that was kind of a shock for her and me and I feel like that kind of took our relationship down a peg or two.

Like Nadia relates, at times conflict involving church doctrine could escalate quickly between participants and their parents. Participants also described that when their parents supported practices that participants found discriminatory, they felt that their parent was choosing religion over them, which in turn made the child feel less close to their parent.

Conformity

Participants also spoke of TP's where their behavior was perceived to be more in line with church standards and doctrine by their parent. This TP often occurred when the participant became "tamer" because of a romantic relationship. Carl related:

> I started dating this girl and so my "going out" went down I suppose. And turned a little more family centric so I feel like my relationship got better even my family made comments and my mom made comments like, "Oh we like her … so we like [girlfriend] because she like you seem a lot more engaged at on Sundays like you're hanging out with the family more you spend time with the grandkids (my nieces and nephews)." And so I guess that improved our relationship, but you know the opportunity to present a gospel principle at any point is still there. I think there's always that hope that I'm gonna come back in.

Carl felt that this event led his mother to interact with him more positively and as a result, brought him closer with his mother. However, like Carl, participants felt that even though this TP was related with feeling closer to their parent, their parent's positive behavior was linked to hopes that their child would come back to full activity within the church.

Coming out

Coming out TPs included revealing one's sexual orientation or gender identity. Because church doctrine preaches against the practice of homosexuality and gender fluidity, parents often responded negatively when their children expressed any deviation from heteronormative behaviors. In her story, Quinn recounted coming out as transgender and how her parents responded:

> Yeah, it seemed sort of initially okay, although they were confused, like, "I don't know if I believe that that's a thing." or "What about biology?" You know the sort of stuff you say when you don't know anything about trans-people at all … There was all this talk that we had about like religion and everything, but me coming out kind of tore everything apart. To them, it made it so that their beliefs were incompatible with my identity …

In her narrative Quinn told about how her parents were starting to come to terms with her lack of belief, but the revelation of her gender identification proved to be insurmountable: "after coming out, I'd probably say was the lowest because I felt like their religion made it impossible for them to possibly accept me." Though some children who came out to their families found support, many felt disenfranchised, causing participants to feel less close and safe around their parents.

Moving out

When participants described the relational consequences of moving out of their parent's home, their responses fell into two categories. In the first, participants discussed how the decreased contact and oversight led to the freedom to explore what they wanted out of life. On the change in contact, Fred remarked:

> Just having the space where she wasn't there seeing whether I went to church every single week, or not, and she wasn't there when I decided to try coffee for the first time. It's just, I had a little bit more space to figure things out away from my mom.

In the second category, participants talked about how physical distance made it hard to reconcile or made parents feel like participants had changed for the worse. Lydia related:

> When I got to college, I told my mom that I had not been going to church at all … And she was really upset about that … She was like, 'I send you off to college and now you don't believe in the church or gospel anymore.' And I was like, 'Yep. That's what happened.' So that was not a good time.

Like Lydia, participants whose experience fell into the second category felt that moving out led to difficult conversations that negatively influenced how close they felt to their parents.

Third-party events

Participants described family events, such as the death of a family member or their parent's treatment of a sibling, as polarizing incidents. These third-party events occurred when circumstances of a third

party, meaning someone besides the participant or their parent, caused religion-related interaction between the participant and their parent.

Family crisis. Events involving individuals not in the parent-child dyad served as catalysts for interactions between some of the participants and their parents. According to participants, family crises could be opportunities to unite as a family to support one another, however, these TP's also lead some participants to feel less close with their parents when parents responded by calling on the child for religious support or belief. Such responses led to feelings of hurt and suspicion. Oaklee described such an event:

> My dad died in 2012 and we kind of grew apart … He died from cancer, and the whole time that he was fighting my family was just, like, we need to pray for his recovery. And I never disbelieved in the church, but I was always just, like, that's not going to work.

Oaklee felt that her lack of faith in praying for her dad isolated her from her family.

Sibling events. Participants also mentioned that the way their parent treated their sibling influenced how they felt about their parents. Participants identified instances where their sibling was treated both better and worse than them as influential to their relationship with their parent. Nadia told the story of when her parents found out her sister was attracted to other women:

> She didn't even get to come out. My parents figured out that she was dating someone and they took away her car, wouldn't let her see her [Girlfriend], started taking her to like special church therapy kind of thing. And that's probably the lowest it ever got because I was not happy with how they were treating her.

As a result of this event, Nadia felt that she no longer wanted to interact with or be around her mother. Nadia's experience highlights the phenomena that even when a parent's actions are directed at a sibling, such an event can change the relationship dynamic with the individual.

Boundaries and interference

Participants spoke of conversations or events where relational boundaries were created or violated. We categorized these TPs into three subthemes: child-initiated boundaries, parent-initiated boundaries, and parent interference.

Child-initiated boundaries. These TPs occurred when participants-initiated conversations with their parents to dictate what they could and could not discuss when together. Oscar spoke of his experience setting boundaries:

> I just said like, 'I'm not going to bring up religion or politics. And like, if you want to talk about it, I'm always open to talk about whatever, but I'm not going to bring it up because I don't think that that's very helpful to our relationship.'

Like Oscar, all participants who set boundaries with their parents felt an increase in closeness; however, many of these participants also felt that they could never be as close to their parents as they had been before they left the church.

Parent boundary-setting. Children also described events where a parent set up expectations of information sharing. Chandler narrated one such event:

> My mom sent me a message on her Facebook where she just she basically said, "Look I know you're not a Mormon anymore, but I [would] really appreciate it if you wouldn't be so mean to the church." I responded that, "as long as the Mormon church uses its influence to spread blatant lies about science and to do as much as they can to hurt people that they disagree with, particularly LGBT people, just basically as long as they use the power that they have in the world for evil things I'm going to speak out against them … " I think she probably unfollowed me after that.

Participants noted that though parents would try to set up information boundaries for themselves, parents also set up boundaries in order to restrict the child's information sharing with siblings and

individuals outside of the family. Even when participants tried to respect the boundaries they felt less close to their parent as a result.

Parent interference. Parental interference TPs are events where children felt that their parents enacted antagonistic behavior by violating the participant's privacy, mandating that the participant repent, or leveraging resources to compel the participant to enact behavior in line with church doctrine. For example, Ingrid recounted:

> She made the rule that I either went to church or I paid rent, or I moved out, and I couldn't move out because I didn't have a job, and I couldn't pay rent because I didn't have a job. So, my only option was to go to church or be homeless and having [my] young kid, a young baby. I liked church much better than being homeless, and so I just tolerated going to church.

Like Ingrid, even when participants conformed to the wishes of their parents, more often than not, this resulted in participants feeling less close to their parents. As a result of interference, some participants felt that they could not trust or respect their parents moving forward. Parent interference TPs, then, were perceived as serious relationship violations.

Emergent trajectories (second research question)

As participants marked and discussed their relational TPs, they also connected each point, forming an overall trajectory that represented the shifts of their parent-child relationship as influenced by the TPs. Through a pictorial analysis of the relational trajectories drawn by participants, four relational trajectory patterns emerged: (1) disrupted, (2) turbulent, (3) declining, and (4) accelerating (see Figure 1 for a visual depiction of each trajectory). Each trajectory is characterized by TPs (TP) at various levels of closeness.

Disrupted

Disrupted trajectories appear to have a dip which initiates after the first TP. The first TP is rated moderate to high in closeness, the lowest rated TP (rated below 50%) occurs in the middle of the trajectory, and the closeness of the last TP is rated right below the rating of the first TP. Participants who drew this type of relational trajectory experienced several concurrent low TP's, and increased closeness only began after TPs such as an open conversation or the setting of boundaries. Participants who graphed this kind of trajectory also described how, even though they felt that their relationship with their parent(s) was improving, they felt that they would never feel as close to their parents as they did before leaving the church.

Turbulent

Turbulent trajectories contained TP that would alternate from highs (around a 70% closeness rating, often due to events such as moving out) to lows (around a 30% closeness rating, often attributed to parental interference or confrontation). Participants who graphed these relational trajectories discussed that in some ways, their relationship with their parent(s) was better because it was more honest. However, they were still unsure as to what to expect from the relationship in the future.

Declining

The declining trajectory is marked by a slow decrease in closeness at each TP, with the final TP being the lowest point. These trajectories contained repeated conflict and judgment regarding the participant's divergent beliefs. Participants who drew this graph described how almost all interaction with their parents were either confrontational or unsatisfying.
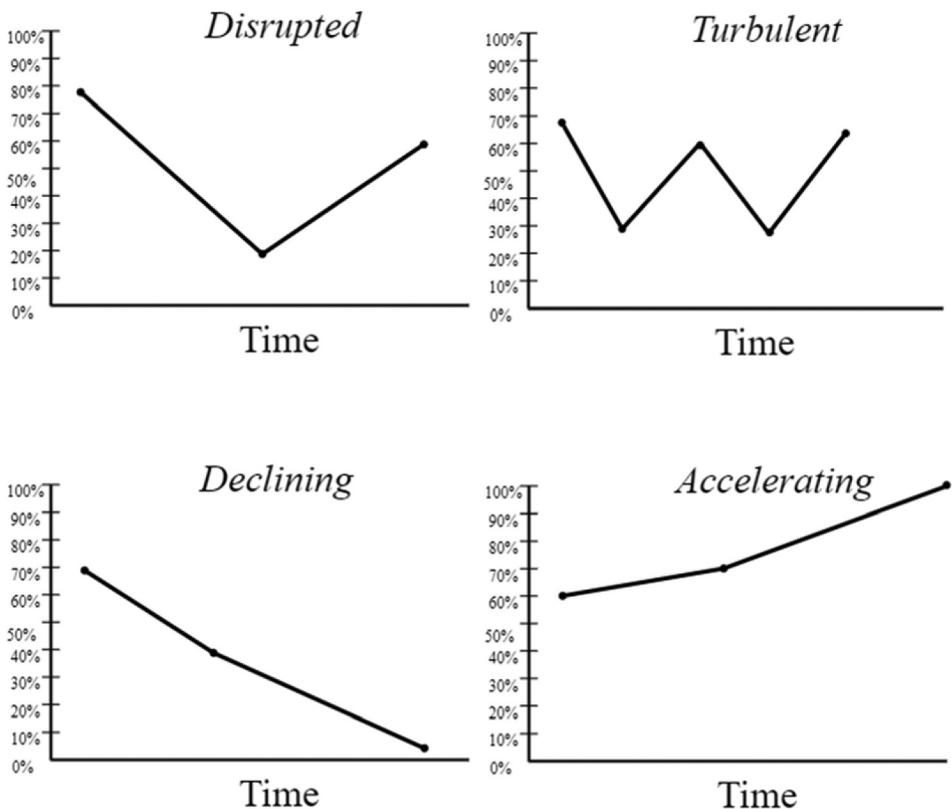
Figure 1. Relational trajectories.

Accelerating

The accelerating relational trajectory is characterized by starting at a TP between 50% and 80% closeness and quickly increasing in closeness with each subsequent TP. Participants who graphed this trajectory discussed how even though their parent struggled with the church exit revelation, this was soon rectified by feeling unconditionally accepted.

Discussion

The goal of this project was to identify the TPs emerging adult children who have left the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints experienced with their parents still active in the church. We also determine patterns of TP trajectories. Illuminating the TPs and trajectories that are influential in the lives of these individuals, not only illustrates the potential relational cost of exiting the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but also provides a starting point for individuals to work through these religious differences in a counseling setting. Thus, attending to the relationship between children who are ex-members of the church and their parents who are active could illuminate the communicative messages and behaviors that help some families remain close or those that lead to family distancing, marginalization, and estrangement (Dorrance Hall, 2017; Scharp & Thomas, 2016). Specifically, the results of this study offer some important implications for family dynamics and trajectories research.

There are multiple theoretical contributions of this study, the first pertains to the unique circumstances of religious difference in a totalistic religion. Although on the surface there appears to be similarities between the parent-child turning points in our study, and those in other studies, there are some marked differences that illuminate the unique complexities of religious deidentification for these emerging adults and their families. Family-crisis events in past research are seen as bonding

experiences that decrease any feelings of marginalization in "black sheep" children (Dorrance Hall, 2017). In our study, some of our participants discussed, however, how family crises could also create or emphasize distance between the participant and their parent. In particular, it is evident that religion and spirituality play a divisive role in families. For example, in Dorrance Hall's study, a family member experiencing severe health issues brought families closer together to support one another, but in our study severe illness at times drove families apart because the child did not want to participate in religious family practices such as prayer, to confront the crises. Consequently, instead of faith being used to unify family members after a crisis, belief in the church serves to emphasize the difference between the child who left the church and the rest of the family. In this regard, traditional means of and catalysts for closeness might be insufficient in the present context.

Second, although emerging adults commonly diverge from family norms in pursuit of independence and autonomy (Arnett, 2007), the way in which our participants expressed this divergence differed from existing TP literature. Golish (2000) conceptualizes such a TP as a "rebellious teenager" (p. 87), who seeks to try new substances and establish autonomy in response to disciplinarian parents. Instead of focusing on autonomy and independence, our participants ignored family rules and norms surrounding behaviors because of their inherent tie to the church. On the other hand, parents' responses in the narratives indicated that these behaviors were not viewed as part of the developmental process, but rather in direct defiance of the church and consequently their family. Thus, the TPs illustrate the ways parents might make different attributions about their children's actions and consequently respond differently than parents who perceive that some deviation is part of the development process. In light of these differences, we suggest that the reason these TPs differ from other contexts is that the emerging adults were trying to separate family from religion, even though for their parent, family *is* religion. Thus, our study extends what we might be able to assume about general patterns of emerging adult development, especially as it pertains to religious differences.

Overall, multiple TPs paralleled the extant literature about LGBTQ+ individuals coming out to parents. Similar to the way that cultural assumptions of heteronormativity silence queer individuals or inhibit them from disclosing divergence (Adams, 2011), participants discussed how they often hid their divergent beliefs or felt trepidation before telling their parents due to expectations of religious homogeneity. The disclosure of divergent beliefs also mirrored many of the disclosure types, specifically, preplanned conversations, emergent conversations, coaxed conversations, and confrontational conversations (Manning, 2015). Participants expressed how disclosures of divergent beliefs occurred during open conversations when either they had planned to reveal their beliefs to their parent, the conversation topic came up naturally over the course of a conversation, or when their parent deliberately asked them about their beliefs. Participants also discussed how, like confrontational conversations (Manning, 2015), parental interference also lead to disclosure when parents engaged in behavior such as reading the text messages of their child. Participants viewed interference and confrontation that forced disclosure very negatively.

Not only did the process of disclosure in our study align with the literature on coming out, the way in which parents responded to these disclosures also held similarities. For example, families enact two types of support in response to a family member coming out: support that preserves the kinship bond and support through action (Merighi & Grimes, 2000). Participants in our study report feeling support when parents express unconditional love or the willingness to put differences aside for the sake of the relationship. In a few cases, participants describe instances where they feel supported when their families advocate for them to other relatives or acquaintances. In previous research, disclosures met with supportive responses do not change family dynamics (Merighi & Grimes, 2000).

In our study, participants often said that regardless of support and acceptance they felt that their departure from the church had severely altered the way they could interact with their parents. Though the responses emerging adults recalled their parents enacting included the expression of support about their departure from the church, their parents also responded with anger, disappointment, and denial of the divergent beliefs. This finding is consistent with disclosures made by the parents of queer children (Roe, 2017). In anticipation of or in response to these outcomes, participants engaged in

behaviors that mirrored LGBTQ+ individuals, namely, avoiding the topic (Watson, 2014), conforming to expected behavior (Waldner & Magruder, 1999) and repeatedly having to *come out* (Adams, 2014).

One of the most theoretically robust aspects of the present study pertains to the importance of restatement. Emerging adults not only note the initial disclosure as important but also the fact that they had to tell their parents about their decision again (and again). This restatement helps these emerging adults set boundaries, clarify their identity and relationship with the church, and respond to their parents hope that they might one day return to the church. This is particularly interesting, considering how current TP literature does not address how the repetition of an event can, in itself, be an event. In other words, though restatement often took the form of an open conversation, it is the fact that the conversation has to be continually repeated that marked a perceived change in the relationship. This is important to note, especially when considering how the stress from these events can culminate over time, leading to depression and other symptoms (Nederhof, Ormel, & Oldehinkel, 2014). In other words, restatement might be a marker of the ways stress can compound when we continuously have to address difficult conversations or when we perceive that others do not listen to or accept what we say the first time.

Another important finding in the present study pertains to the way emerging adults focus on how values and beliefs serve as a divisive function between family members. This finding starkly contrasts with existing literature that paints TPs as a facilitator of honest communication and a way to embrace difference (Golish, 2000) or as a way to disclose values and beliefs (Dorrance Hall, 2017). It is the religious context that facilitates this difference, as a lack of adherence to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is not just a difference of opinion, rather it is impeding one's relationship with their family. Indeed, identifying TPs of family division might be an important step to understanding family distancing, or if there are particular differences that allow some families to remain resilient and close despite differences.

Despite how the manifestation and relational influence of the TPs differed in important theoretical ways for our participants, there are similarities to other turning points research that supports the move toward a metatheory. The consistency between the relational trajectories and TPs that emerged in our study, and those in other studies, are valuable to the continuation of trajectory research. Given the consistency within trajectory research so far, it is important to determine if there are metapatterns that emerge across research and if those patterns can be used to develop a metatheory of family trajectories (Sahlstein Parcell, 2013). We argue that our findings, specifically the trajectories of: (1) disrupted, (2) turbulent (3) declining, and (4) accelerating support this claim that trajectories research is moving in the direction of a metatheory (Sahlstein Parcell, 2013).

Consistency within TPs can also be used to further the theoretical framework of relational TP research. Given the frequency with which young adults talk about their negative experiences related to leaving the church, it is no surprise that some of the TPs that emerge are consistent with those of individuals who experience family marginalization (Dorrance Hall, 2017), an outcome that is particularly likely for individuals who leave a high cost religion such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Thus, although participant experiences might appear similar across relationships, theoretical development must consider factors such as a totalistic religion that might supersede existing understanding of particular dyadic relationships. Consequently, as relational trajectory and turning point research moves in the direction of a metatheory, it becomes even more important to understand how religion/ideology and other unique circumstances influence what theoretical claims can be made about TP research.

Practical applications and implications

The first practical implication upends traditional beliefs about the primacy of the family both within the church and within the culture at large. Within church doctrine, the family should play a fundamental role. Not only does church doctrine preach the importance of engaging in religious practices together in this life, but also constructs family as an eternal relationship that persists after

death (Eyring, 2016). Indeed, much of the rhetoric of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints emphasizes the ways the gospel strengthens and unifies families, and evangelical classes of the church often focus on how to promote a loving and nurturing family life (Teaching Children, 2000b). Although the eternal family is something that individuals consider before leaving the faith (Hinderaker & O'Connor, 2015), it is evident in our findings that participants feel marginalized when parents strive to strictly adhere to church policy and doctrine.

Church leaders have given several sermons on the responsibility of mothers and fathers to their children (Maxwell, 1994). Yet, when it comes to choosing between the church and their child, the child's deviance from the church pushes them out of the family, in some aspects, even as they pull away. Consequently, our findings suggest that when individuals choose to leave the church, their parents often view this as both a personal short coming and a betrayal of the family. Conversely, children who leave the church feel a desire to be close to their parents, but struggle to navigate this relationship when they feel deeply wronged by the same religion to which their parents hold dear. These tensions create a context in which traditional efforts to remain close are seen as threats to the other's identity, thus creating further distance in the relationship. This is even more remarkable because there is an overall cultural assumption that families are obligated to one another though biological ties and shared history regardless of their religious beliefs (Scharp & Thomas, 2016, 2018). Thus, leaving the church violates multiple norms; about how children should behave, what they should believe, and about the meaning of family in general. In the future, researchers should attend to other instances when people's particular beliefs and values call into question the primacy of the family relationship. Questioning the assumption that families stay together no matter the circumstance, might normalize this experience which could have implications for other people trying to leave their family relationships for any reason.

The second practical implication of this study pertains to the attitudes the people in this study take toward conflict and control. For participants, this prioritizing of the church meant that their parents invaded their privacy, leveraged resources, or became verbally aggressive to restore compliance and adherence of their children to church teachings and doctrine. For instance, participants describe their parents as attempting to bargain (i.e., just don't remove your name from the records), threaten (i.e., you have to go to church or move out) and emotionally blackmail (i.e., crying anytime the child walked in the room) them into submission. Participants describe that by leveraging threats and blackmail, parents only contribute to the reasons they are no longer faithful members of the church. Although it makes sense why these interferences and attempts at control are perceived as serious relational transgressions and significantly decrease feelings of closeness (Ledbetter, Heiss, Sibal, Lev, Battle-Fisher, & Shubert, 2010; McLaren & Sillars, 2014), it is the distributive nature of their interactions that warrants further consideration.

Instead of approaching religious differences by attempting to find a solution or compromise, the relational turning points for these individuals do not follow other patterns of parent-child disagreement (Golish, 2000). For example, in research on parent-child conflict, individuals are able to overcome their disagreements through a variety of strategies, yet for our participants, ideological and institutional differences inherently situate disagreement as a win-lose scenario. When church culture and doctrine emphasizes that a child's activity in the church is a determining measure of a temporal and eternal parental success, there is little a child can do to negotiate unconditional acceptance while remaining out of the church. Thus, it is possible that for children and parents who would like to maintain a relationship after one party disaffiliates, conflict management counseling that emphasizes integrative approaches (Golish, 2000) could help families maintain ties. Ultimately, this finding speaks to the research on relational framing (Solomon & McLaren, 2008) that suggests that messages might be perceived with the intent of asserting dominance or to convey affiliation. The results of this study are not without their limitations, and potential avenues for future research.

Limitations and future directions

Although the current study adds to our understanding about how families negotiate differing values, it has limitations. First, despite our rationale for focusing on emergent adults, it is possible that emerging

adults might face particular constraints that other older adult children might not. In fact, some of the participants noted that their parents would use housing and other monetary resources as a means to try and leverage them to stay in the church. This might not hold true for older individuals as they are more established, financially independent, and have access to more resources, thus making the transition less costly. Volunteer bias might also paint a more negative picture of this experience. For example, individuals who had negative interactions or feelings toward their parents might have been more motivated to volunteer for this study than individuals with more neutral or positive experiences. Finally, the valence of the TPs in our study was not consistent. In other words, many of the TPs discussed had different outcomes for the parent-child relationship depending on the individual. Thus, future researchers should carefully examine TPs from the perspective of both members of the dyad to determine where they converge on moments of meaning. In this way, scholars can determine the most productive types of communicative events that practitioners can use to help facilitate tenuous relationships resulting from religious incompatibility.

In the future, researchers should consider interviewing the parents, or multiple family members, at the same time. Garnering additional perspectives might serve to reinforce some TPs and contradict others. Better understanding the different perspectives might be fruitful if parents and children seek to work out their differences. Indeed, better understanding the parent perspective might be salient considering disaffiliation from a high-cost religion might create a scenario where parents feel like they are placed in the impossible position of choosing their child or choosing their family and life according to God's plan. By utilizing the perspective of multiple family members, scholars can attend to the nuanced ways in which micro-moments shape religiously divergent relationships and provide practitioners with a starting point for generating moments of religious accommodation.

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