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**Strengthening Sisters:
How Latter-day Saint Missionary Service Can Prepare Women for Leadership**

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Abstract

Women, especially those from highly religious societies, are underrepresented in professional and civic leadership positions. Considering how women's life experiences, especially from religious volunteer opportunities, can be reframed as training for broader leadership roles could help address this disparity. The potential for women to learn leadership skills from volunteer religious service is an overlooked, but possibly important, means of transferability to larger leadership roles. This article describes a qualitative study of women's perceptions of leadership skills gained while serving as full-time volunteer missionaries for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints during young adulthood. Respondents described perceptions of leadership skills developed throughout missions as well as perceptions about how they are currently using these skills. Findings suggest many women perceived growth in leadership skills from missionary service, especially in the areas of interpersonal interactions and relationships, though they reported currently utilizing skills more in church and family roles rather than professional or civic ones. The study is discussed in the context of literature related to gender and types of leadership approaches, as well as Relational-Cultural Theory. Implications for facilitating respondents' post-mission skill transfer to future leadership roles are presented. Larger scale applications for women's leadership development are also considered.

Keywords: women, leadership, transferability, religion, Relational-Cultural Theory

Strengthening Sisters: How Latter-day Saint Missionary Service Can Prepare Women for Leadership

Women are persistently underrepresented in leadership roles in many settings (Madsen, 2017; Pew Research Center, 2018; Storberg-Walker & Haber-Curran, 2017). The reasons cited for this lack of representation include discrimination, bias, and/or the possibility that women lack confidence in their leadership abilities (Kay & Shipman, 2014; Ridgeway, 2011; Thomson, 2018). This discrepancy is especially prominent in more religious areas of the United States and in religious societies generally (Jacobs, 2021; Sitzmann & Campbell, 2020). One potential reason for this gap is traditional gender roles. In these societies, having more men in leadership roles is normative; women are often expected to focus more on family life than on professional and civic involvement (Jacobs, 2021; Pappas, 2020; Sitzmann & Campbell, 2020).

Some research has sought to address this disparity by identifying ways that women can learn to lead and highlighting the need to give women more preparation and opportunity to assume leadership roles (Madsen, 2008, 2009). One potential way to do so, especially for women from religious areas with large gender gaps, is to help them appreciate how their life experiences, even those not explicitly connected to leadership, might provide leadership training. A type of life experience that can provide this training is volunteering, which may produce leadership development gains that can transfer to other leadership roles, including those in the workforce and community (Bartsch, 2012; Digby & Ferrari, 2007; Pierce et al., 2020; Woottan, 2017).

One religious organization that emphasizes traditional gender roles, yet enables women to have volunteer experience with potential for leadership transferability, is The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (hereafter referred to as the “Church”), historically known as the “Mormon Church.” Young adult women who are Church members can volunteer to serve as full-

time missionaries for 18 months. Analyzing women's potential for leadership in this context is valuable, as the Church is most prominent in Utah, which has one of the biggest gender earnings and leadership gaps in the United States (Jacobs, 2021; Madsen et al., 2018). Studying these experiences may also shed light on potential to transfer leadership learning from similar contexts.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the leadership development experiences gained by women who had served as full-time missionaries in young adulthood for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The study considers whether women can learn leadership skills in activities such as religious volunteering, which they can then transfer to larger leadership roles. The study focuses on exploring these women's perceptions of leadership knowledge, skills, and abilities developed on missions, including current use of these attributes.

An important consideration is to understand how women can learn to see themselves as potential leaders. Gender leadership gaps might be lessened if more women and stakeholders realized women's potential to transfer leadership learning from previous life experiences. Many women may be apt to focus on prioritizing relational skills that they use frequently in family and caregiving settings. They might recognize that they have relational and interpersonal skill sets, without seeing them as relevant to potential professional and civic leadership roles (Gilligan, 1996; Harter, 2012; Pappas, 2020; Sitzmann & Campbell, 2020).

In religious societies, men are often more represented in leadership (Jacobs, 2021; Pappas, 2020; Sitzmann & Campbell, 2020). In these settings, transactional leadership, which has been associated with male gender norms, can be more common (Barth & Benoliel, 2019; Hidayat et al., 2017). In contrast, transformational, servant, and Relational-Cultural leadership approaches focus more on interpersonal relationships and on developing and empowering

followers (Bass, 1999; Bonau, 2017; Hurst et al., 2018b). These types of leadership have been found to serve the needs of followers better and to increase likelihood of organizational success (Bass 1999; Pascale & Ohlson, 2020; Sugiyama, Cavanagh et al., 2016). Women are more likely to use these latter approaches (Bass 1999; Druskat, 1994; Martin, 2015; Silva & Mendis, 2017). Women may thus be more likely to become leaders if they can connect their skills to leadership and are supported in their efforts to succeed.

Significance of Study

As indicated above, this study is important because it addresses a topic crucial to the functioning of larger society—increasing gender equity in leadership roles. It is also valuable because it assesses one way to ameliorate this problem in religious regions. In addition, it addresses the issue of gender leadership inequity in an understudied context, the transferability of leadership learning from women’s religious volunteering to other larger leadership roles.

Volunteering often occurs in religious contexts, but little research has explored women’s potential to develop leadership skills in these settings. This neglect might reflect the paucity of women congregants in senior leadership roles in most religious organizations, especially ones that adhere to patriarchal norms (Cnaan & Helzer, 2004; Ecklund, 2006; Ojong, 2017; Stolz & Monnot, 2019; Wallace, 2000). Although there are other women-only settings for leadership development in non-religious organizations (Archard, 2012; Häyrynen & Lämsä, 2017; Levin, 2011), it is important to explore whether and how faith-driven beliefs in traditional gender roles in religious settings relate to women’s potential to transfer leadership learning (Cnaan & Helzer, 2004; Dahlvig & Longman, 2016; Longman et al., 2019; Ojong, 2017). This exploratory study can provide insight on potential for women to transfer leadership learning from life experiences, resulting in broader understanding about how to reduce gender leadership gaps.

Literature Review

This section reviews the context for the study. First, the cultural context of missionary work, particularly the experience of sister missionaries in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, is reviewed to provide background for the study's findings. Next, literature is reviewed on the lack of women in leadership positions, including findings about why this gap exists and persists, and the barriers to narrowing it. Third, literature about the transferability of leadership learning, especially in volunteer and religious contexts, is considered. There is then an explanation of the theoretical context of the study, which summarizes two well-known leadership approaches (i.e., transformational and servant leadership), and discusses Relational-Cultural Theory, as well as the implications of these approaches for women's leadership. Skills associated with these approaches are also delineated to frame the description of the study and its findings.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

The Church provides an interesting context for studying women's volunteering and leadership transferability. Women have many volunteer opportunities for leading in church auxiliary organizations, but Church doctrines, policies, and practices overall privilege traditional gender roles and masculine leadership (Chen, 2014). In the Church, men are supposed to provide for their families and be leaders in both religious and secular spheres. Women are tasked with managing the home, nurturing children, and providing support (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1995). Despite increased flexibility in these gendered responsibilities, with many Latter-day Saint women having professional and other leadership roles, the traditional gendered division of labor is still common and is often touted as ideal (Lafkas, 2012; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1995; Vance, 2002).

Nonetheless, many Latter-day Saint women have sought higher education. For instance,

in the Pew Research Center's Religious Landscape Study of the United States, approximately 42% of Latter-day Saint women reported completing some college, with an additional 23% completing their undergraduate education and 8% having obtained a graduate degree. These data suggest that approximately 72% of Latter-day Saint women in the United States have pursued higher education, which may be indicative of interest in exploring training for leadership and other pursuits outside of home and family life (Pew Research Center, 2020).

The Missionary Experience

A crucial training ground for leadership development within the Church is the full-time mission (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, n.d.), which is generally regarded as the setting in which young members between the ages of 18 and 25 volunteer (two years for men and 18 months for women) to proselytize for the Church. This experience is thought of as a “rite of passage” into adulthood prior to marriage (McBride, 2018). Church leaders frame men's service as a duty and commandment from God. Young women have not been expected to serve as missionaries (Embry, 1997; Lyon & McFarland, 2003; Rabada, 2014). In 2007, 80% of all missionaries were young men, 13% were young women, and the remaining 7% were retired couples (Fletcher Stack, 2007). These numbers shifted after Church policy changed in 2012 to allow missionaries to serve at younger ages—men at 18 and women at 19. By 2016, women made up approximately 30% of the Church young adult missionaries, whereas men were around 70% (Intellectual Reserve, 2016).

While the authors of this study could not locate definitive Church statistics about the percentage of Latter-day Saint women who serve missions, an independent study in 2016 that surveyed over 1500 current and former church members to seek a representative sample, estimated that 44.5% of “Millennial” generation young adult Latter-day Saint women entered

full-time missionary service (even if they did not complete it). In contrast, the survey reported that about 28% of “Generation X” and 13% of combined “Boomer” and “Silent” generations Latter-day Saint women served missions (Riess, 2019).

For sister missionaries, leadership development has been evolving since the mission age change in 2012. At that time, the Church also created a leadership council that includes mission presidents’ wives and newly created positions of sister training leaders assigned to mentor other sisters (Rabada, 2014). Nonetheless, the mission experience itself is still largely male-centric (Embry, 1997; Lyon & McFarland, 2003; Rabada, 2014).

The discrepancy in expectations has implications for Church leadership development, as missions have been regarded as key in fostering a Latter-day Saint identity and promoting leadership skills within the Church (Ault, 2018). Some writers (Benedict, 2012; Bluestein, 2020; Groth, 2011; McKeown, 2012) have also argued that missions often provide young men with discipline and character development that help them assume prominent leadership roles in secular and religious spheres. For instance, Mitt Romney has noted that he was influenced by his religious background and culture in his professional interactions (Gerhart & Rucker, 2012).

Sister Missionaries

Although women have served missions for much of the Church’s history, Church policies specify that women serve missions at slightly older ages and for shorter periods (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2020). Official Church statements and leader comments suggest the reason for these differences relates to the gendered division of labor in the Church. Women’s missionary service has been structured to interfere minimally with marriage and family prospects. Kantor and Goodstein (2014) and Rabada (2014) argued that Church leaders lowered the age for service because they perceived women who served missions were more likely to

marry in the faith and be more committed to raising their families within it. Sister missionaries were originally tasked with clerical duties, but now engage mainly in proselytizing activities, although their roles at times may be different from men's (e.g., Some sisters are assigned to host at Church visitor centers and historical sites.). Sisters also do not perform institutional ordinances like baptisms that are the purview of the male missionaries (Embry, 1997; Rabada, 2014).

There is little research on young women's motivations for serving a Church mission, but these reasons may differ from those of men and may include greater desires to enhance their faith and build relationships. Madsen (2016) cited four primary motivations of Latter-day Saint women for embarking on leadership-based activities: the desire to serve God, a desire to promote motherhood, a desire to serve the community, and a sense of personal revelation or "calling" to serve the Lord. Sister missionaries might not consciously consider their service a leadership activity, but these motivations could influence their decisions to serve.

Notably, the motivations cited by Madsen (2016) seem to be mainly relational in nature. They are consistent with research from other Christian contexts on leadership motivators for women in religious settings (Longman et al., 2019). In contrast, men's primary motivations for mission service appear to include a sense of duty, rite of passage, and training for Church leadership positions, along with spiritual reasons (Lyon & McFarland, 2003; Rabada, 2014). If the leadership learning that Latter-day Saint women gain from their missions is different from men's, how might these differences look, and how might they transfer to leadership experiences post-mission? These are concerns that this study sought to explore.

Lack of Women in Leadership

The considerable research on women's leadership (e.g., Madsen, 2017; Storberg-Walker & Haber-Curran, 2017), particularly on the dearth of women in high-ranking and highly paid

positions, has noted how workplace, civic, and other professional cultures often do not support or accommodate women, and how women often do not adapt to leadership norms and/or do not pursue leadership opportunities (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2017; Ridgeway, 2011; Thomson, 2018). It has also been argued that women might not adapt to leadership expectations due to biology or socialization, leading to the need to “fix the women” and help them learn to conform to dominant leadership norms and expectations (Fox-Kirk, 2019; Kay & Shipman, 2014).

Research on gender roles and leader identity has shown leadership is a gendered notion (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Ridgeway, 2011) that is still viewed as normatively the domain of men (Bierema, 2017; Koenig et al., 2011). Being a female leader is often seen as deviant from this norm, which can explain why many women face difficulties when trying to claim leadership identities (Fox-Kirk et al., 2017; Ridgeway, 2011). Women may struggle to see themselves as leaders, and others may not see them as “rightful” leaders due to many societal interactions being structured around the traditional gender norms of men being leaders and women being in supportive roles. Hence many persons may be reluctant to grant women leadership identity (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Ridgeway, 2011; Thomson, 2018).

Evidence of such forces is suggested by the lack of successful programs targeted towards women in advancing their leadership representation (Colantuono, 2016; Kay, 2014). Despite the history of mentoring and role-modeling aimed to develop women’s leadership in programs such as same-sex schools (Archard, 2012), both women and men tend to view leadership in gendered ways and in terms of male norms, even when leadership is targeted towards women’s needs (Pascale & Ohlson, 2020; Ridgeway, 2011). Vinnicombe and Singh (2002) argued that traditional leadership training and development has been designed for men and may not be optimal for women. Even with targeted women-only training, biases, shortage of networks,

sexism in hiring, and the lack of confidence that may be engendered by these barriers may keep women from leadership positions in organizations (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2017; Ridgeway, 2011; Thomson, 2018). Nonetheless, many women in leadership positions are viewed as effective, demonstrating a range of widely accepted leadership skills (Zenger & Folkman, 2012, 2019b).

Transferability of Leadership Learning

As women still face barriers to attaining leadership parity, and targeted training programs have not succeeded enough, it is useful to consider other potential ways to increase women's leadership representation. One area centers on the transferability of leadership skills that help women and other stakeholders see women's potential to transfer leadership skills learned in other contexts to professional and civic spheres. Transferability is not a new concept. Organizations have long sponsored leadership efficacy training, with the idea that aspects of these programs might facilitate transfer of skills learned there to leadership roles (Sorensen, 2017). Individual factors like motivation and job satisfaction, and contextual factors like organizational support and expectation, may influence ability to transfer (Franke & Felfe, 2012; Sorensen, 2017).

It is useful to consider how women's life experiences outside formalized leadership training might be transferable. One life experience to explore for such transfer is volunteerism. In the United States, women volunteer at higher rates than men, with religious organizations being the most common setting (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Some research has supported the idea that volunteers can transfer leadership learning to other settings such as the workplace (Bartsch, 2012; Digby & Ferrari, 2007; Pierce et al., 2020; Woottan, 2017).

The research on leadership learning transfer from volunteer contexts to other settings is limited, but informative. A study of high-school athletes in volunteer leadership roles found that participants perceived both individual and contextual factors contributed to leadership learning

transfer (Pierce et al., 2020). Individual factors included awareness of desire, opportunities to transfer learning, and high self-expectations and self-confidence. Bartsch (2012) discovered that volunteers perceived that guided reflective processes facilitated learning transfer to professional leadership roles. Woottan (2017) found potential factors in transferring learning from volunteer contexts included experiential learning and mentorship, which may improve volunteers' confidence and self-efficacy, leading to skill transfer. Lastly, a study of former volunteer camp counselors (Digby & Ferrari, 2007) indicated that participants believed they learned interpersonal and teamwork skills while volunteering that facilitated leadership skills, including identity growth and ability to take initiative. The study also postulated that participants could transfer this learning into their careers. In addition, although not specific to volunteerism, studies of women's compulsory military service have demonstrated that context matters. Häyrynen and Lämsä (2017) showed transfer of leadership learning for women in the Finnish military, whereas Levin (2011) found that sexism constrained leadership development of women in the Israeli military. Overall, these studies suggest learning in other settings can transfer to leadership roles.

Individuals' perceptions of transfer do not mean that transfer happens. These perceptions also do not necessarily mean that a volunteer experience catalyzed the move into later leadership roles. One framework (Tawadros, 2015) suggests, however, that individuals who practice leadership-related behaviors in groups may facilitate experiential learning and self-awareness that can be applied in future leadership roles.

In addition, because men typically dominate leadership roles, particularly in traditional churches, little is known about how this type of leadership learning transfer might occur for women volunteers in religious settings (Cnaan & Helzer, 2004; Dahlvig & Longman, 2016; Ecklund, 2006; Longman et al., 2019; Ojong, 2017; Stolz & Monnot, 2019; Wallace, 2000). For

instance, some literature has highlighted how when women from patriarchal societies embark on experiences such as migration endeavors, that require more independence and exposure to broader contexts in the world, their perspectives can change in a way that might make them more likely to contribute professionally and civically in communities (Lee, 2013; Yang & Xiaodong, 2020). Yet, this research also suggests that these women can still be constrained from leadership by the expectations of inertial patriarchal systems, which can frustrate them as they balance these expectations with the perspectives gained from experiences outside these societies (Lee, 2013; Yang & Xiaodong, 2020). In a Latter-day Saint context, one study suggested that women returned missionaries have higher grade point averages in college and were more likely to select majors with fewer women and higher salary potential (Marchant, 2018), but it is not clear how these differences might relate to leadership learning transfer.

In sum, research suggests that women who have stepped outside patriarchal societies of origin and engaged in intensive independent experiences may transfer learning. It also indicates possible constraints to transfer when they return to these systems. However, no research thus far considers what types of leadership learning Latter-day Saint women perceive acquiring from the mission experience, how they apply it when they return, and in what contexts. Thus, exploring women's experiences in this setting could shed light on different ways to support and expand women's leadership opportunities, especially in religious societies (Jacobs, 2021; Pappas, 2020). As religious women may be more inclined to engage in leadership learning when it is connected to and reconcilable with their faith (Dahlvig & Longman, 2016), studying transfer of women's leadership learning in religious volunteer contexts can provide needed understanding.

Theoretical Context

The literature identifies varied approaches to leadership that involve different skills and

behaviors. Transformational and servant leadership theories have features that are aligned with feminine leadership (Gerzema & D'Antonio, 2013; Northouse, 2019). They have been identified as especially relevant to the current study and are reviewed below. Relational-Cultural Theory is also considered as a perspective on development that can illuminate women's use of these approaches. This overview provides the background for describing key relational leadership skills and provides important framing for the findings of the current study.

First, transformational leadership is based on relationship-building. Transformational leaders are typically visionary and adopt caring and empathic styles toward followers (Bass, 1999; Bonau, 2017; Pascale & Ohlson, 2020; Sugiyama et al., 2016). This approach stands in contrast to transactional leadership, where leaders give directives and operate based on reciprocal exchanges and incentives to encourage compliance (Bass, 1999; Pascale & Ohlson, 2020; Sugiyama et al., 2016). The transactional style is more associated with men than women (Bass, 1999; Druskat, 1994; Martin, 2015; Silva & Mendis, 2017). It may be especially prominent in highly religious and patriarchal cultures (Barth & Benoliel, 2019; Hidayat et al., 2017). In contrast, transformational leadership centers on supporting followers' personal and professional development (Bonau, 2017), hence encouraging transformation.

Transformational leadership is used widely across organizations (Bass, 1999; Bonau, 2017) and research suggests that women more often use this approach than men do (Bass, 1999; Druskat, 1994; Martin, 2015; Silva & Mendis, 2017). Other research on a branch of transformational leadership called inspirational leadership (Bonau, 2017; Potter, 2018) argues inspirational leaders focus more on the motivations of followers and embody relational leadership skills like empathy and emotional attunement (Bonau, 2017; Potter, 2018; Salas-Vallina et al., 2020). Although some critiques of transformational leadership theory argue that it

is conceptually vague and depends too much on the actions of singular leaders (Lee, 2014; Northouse, 2019), the literature suggests overall that this approach and its associated characteristics are effective, relational, and commonly used by women (Bass, 1999; Druskat, 1994; Martin, 2015; Silva & Mendis, 2017).

Servant leadership is another approach that has identified numerous feminine and relational characteristics (Gerzema & D'Antonio, 2013; Lemoine & Blum, 2021; Northouse, 2019). It is strongly identified with a leader putting followers' needs and interests first and seeking their growth and development (Northouse, 2019). Attributes associated with servant leadership include listening to and validating the perspectives of followers, demonstrating empathy, desiring to help followers move toward needed healing, having self-awareness, being persuasive, and demonstrating a vision of leadership (Northouse, 2019; Spears, 2010). Servant leaders consider stewardship as central to their leadership roles and tend to build community among their followers. Other researchers have identified humility, authenticity, and courage with this approach (Sendjaya et al., 2008; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). In contexts that are conducive to servant leadership, including ones where followers are receptive, behaviors of the servant leader can lead to enhanced growth and performance of followers, effective organizational performance, and potential positive community and societal impacts (Northouse, 2019). This approach has been associated with women (Lemoine & Blum, 2021), but this connection may reflect gender bias and socialization (Eicher-Catt, 2005).

Since research suggests a link between women and the use of transformational and servant leadership approaches, it is important to consider why these links may exist. Some have argued that women are more inclined to utilize relational skills such as empathy, caring, and collaboration (Christov-Moore et al, 2014; Olmos, 2019). Others have implied that women may

be socialized to adopt these qualities (Gilchrist et al., 2020; Gilligan, 1996, Harter, 2012). Some have argued that women might not be inherently more relational but must adopt relational skills to achieve a modicum of success because they are systematically excluded from leadership positions (Ridgeway, 2011; Thomson, 2018).

One perspective that might help illuminate women's use of transformational and servant leadership approaches is Relational-Cultural Theory, or RCT, which highlights the centrality of relationships in developmental experiences (Dipre & Luke, 2020; Jordan, 2017; Miller, 1976; Miller & Stiver, 1997). This theory stood out to the authors of this study as useful because of its psychological origins. While the leadership literature describes approaches that are relevant to women leaders, it was determined that combining these approaches with psychological theory might suggest why many women use these approaches, and hence illuminate how to help women transfer learning to see themselves as leaders—a key purpose of the study.

RCT is rooted in the work of psychologist Jean Baker Miller, who argued in *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (1976) that women thrive on connection and develop by building relationships. She acknowledged that this idea contradicted traditional theories of psychological development, which stressed autonomy and independence, attributes associated with the values of a patriarchal society, as central developmental tasks (Jordan, 2017; Miller, 1976; Miller & Stiver, 1997). RCT has expanded to focus on the centrality of relationships to wide populations, yet it is still a helpful lens through which to consider women's development, as it was developed in response to women's needs. RCT posits that all people thrive in connection to others, and developmental growth is spurred through relationships where there is mutual empathy and empowerment (Dipre & Luke, 2020; Jordan & Hartling, 2002).

RCT has been used to identify environments that are conducive to women's development

and empowerment. Portman and Garrett (2005) utilized RCT to argue that more women thrive in settings that are inherently relational than they do in competitive and individualistic ones. East and Roll (2015) similarly used RCT to support their discussion of how women are empowered in relational approaches of mentorship and support rather than individualism and autonomy.

RCT has also been applied to women in leadership roles. For instance, researchers have argued that relationships, especially mutually supportive and empowering mentorships, promote women's leadership development more than hierarchal mentoring relationships do (Anyikwa et al., 2015; Hurst et al., 2018a). In exploring how RCT applies to women's leadership skill development, some researchers (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016; Hurst et al., 2018a; Hurst et al., 2018b) have contended that supportive relationships are especially effective when women mentor other women, while competitive and individualistic forms of motivation—which have been typically used in leadership training situations—may be less helpful for developing women's leadership skills. Overall, the limited literature related to RCT and leadership suggests that the low percentage of women in leadership roles may be in part due to women not receiving the types of relational support that could help them succeed as leaders. Thus, while it cannot be said for certain that women thrive in empowering relational settings due to biology, socialization or discriminatory practices, or a combination of all of these, there is a link between these types of supportive contexts and women's growth, including in leadership settings. This theoretical context may also imply that when women are provided enough relational support in leadership roles, it could be conducive to transferring leadership learning from one context to another.

It is also important to identify key leadership qualities and skills from the literature around transformational and servant leadership approaches, especially in connection with relational-cultural leadership principles. The current study thus attempts to delineate skills in

detail rather than simply invoke the broad term of “relational.” While the leadership literature names many relational qualities, including those found in other leadership theories, not all of them can be discussed in this paper. We identified five relational leadership skills that recurred in reviewed leadership literature and stood out as relevant to the current study, especially because of their relevance to both the leadership and Relational-Cultural Theory literature.

1. Conflict Management

One leadership skill commonly referenced in the literature on both transformational leadership and RCT is conflict management. Hurst et al. (2018b) indicated that gender-based relationship expectations can be more implicit in hierarchal professional situations for women, often leading to conflict. They argued that conflict can lead to growth if leaders have relational awareness and skills to manage conflict. They further suggested that leaders and subordinates can best manage conflict through strategies of developing awareness, enhancing their relational skills, building support networks and finding acceptance. Block and Tietjen Smith (2016) utilized RCT to argue that women leaders should develop conflict management skills and learn to tolerate tensions and conflicts while maintaining a sense of self.

2. Courage

Another leadership skill from the literature was courage (Folkman, 2019; Portman and Garrett, 2005; Northouse, 2019; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). Portman and Garrett (2005) discussed RCT in terms of women’s leadership by relating courage to the concept of authenticity and highlighted an effective leader’s tendency to have courage to share personal truths and to be genuine in voicing opinions and concerns. Other researchers also associated courage with character, as well as leaders who stay true to principles and stand up for beliefs (Block & Tietjen

Smith, 2016; Folkman, 2019; Potter, 2018). Some servant leadership literature also highlights courage, identifying it as a willingness to take risks and identify new approaches to problems (Northouse, 2019; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011).

3. Interpersonal Skills

While the term “interpersonal skills” is broad, some researchers have delineated the concept as it pertains to effective leadership. Zenger and Folkman (2019a, 2019b) have indicated that effective leaders often demonstrate interpersonal skills, which they define as building relationships, developing others, being collaborative, and seeking to motivate. Potter (2018) defined the concept of interpersonal skills similarly and included developing and motivating others, as well as communicating effectively. Hurst et al. (2018b), focusing more on women, described effective leaders as having interpersonal awareness of self and the other. They indicated these leaders are empowering and motivating in interactions and embody the RCT principle of seeking to have power-with and not power-over subordinates.

4. Empathy

Empathy is another leadership skill cited repeatedly in the literature on transformational, servant, and RCT-related forms of leadership. Bonau (2017) associated empathy with being self-reflective, where a leader is receptive to hearing another person’s experience and considers how it would feel to have that same experience. Block and Tietjen Smith (2016), focusing on women, argued that empathy is an ability to attune to another person’s experience. Portman and Garrett (2005) closely aligned the concept of empathy with compassion and indicated that, for leaders, drawing on RCT-related principles, mutual empathy can develop when there is a focus on other over self. Much of the servant leadership literature also discusses empathy as key (Northouse, 2019; Spears, 2010).

5. *Confidence*

Another leadership skill from the reviewed literature is confidence. Confidence has been described as having a strong belief in self and executive presence (Potter, 2018). It has further been described as an ability to utilize one's own confidence to instill confidence in subordinates, to energize them, and help them recognize worth (Hurst et al., 2018a, 2018b).

The aforementioned leadership theories and five relational leadership skills, combined with the review of the literature around women's leadership and transferability, provide the framing for the study results and their implications. Before describing the study itself, however, it is important to note that "women" is not a monolithic term. There is much variation across women's learning and leadership styles. Even though the reviewed literature has suggested women tend to adopt and respond to more transformational, servant, and relational-cultural leadership approaches, this argument does not apply to all women.

For the current study, however, this argument may be relevant due to the focus on Latter-day Saint women who served as missionaries. The tendency to lack confidence and hold back due to lack of relationship support may be most prominent among women who are highly socialized into patriarchal norms (Gilligan, 1996; Harter, 2012). Thus, although not all women might use and respond to more relational styles of leadership, this perspective may be especially relevant for women from religious societies where traditional gender roles are ingrained, and where gender-based leadership gaps are largest (Jacobs, 2021; Sitzmann & Campbell, 2020).

Method

The researchers and stakeholders involved in the study shared an interest in the persistent gender wage and leadership gap in Utah, which is among the largest in the nation (Madsen et al., 2018). Researchers were concerned that these gaps persist even though many Utah women have

pursued higher education, including approximately 43.5% who have completed an associate's degree or higher and an additional 26.5% who have reported completing some college (Utah Department of Health, 2020). In considering how to address this gap within the region—given that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, a faith emphasizing traditional gender roles, is so prominent—the idea to research this phenomenon emerged.

As all the researchers involved in this study have had close experience with the faith and some have served as sister missionaries in young adulthood, along with having knowledge of and interest in leadership development, this area of inquiry was of great interest. The developmental experiences shared anecdotally with the researchers by other returned sister missionaries, as well as impressions of returned sister missionaries as being more academically focused and career driven, made researchers consider the leadership implications of full-time missionary service for Women. These considerations also led the researchers to wonder if potential leadership learning from missions could be transferred to larger leadership roles in other contexts.

As qualitative methods are appropriate when the intent is to understand how study participants make meaning of events, situations, and contexts in which they live (Maxwell, 2013), researchers deemed this approach best for an initial inquiry, which we viewed as possibly leading to future large-scale inquiries. The research development and design used for this study aligns with Maxwell's (2013) interactive model of research design, in which qualitative research designs include the development of research questions, as well as the consideration of how these questions interrelate to goals, theoretical frameworks, analysis methods, and concerns with validity (Lafkas, 2012; Maxwell, 2013). Keeping research design principles in mind and key areas of inquiry in this study, the following research questions emerged as a focus:

- 1) What are the leadership knowledge, skills, and abilities women perceive developing throughout the experience of serving a full-time mission during young adulthood?
- 2) How do returned sister missionaries perceive they are currently using these knowledge, skills, and abilities?

Data Collection

The qualitative research instrument for the study included demographic questions (see below), and three open-ended qualitative questions (plus space for additional comments). The first two open-ended questions were aligned closely with the main research questions stated above. These questions asked the participants to identify the leadership knowledge skills and abilities that they developed while serving a full-time mission for the Church. The second question asked them to reflect on how they currently use these knowledge, skills, and abilities. The third question asked them to speculate about other missionary experiences or opportunities they wished they would have had so that they would have been more prepared to lead and/or influence currently in their lives. The data from the third question were excluded from the current paper because of the extensive volume of data collected. These findings were explored in a separate report, along with a nine-item scale with a variety of questions to measure participants' perceptions about the value of their experience, particularly as it focused on their views of missions and leadership learning.

Data were collected during December 2018 and January 2019 through a web-based survey tool. Recruitment efforts were focused largely on the state of Utah, given the researchers' interest in the gender-based leadership gaps in the state, and the large numbers of Latter-day Saint women residing there. After Institutional Review Board approval, participants were recruited through a women's newsletter, social media, announcements in women's meetings,

distribution lists within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and invitations to key faculty and administrators at Brigham Young University and LDS Business College, who then distributed it to potential respondents. In contrast to randomized sampling, this targeted approach could have led to systematic bias in respondent type. The only requested criteria for participants to complete the survey were being a woman who had served as a full-time missionary for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints between the ages of 19 to 25. The initial goal was 100–200 responses, but the survey was closed early after 687 responses were submitted, most of which were very detailed. Some surveys were not usable, mainly because participants completed only the demographic information. Of the responses we received, 625 were sufficiently complete (i.e., The open-ended questions were answered.) to use in the analysis. The demographics collected included age range, marital status, highest educational level, religious activity level, age when the mission experience began, current work situation, paid work industry, and occupational level (see Table 1 for survey participant demographics).

Table 1*Survey Participant Demographic Information*

Characteristic	Category	% of Participants
Current Age ^a	20-24	29.5
	25-29	18.4
	30-39	21.1
	40-49	18.7
	50+	12.3
Marital Status	Married	61.3
	Single	33.9
	Separated, divorced widowed, or other	4.8
Highest Educational Level	Master's degree +	31.9

	Bachelor's degree	36.3
	Associate degree	11
	Some college (with many currently enrolled)	20.2
	High school diploma	.6
Church Activity	Mostly to very active	87.4
	Slightly or moderately active	3.7
	Not active	8.9
Age Began Mission	19-20	36.5
	21	48.2
	22+	15.3
Current Work	Full-time homemakers	10.3
	Students	18.6
	Part-time jobs	18.7
	Full-time careers	52.4
Paid Work Industry	Education	43.6
	Business	33.8
	Health, caregiving or social work	12
	Non-profit, government, Legal, or public policy	10.6
Occupational Level	Current student, entry level, or independent workers	51
	Supervisors, coordinators, or elementary or secondary teachers	29.3
	Professors, managers, or executive positions	19.7

Note. N=625 participants

^a“Current Age” is also an approximate proxy for how long it has been since the participant served a mission, as most women served at similar age ranges.

Data Analysis

Researchers may consider multiple methods for performing qualitative data analysis. The

researchers in this study used the method of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021) for this inquiry. This method was chosen because the primary investigator had used it for decades, it was accessible to all team members, and it could be understood and applied by researchers in the study, who were coming from varied disciplines. This method also has some similarities to other methods with which members of the research team were familiar, including grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Before embarking on the analysis, the research team discussed the use of qualitative software to aid in coding, such as NVivo, but this was rejected as team members come from different institutions and lacked access to the same software. Because of the extensive experience of the primary investigator using the analysis process for previous studies, the team decided to use spreadsheets to manage and share data, and traditional inductive content analysis to organize and analyze it (Silverman, 2020).

Reflexive thematic analysis was developed to delineate the process of the method into a cohesive set of steps (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021; Willig, 2013). This method is described as having specific stages, but it is flexible enough to meet the needs of the inquiry at hand. The first step was to have the researchers review the data and note initial ideas. In this and subsequent steps, not all the researchers involved in the study read and analyzed each response. At least two different researchers were engaged with participant responses, and all the study authors were involved in the analysis. During the first reading step, the researchers assigned to participants read each response multiple times and began to identify key ideas or concepts. Second, the process of generating initial codes was used by multiple researchers (at least two for each response) who coded remarkable features of the data systematically across the entire data set. During this step, each key idea was recorded and placed in a separate spreadsheet cell. The researchers coded iteratively to create parent codes resulting in the identified key themes. This

process included the steps of writing notes in spreadsheets to discuss the naming and combining of codes, as well as having in-person conversations to engage in these processes. All researchers engaged in discussions together to finalize codes. This process is common in qualitative research (Creswell, 2012) and is consistent with the process of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006, 2021). The third part of the process involved identifying themes, categorizing codes, and grouping similar codes into broader themes, which included discussion among all the researchers. Fourth, the researchers reviewed and reflexively considered the different themes, combining them to generate the core themes of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

As indicated above, the decision was made to have at least two researchers, and often a third, to review each participant's responses and reduce rater bias. This process resulted in the recategorization of some codes, until the final analysis was complete, resulting in the final identification of core themes. Participant responses to a question that contained data relevant to another question were also identified, disaggregated as necessary, and moved to the appropriate spreadsheets for analysis. After iterative rounds of data analysis, tallies were also made to determine the number and percentages of respondents who provided insights into each theme.

Validity and Reliability

As Maxwell (2013) argued, successful research designs consider issues of validity and reliability. Past researchers have established criteria for evaluating validity and reliability in qualitative research (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Cypress, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Utilizing some of these criteria while analyzing the current data, researchers integrated four key concepts to address validity and reliability issues.

First, the concept of *credibility* in qualitative research is thought of as confidence from the wider community in the accuracy of the findings (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Cypress, 2013;

Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility also includes ensuring that findings make sense to those in the research community and to the participants who are being studied. One method that is commonly used to ensure credibility is analyst triangulation (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), where multiple data analysts review the findings. This process provides a check on raters' perceptions to illuminate biases in interpretive analysis. The current study employed this process by using multiple raters from the research team with different perspectives on the responses to identify codes and generate themes.

Second, *transferability* is also known as external validity or the demonstration that the research findings can be applied to other contexts (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). While the data in the study were based on perceptions and the findings might not hold in other contexts, the research team took steps to ensure transferability by using the method of thick description (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), to continually consider both the individual micro and larger macro contextual factors at hand in the descriptions and analysis of participant responses. In notes and conversations during the coding process, consideration was given to how the context of the mission experience might have influenced participant responses.

Third, the concept of *dependability* was used as it refers to reliability (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and demonstrates that the findings have consistency and can be repeated. Due to resource and time constraints, a formal external audit of the data to establish dependability was not conducted and is a limitation of this study. However, researchers did internally audit the data and discussed them from different perspectives throughout the process. A few researchers had served as full-time missionaries and brought that lens, while others were less familiar with the Church and the mission experience. As such, unpacking responses and identifying themes from different perspectives was an important consideration.

Finally, a fourth principle often used to delineate reliability in qualitative research is *confirmability*, which refers to the level of neutrality in the study and extent to which results are shaped by participants rather than the researchers' biases and motivations (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Researchers took steps to ensure confirmability by creating an audit trail with extensive records, including the use of data analysis products where codes were directly connected to the original data and keeping records of process notes and summaries of the key skills identified. Confirmability was also addressed through triangulation, where different perspectives and interpretations of codes were discussed to come to agreement. Reflexivity was also established through conversations about the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Cypress, 2013). Overall, although there were limitations in terms of time and resources, substantial efforts were taken to assure validity and reliability by using the commonly accepted methods as described.

Results

This section reports the themes and insights for the leadership skills that participants believed they developed while serving a full-time mission, followed by their views on how they are currently using these skills. Most respondents provided stories, lists of ideas, and other suggestions. Some commentary is provided in this section to clarify the reported results, but the main reflection on the results occurs in the subsequent Discussion section.

Leadership Skills Gained from Missions

Of the 625 usable survey responses, 465 (74.4%) included data relevant to the first open-ended question (including identified skills that women mentioned in other parts of the survey), which asked "What are the leadership knowledge, skills, and abilities you developed throughout the experience of serving a full-time mission?" A final list of skill categories was created and ranked by percentage of the 465 respondents who mentioned each (see Table 2).

Table 2*Leadership Skills Developed While Serving a Full-Time Mission*

Skills	% of Participants Reporting
1. Public Speaking	40.2
2. Conflict Management	38.9
3. Courage	37.6
4. Interpersonal Skills	35.3
5. Problem Solving	33.5
6. Planning, Organization, & Accountability	31.0
7. Other Communication	28.6
8. Confidence	26.2
9. Spiritual Growth	23.7
10. Empathy	22.6
11. Feedback (Giving & Receiving)	22.6
12. Hard Things, Grit, Resilience, & Challenges	21.1
13. Mentoring	20.4
14. Teaching	20.2
15. Critical Thinking	19.6
16. Listening	17.4
17. Personal Growth & Awareness	15.3
18. Accepting Others	14.2
19. Time Management	13.1
20. Leader Development	12.3
21. Training Others	12.0
22. Teamwork	11.4
23. Foreign Language	11.2
24. Intercultural Skills	11.2
25. Goal Setting & Achieving	10.1
26. Managing People	10.1
27. Work Ethic	10.1
28. Serving Others	9.7
29. Taking Direction & Learning from Leaders	9.0
30. Independence & Boundaries	8.4
31. Patience	8.4
32. Decision Making & Judgment	8.0
33. Standing My Ground	7.7
34. Leading by Example	7.5
35. Using My Voice	7.5
36. Self-Discipline	6.5
37. Adaptability & Flexibility	6.2
38. Lifelong Learning	5.4

Note. N=625 participants

The 38 identified leadership skills were grouped into the following five major themes. All skills discussed below are ordered by the number of participant mentions.

Interpersonal and Relationship Skills (87%)

Almost nine of ten respondents reported gaining interpersonal or relationship skills while serving missions. This was the area that participants seemed to identify with most strongly. These skills included some of the five relational leadership skills highlighted above (e.g., conflict management, interpersonal skills, and empathy). Other identified skills were communication, mentoring, listening, accepting others, training others, teamwork, serving others, taking direction and learning from leaders, and establishing independence and boundaries. A mission was the first time many had been in close prolonged relationships outside their own families. Such relationships were with their companion (an assigned partner with whom missionaries are required to spend virtually all their time, typically in a six- or twelve-week rotation); other missionaries; individuals and families they taught or worked with; mission leaders; and other members of the Church. Hence, it is unsurprising that the relationship skills most frequently mentioned were “Conflict Management” (one of the five relational leadership skills identified earlier) and the related skills of compromise, negotiation, and mediation. One participant indicated growth from learning to manage conflict on her mission. She said: “I learned that when both sides are humble and willing to recognize a problem, it goes smoothly and everyone is better off than before the issue was addressed.” Another participant stated the following about conflict management in the context of a check-in with her missionary companion:

My trainer originally frustrated me by never answering our investigators’ questions. I finally brought it up ... and she responded that she was equally frustrated by the fact that

I always jumped in and answered without giving her an opportunity. My discomfort with silence had led me to answer quickly while her determination to make sure she answered correctly led her to pause before answering. Multiple valuable lessons in that experience!

In both instances quoted above, participants indicated that working through conflicts added to their growth and insight during their missions.

“Interpersonal Skills” (including building trust, making connections, forming close relationships, and dealing with varied personalities), also one of the relational leadership skills highlighted in the literature, was the next most frequently mentioned skill in this theme.

Quotations illustrating this skill include “I learned that building and preserving good relationships is essential to leadership,” and “I saw the importance of developing authentic ways of showing interest in those I work with and lead.” A third quotation was:

I have to do a lot of gentle nudging, sharing hopefulness, staying with people in the places where they are rather than where I'd like them to. These are skills I started to learn on my mission, and they are helpful now.

These quotations illustrate how participants came to value things like maintaining relationships and motivating followers, which are important to leadership.

“Empathy,” also one of the five relational leadership skills highlighted—and closely-related terms such as compassion, love, understanding others, and forgiveness—was also named as an important skill by study participants, which one respondent noted was the key to being “a more inclusive leader.” One participant discussed learning empathy during her mission:

I also was able to spend time as a sister training leader (STL) ... More than anything else we could do to lead, I felt the most vital was to let our sisters know we were supporting them. One of my companions and I called it “filling the bucket.”

Another participant stated: “I have more empathy than I would have because I saw that not everyone had the same background (e.g., education, family, religious experience). This allows me to be a more inclusive leader.”

Professional and Practical Skills (86%)

Nearly as many participants said they gained at least one of the following skills, which researchers categorized as professional and practical: public speaking; problem solving; planning, organization, and accountability; feedback (giving and receiving); teaching; critical thinking; time management; leader development; foreign language; goal setting and achieving; managing people; work ethic; decision making and judgment; and lifelong learning. Missions include a wide variety of activities, and missionaries often manage and coordinate their days independently. They thus develop leadership skills that have future professional and practical applications.

“Public Speaking” was the top skill mentioned, as missionaries had to speak frequently to large or small groups, often with little notice. “Problem Solving” was the next highest ranked professional skill mentioned; it included troubleshooting, being resourceful, and pivoting when plans changed. Missions presented logistical challenges (e.g., transportation, scheduling, and budgeting), hence many respondents listed “Planning, Organization, and Accountability” as a skill set. The next most frequently mentioned skill was “Feedback (giving and receiving).” Many respondents recognized how critical this leadership skill was. For example, one individual stated: “I absolutely loved learning how to give good feedback. . . . but to be a good leader, it is even more important to receive good feedback.” The next most mentioned skill was “Teaching,” a vital skill on a mission, and, as seen in a later section on roles, one that many participants used in subsequent professional and church work. Overall, participants identified numerous professional and practical skills developed while serving their missions. Even though skills in this category

were not directly aligned with the five relational leadership skills highlighted in the theoretical context, it is important to note that many of these skills also had relational components, in that they were often mentioned in terms of communication with and presentation to others.

Courage and Confidence (60%)

Most respondents said they gained courage and/or confidence on their missions. Table 2 includes several attributes in this category: courage, confidence, standing my ground, leading by example, and using my voice. Many participants mentioned the courage to open one's mouth and speak about religion, often an uncomfortable topic. In discussing "Courage" (identified earlier as one of the five relational leadership skills highlighted), respondents reported their missions had taught them to be brave, bold, and assertive, and to take risks by leaving their comfort zones. One woman said, "I learned it's better to risk being turned down than to never know where a moment of courage could take me." An additional quotation regarding the skill of courage included:

I learned to not be afraid to speak up to leaders when another leader crosses a line. Again, I may have already been inclined to do so, but having the opportunity to do so when needed was important in becoming who I am today.

Another participant shared her experience gaining courage through an anecdote about experiences with mission leadership:

By the end of my mission, I had taken on so many roles like this that I felt I should tell my mission president explicitly that he needed to do more to support the sisters who were very isolated in their areas, especially compared to the elders who could support each other much more easily. Thankfully he listened to me and called for a sisters meeting the very next day, which was the day I went home. I was very grateful for his decision to listen to me, and for my courage to speak up about something I thought needed changing.

Participants also gained confidence (again, one of the five relational leadership skills highlight in the theoretical context description) to speak, lead, and trust themselves. They noted increased levels of self-esteem and self-worth after their missions. One woman stated that:

My mission experiences were very pivotal to me and my path since then. I never would have had the confidence or been brave enough to tackle the educational experiences I did, had I not served a mission (double master's degree— engineering and MBA at the same time—the only woman to do so).

“Standing My Ground” related to situations where women learned to defend, advocate, stand up for themselves, and have the courage to speak the truth. Participants also listed the power of “Leading by Example.” Finally, returned missionaries mentioned “Using My Voice” as a skill gained through serving a mission, as shown by this comment: “Most importantly, it taught me that my voice as a woman in the Church is important and should be heard equally among priesthood leaders.” It is notable that this third category also focused on relationships, as participants often discussed incidents of courage and confidence in interactions with others.

Personal Growth and Maturity (48%)

Nearly half of respondents reported gaining skills for personal growth and maturity, as evidenced by the following: spiritual growth, personal growth and awareness, intercultural skills, patience, self-discipline, and adaptability and flexibility. Missions are a “coming of age” experience for many who serve, and this was clearly demonstrated by our sample. “Spiritual Growth” was the most mentioned in this category, which included increased faith, humility, obedience, joy, gratitude, and reliance upon Deity. These skills may not always be overtly connected to leadership, but many respondents recognized them as such.

Numerous participants listed “Personal Growth and Awareness” skills, like perspective,

positivity, overcoming perfectionism, open-mindedness, and maturity. Many, especially those serving far from home, cited “Intercultural Skills” (increased awareness, sensitivity, and respect for people and cultures very different from their own). One sister stated, “My mission brought me out of my world and into another.” The final three skills related to “Patience,” “Self-discipline,” and “Adaptability and Flexibility,” which highlighted ways that returned missionaries recognized and appreciated their personal growth and development during their missions and believed their increased maturity could help them develop as leaders. This category is not explicitly associated with the five relational leadership skills in the theoretical context section, but it merits discussion, as many respondents associated these skills with leadership learning.

Managing Challenges (21%)

Finally, one in five respondents mentioned learning to survive or to overcome challenges, as is demonstrated in the skill category “Hard Things, Grit, Resilience, and Challenges.” Being relatively distinct, this skill warrants its own main theme. One respondent said, “Missions are hard. They push you to your breaking point. But my mission helped me know how to get from my breaking point to my high points.” Many respondents emphasized interpersonal challenges, such as problems in relationships with companions. A common theme among respondents was that missions helped them learn they could do hard things, but that they would become stronger by doing so. They often used terms like grit, determination, perseverance, tenacity, resilience, endurance, persistence, and survival. Many expressed gratitude for the challenges and the strength they gained through their persistence.

Notably, a small (10.3%) but fervent subset of participants stated that, while they did gain valuable skills, they did not get to lead for various reasons: lack of opportunity, bias or discrimination (consciously or not) from mission leaders or other missionaries, or the attitude that

women were only to follow, not lead. One participant's statement encapsulates this sentiment:

I was told that if I didn't follow the rules exactly as prescribed or deliver the discussions word-for-word, exactly as they were written, I was not worthy of the Spirit and was not doing any good. I did not feel trusted or empowered.

Other participants said they had gained many leadership skills prior to serving, which some said they continued to develop on a mission, but others felt that their previous leadership abilities were diminished due to the biased treatment they experienced during their missions.

In addition, some participants recognized skills they gained, but did not identify them as related to leadership. These respondents may have believed that leadership occurs only while serving in a formal role. However, responses to Question 1 suggested that most participants recognized and valued the leadership skills they gained and developed on their missions.

Overall, participants identified a wide array of skills learned on their missions, which were grouped into distinct categories. Some of these categories aligned with relational leadership skills identified in the previous theoretical context description. Others were related to different aspects of leadership, but all illuminate various ways that the respondents connected leadership learning from their missions. These findings will be further considered in the Discussion section.

Demographic Findings

After identifying the leadership skills that participants mentioned most often, data were disaggregated according to some of the demographics collected in the study. This section focuses on factors age and education level, as they connect with some of the findings presented. Age may indicate maturity and proxies for how long the women had been back from their missions. Educational level has also been linked to lifelong learning skills, which could have affected an ability to harness learning more readily from earlier life experiences (Horrigan, 2016).

Table 3 summarizes the differences, in terms of percentages, among the five relational leadership skills identified above, along with the age range groupings collected. Some notable trends should be explored in future studies to assess statistical significance. For instance, the “Confidence,” “Conflict Management,” and “Empathy” categories seem to resonate more with younger participants, whereas “Courage” appears to resonate more strongly with older ones.

Table 3

Differences in Identified Women’s Relational Leadership Skills by Age Range

	20-24 (N=133)	25-29 (N=85)	30-39 (N=102)	40-49 (N=82)	50+ (N=63)
Confidence	30.83%	24.71%	28.43%	23.70%	19.05%
Conflict Management	44.36%	45.53%	36.27%	32.93%	33.33%
Courage	36.09%	34.12%	33.33%	42.68%	46.03%
Empathy	27.82%	22.35%	16.67%	23.17%	20.63%
Interpersonal Skills	33.08%	30.59%	40.20%	36.59%	36.55%

Table 4 below displays the disaggregated results by education level. The “High School Diploma and Some College” category included current students. For differences by education level, it appears as if “Conflict Management” and “Empathy” resonated more with less educated participants, which aligns with younger participants as well. There is more consistency across other skill categories and educational levels; participants at all educational levels viewed missions as beneficial to their development of skills.

Table 4

Difference in Key Relational Leadership Skills by Educational Level

	High School Diploma and	Associate Degree	Bachelor’s Degree	Master’s Degree+
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	Some College (N=95)	(N=51)	(N=161)	(N=158)
Confidence	27.37%	33.33%	25.47%	24.05%
Conflict Management	46.32%	41.18%	37.89%	34.81%
Courage	45.26%	31.37%	33.54%	39.24%
Empathy	26.32%	29.41%	24.22%	16.46%
Interpersonal Skills	36.84%	37.25%	34.78%	34.18%

The results of Question 1 indicate that leadership skills identified the most by participants align largely with the five relational leadership skills identified in the theoretical context for this study, namely, “Conflict Management,” “Courage,” “Interpersonal Skills,” “Empathy,” and “Confidence.” While the top skill identified was “Public Speaking,” the key relationally-based leadership skills that were highlighted were also rated in the top 10 skills identified.

Current Use of Leadership Skills

The second research question asked was, “How are you currently using the leadership knowledge, skills, and abilities you developed during your mission?” Responses to this question came in two general formats. First, participants discussed skills that they developed, which were moved to the analysis for Question 1. Second, they identified the main roles in which they were now using their leadership training, with 382 respondents mentioning that they used such skills in their current roles. The 28 different roles mentioned were aggregated into five main categories, with the percentage of those who responded to this question that mentioned that role.

Church Roles (22%)

Unsurprisingly, participants reported using leadership skills for roles within the Church, such as being the president of women’s, youth, and children’s organizations within their local congregations. They also noted they used the teaching skills they learned on their missions. Some

talked about using planning and organizing skills at church. Others discussed understanding how congregation processes work and developing a range of interpersonal and relational skills, like listening, empathy, and advocacy, as the following quotation suggests: “I am in the Relief Society presidency now and am constantly having opportunities to listen deeply to what our struggling sisters are saying. This compassion and desire to listen came a lot from my mission.”

Education and Guidance Roles (21%)

Just over one-fifth of participants reported that they use leadership skills from their missions in their work as teachers or in other relational roles where they guide or develop others (e.g., coaching, mentoring, and advocacy). Many participants reported being in professional teaching roles, from preschool to university professors to department chairs. Some stated that their success in education was directly attributable to skills beyond teaching they learned on their mission, such as increased confidence, public speaking, and “doing difficult things.” One participant discussed how she passed on these skills to others: “I’m a teacher and actually teach a leadership class. I interact with college students regularly, and I encourage them to push themselves and do things that they see as hard.”

Family Roles (20%)

One-fifth of participants said they use their leadership skills within their families. These respondents noted how the skills learned on their mission help them in their work as mothers. They pointed to the value of assertiveness skills and building confidence, deemed as essential to advocating for their children, as one quotation suggests: “I’m assertive. As a mom, I can tactfully but assertively approach teachers to advocate for my child.” Participants also noted the value of modeling independence and resilience for their daughters. An interesting set of comments focused on how women lead in families, specifically as wives. They regarded people and relationship

skills learned on a mission as building blocks for leading their families well. Participants noted that compromise and collaboration are essential to a successful marriage, and they developed those skills on their missions. Even simple techniques, such as planning and goal setting through family discussions, were highlighted as useful aptitudes drawn from mission experiences.

Professional and Work Roles (17%)

Respondents mentioned a wide range of other professional and employment roles in which they regularly used mission-learned leadership skills (beyond those noted earlier). Along with public speaking, giving presentations, and people management, the ability to communicate complex ideas simply was identified as a skill that made the respondents stand out at work. Participants said that a mission helped them develop tenacity and resilience, as well as the ability to see the benefits of taking on difficult tasks. Women working as managers noted their capacity for people-centered leadership. Success was also discussed in terms of helping others to become leaders or having compassion for everyone, while recognizing the importance of prioritizing relationships and balancing high performance. One respondent spoke of being consulted for her leadership knowledge and skills: “I’m often invited in to consult on leadership and team development across my company.” The jobs mentioned included supervisor, manager, business owner, researcher, project manager, and support staff within numerous fields.

College and School Roles (10%)

Respondents also said that their mission learning experiences had affected their engagement with education, particularly that skills they learned on their mission increased their focus on education and helped them succeed as students. Such concepts included resilience, planning, problem solving, and public speaking. They also identified the ability to work well with people from different backgrounds as a mission skill that transfers into educational settings.

Overall, in responding to Question 2, survey participants discussed taking leadership roles at work, in the family, and at church. Although leading in an educational setting was by far the most common experience reported, a few listed senior leadership roles in project management, business, and engineering. Surprisingly, less than 2% of respondents talked about using leadership skills in community roles; examples included being involved in politics and campaigning and, in particular, advocating for the disadvantaged. Several respondents also mentioned that being a good role model for younger women was a critical aspect of leadership. Again, skills such as conflict resolution, relationship building, and empathy were mentioned as central to leading in many roles. Although not articulated directly, the results of this section also align with the theories and relational leadership skills outlined previously in this paper.

Discussion

This study found that women who had served full-time missions as young adults for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints reported developing a variety of leadership skills and abilities—even when they did not link the skills to leadership—ranging from interpersonal and relationship skills, professional and practical skills, courage and confidence, personal growth and maturity, to learning to manage challenges. The results align with the five relational leadership skills derived from the transformational and servant leadership literature and relational-cultural principles, which indicate that women are drawn towards leadership approaches that are more relationally and interpersonally-based. These skills are also consistent with behaviors associated with effective leadership (Bass, 1999; Bonau, 2017; Folkman, 2019; Zenger & Folkman, 2019a).

Participants identified with relational skills gained from their mission experiences. All core themes and their subthemes had strong relational components (e.g., giving and receiving feedback, teaching, managing people, standing their ground, developing empathy, leading by

example, enhancing listening skills, and using their voice). Participants stated how relationships were key to their leadership development throughout their missions. It is likely, although data were not collected to demonstrate, that relationally-based themes are more prominent with sister missionaries than they would be with young men who served missions. This conjecture is related to the perception that missionary training for men is geared toward traditional, less relational, and more transactional male-centric leadership norms (Lyon & McFarland, 2003).

Participants also reported relational experiences that hindered them on their missions, centered mainly on feeling invalidated, disempowered, and disappointed. These experiences connect to RCT in that all people, especially women, are more likely to succeed in both personal and professional organizational settings that have mutual support and respect. Yet, many women continue to get feedback that they need to adjust themselves to male-centric types of leadership (Fox-Kirk, 2019; Ridgeway, 2011), even though many women, and especially those who identify with patriarchal values (Gilligan, 1996; Harter, 2012), largely identify with relationally-based leadership skills. This phenomenon was reflected in some of the survey responses.

In terms of the samples shared from the disaggregated data, these results suggest that younger and less educated participants might associate the five relational leadership skills highlighted with their mission experiences more strongly, apart from “courage,” which seemed to resonate more strongly with older participants. Some of the older, more educated participants might have had experiences in their personal lives, or professional and educational activities, that gave them more opportunities to practice skills they learned on missions, making them less likely to associate these skills with missions. For “courage,” some older participants might have recognized how their missions were key to developing that skill. Some younger participants may have gained “courage” through their missions but could not yet recognize that as such. Overall,

the disaggregated results implied that the mission experience could be formative for leadership development of women who are younger and/or who have not attained more advanced education. Even though the sample itself was more highly educated than is typical of Latter-day Saint and Utah women more generally (as discussed in the next section) these differences are informative and may have bearing on future research regarding leadership learning with this population.

In terms of how study participants viewed the post-mission transfer of skills they gained during mission service, the strongest link was to current leadership roles in the Church, followed by roles related to education and guidance, family, professional work, and college and school. As highlighted earlier, Latter-day Saint mission experiences have long been seen as leadership training grounds for men, especially within the Church, and many male missionaries transfer skills learned from their missions into corporate and entrepreneurial settings (Benedict, 2012; Bluestein, 2020; Groth, 2011; McKeown, 2012). In contrast, while the majority of the participants in the present study did recognize leadership skill transfer from their missions, they indicated more tendency to transfer mission leadership skills to contexts within home and church settings than to professional and civic ones. It is notable, however, especially in reference to the transformational, servant leadership, and RCT principles previously discussed, that participants who did make leadership transferability connections to professional and civic roles often did so in relational contexts, such as teaching, mentoring, and with direct reports and peers.

It is important to consider the reasons why the women did not make stronger and more explicit connections between leadership learning on their missions and current professional and civic roles. As Madsen (2016) suggested, the motivations for Latter-day Saint women who embark on leadership activities often reflect a wish to serve or a desire to promote motherhood, draw closer to God, or feeling called to do so. The results from this study support such assertions

in suggesting that women may be more motivated to go on missions to serve others (a relational characteristic) than they are to gain leadership training for themselves. Finally, the identity formation literature (Madsen, 2017) confirms that boys are more often socialized toward seeing themselves as future leaders than girls are. Therefore, some women, especially those from religious societies with strong patriarchal norms and adherence to traditional gender roles (Jacobs, 2021; Sitzmann & Campbell, 2020) may not consider that what they have experienced could help them become leaders. Even though a transfer of learning may occur from leadership gained in volunteer settings to other contexts (Bartsch, 2012; Digby & Ferrari, 2007; Pierce et al., 2020; Wootan, 2017), some women might not make these connections to their mission experience because they have not been socialized to do so.

Limitations

This study had several limitations, the primary one being its reliance on survey data. Thus, there is no direct measure of leadership behaviors. Surveys rely on self-reports; external observers might not verify what participants report about their leadership skills and abilities, but their reports largely align with characteristics of effective leaders that the literature identifies, specifically those related to the leadership approaches that are more closely associated with women (Bass, 1999; Bonau, 2017; Folkman, 2019; Lemoine & Blum, 2021; Zenger & Folkman, 2019a). Self-report methods also cannot control for participants' post-rationalization processes. Future studies could use ethnographic or observational methods to gather these data. Second, because of the study's focus, the recruiting methods utilized led to most participants being women who live in the state of Utah (USA). Future research could use wider recruiting and sampling methods and include experiences of sister missionaries outside the United States.

With hindsight, it would have been useful to collect more of participants' demographic

data to identify systematic trends (e.g., year of missionary service, whether the women had held higher-level women's leadership positions within the Church) and more information about their mission experiences (e.g., perceptions about missionary companionships and mission leaders). A more intensive analysis of disaggregated results based on these factors could tell us more about the research questions than the limited disaggregated analyses we did according to age and educational level. Finally, it is possible that our findings are attributable to unmeasured variables, such as time away from home, or the power of female companionship.

In addition, the sample in this study may contain a larger percentage of highly-educated women with careers than is found among Utah and Latter-day Saint women more generally. This could be due to the nature of entities where recruitment efforts were made (e.g., universities). It is also possible that women who choose to serve missions are also more likely to complete higher education pursuits and go on to have careers. Alternatively, it might also be the case that the experience of serving a mission helps encourage women to pursue education and career more often. Control and measurement of these variables was not possible with the research team's limited resources and was beyond the scope of this study. This study should be viewed as an exploratory study aimed at starting more rigorous research in this area.

Implications

The findings from this study support the assertion that women can and often do transfer leadership learning from volunteer experiences such as missionary service to other roles. The findings suggest that many women perceive they have transferred leadership skills from missions to other contexts, though these were largely in the areas of church and family, and largely in the realm of interpersonal relationships. Since some women did report transferring skills to professional and civic roles as well, however, there is implied potential for more women to

recognize their abilities to transfer these skills to these types of roles, especially if such learning were framed for them as leadership preparation for larger contexts.

Researchers could not locate other studies about experiences of returned sister missionaries and leadership, making this a unique contribution. Indeed, the study of this population provides valuable insight and suggests that if more support was provided to enhance women's ability to connect relational leadership skillsets that they recognize learning on missions to larger professional and civic leadership contexts, it could help close the large gender leadership gaps in religious societies (Jacobs, 2021; Pappas, 2020; Sitzmann & Campbell, 2020). Stakeholders in women's leadership development should recognize this potential transferability and work to help women capitalize on it.

Given the broader implications described above, it is important to describe some of the more specific suggestions that this study offers for practice. For instance, women should have development opportunities that help them reflect on their experiences and their potential links to leadership knowledge and skills, specifically to larger professional and civic realms. Awareness and education strengthen leadership development (Madsen, 2008, 2009) and could help women connect skills gained during missions or similar experiences to future leadership roles. Research has shown that as women are taught how developmental experiences more generally (e.g., missionary service, motherhood, nonprofit board membership) have direct and indirect ties to leadership development, they can be more reflective in ways that help them transfer their learning more intentionally (Madsen, 2008, 2009, 2017). Furthermore, leaders can ensure that those under their purview have equal opportunity for developmental relationships (e.g., mentors sponsors, and role models). This would include training that helps leaders perceive their own biases and uses better methods for developing girls and women.

In terms of the experience of Church missions, the implications of this study could be for the Church to expand on the current model of giving women positions as sister training leaders by explicitly framing this responsibility as preparation for future leadership roles. Such framing might facilitate women recognizing the leadership skills they are gaining on their missions and enhance their abilities to transfer them to other roles. As more Latter-day Saint women are becoming concerned with women's roles in the Church, and more women are serving missions (Riess, 2019), Church leaders may be amenable to applying these findings to create mission environments that might help women see the potential for leadership transferability—not only to the church and family contexts as found in this study— but also to larger roles in professional and civic environments.

Future Research

Ideas for future research include further analysis comparing those who served missions before and after 2012 (the date of the age range expansion for women serving missions). Future research might also expand the sample to include more women of color and further analyze participants' current activity in the Church and whether their mission experiences affected those choices, especially as the mission experience is perceived as negative and even somewhat traumatic for a sizeable subset of individuals (Doty et al., 2015). The possibility that some respondents who did not answer both questions had negative feelings or associations with their missions should also be explored. In addition, future studies might compare men's and women's perceptions of leadership skills gained on missions. It would also be helpful to compare women's perceptions of leadership skills gained on Latter-day Saint missions to other types of missions or intensive volunteer experiences to assess the applicability of the findings to other contexts.

Conclusion

Through better understanding and explicitly framing experiences that women already engage in, such as full-time missions, as preparation for leadership, women, and especially women from more religious societies where the gendered wage and leadership gaps are greatest, can continue to grow in their leadership capacity. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and similar traditional organizations can encourage women to harness these learned skills and apply them in future leadership roles in various settings. By helping women recognize these possibilities, and by training leaders to reframe these experiences as leadership development, more women may seek out leadership roles not only within their families and churches, but within professions, governments, and the global community.

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