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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-LDS Children and Their Active LDS Parents

by

Jared Worwood

**Capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for graduation with**

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Running head: EX-LDS CHILDREN AND THEIR ACTIVE LDS PARENTS

“I Don't Want to Have a Weird Relationship With You, So I'm Trying”: Relational Turning
Points and Trajectories of Ex-LDS Children and Their Active LDS Parents

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Abstract

Ex-LDs individuals face a unique and often turbulent time in their relationship with their parent if the individual decides to leave the LDS Church. To explore this phenomena, we investigated the turning points and relational trajectories of ex-LDS children and their interactions with their active LDS parent. Thirty emerging adult children were interviewed using the retrospective interviewing technique (RIT). Through turning point analysis, we identified 14 turning points: (1) Discussions of values and beliefs, (2) decrease in church participation, (3) moving out, (4) physical proximity, (5) critical family events, (6) parent realizations, (7) sibling events, (8) romantic life events, (9) verbal boundary-setting, (10) social life conversations, (11) coming out, (12) personal value decisions, (13) parent interference, and (14) non-verbal events. Eight relationship trajectories also emerged: (1) minor setback, (2) reconciliation, (3) delayed reconciliation, (4) reluctant reconciliation, (5) positive turbulent, (6) negative turbulent, (7) moderate turbulent, and (8) diminishing closeness.

Keywords: Child & parent communication, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Exit, Relational closeness.

Dedication

To my dear mother, whose vulnerability and honesty inspired me to pursue this project.

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Introduction

The doctrine and practices of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (also known as the LDS or Mormon Church) require high levels of commitment and involvement. As a result, like many high-cost religions, not only does the LDS church influence the identities of its members, but it is also extensively integrated into the everyday life of LDS families (Airhart & Bendroth, 1996; Loser, Klein, Hill, & Dollahite, 2008; Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010). Besides being instructed that it is their divine mandate to teach their children the gospel of the church (Nelson, 2001; Viñas, 2010), LDS parents are also taught that a successful family is one that is based on the principles of the gospel (The Family: A Proclamation to the World, 1995). Because of these principles, parents and children face a unique and often turbulent time in their relationship if a child decides to leave the church.

In previous studies concerning family and religion, when a child exits the church of their parents, the parent often feels that they have failed, or that the child has betrayed them (Ellison, Bartkowski, & Segal, 1996). In fact, researchers have observed that parents and children who have divergent religious beliefs experience significantly less affectionate relationships with each other than religiously aligning parent-child relationships (Myers, 2004; Pearce & Axinn, 1998). As a result of these relational strains and changes, children often feel disenfranchised or marginalized by their own families (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010).

Though scholars agree that significant relational changes occur when children deviate from the faith of their parents, most research in this area investigates these relationships by looking at an individual's health or relational outcomes (see Ellison, Bartkowski, & Segal, 1996; Pearce & Axinn, 1998; Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010). Investigating these individual and

relational level outcomes does not fully capture the nuances of relational change and the ever changing dynamics of the parent-child relationship (Golish, 2000).

By analyzing the relational path (in this study we refer to this as a trajectory) rather than only the outcomes, we will better be able to capture the fluidity of these parent-child relationships. Through this study, we aim to illuminate an aspect of the experience of ex-LDS individuals. We also identify relational turning points and their influence on the parent-child relationship in order to further explore these parent-child relationships.

Emerging adults and parent-child closeness

Individuals often make decisions regarding religion during emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2007). Emerging adults, characterized by individuals who range in age from 18 to their late 20's, experience a time of instability, possibility, and identity exploration (see Arnett, 2004; 2007). During this time of their life, emerging adults also make choices about their education, career and values. Because of this, emerging adults have been observed to experiment with world views that differ from their family's beliefs (Arnett, 2000; 2007).

Parent-child relationships are relatively permanent and, because of societal discourse on the parent-child relationship, these relationships often endure despite normal relationship-threatening events (Scharp & Thomas, 2016). This means that, though emerging adults become more independent from their family, the parent-child relationship can influence a child's outlook on life well into adulthood (Kretschmer, Vollebergh, & Oldehinkel, 2015). Researchers have found that among emerging adults, higher parent-child relationship quality is associated with higher quality of life (Szkody, Rogers, & McKinney, 2018). It is important to note, however, that the cultural context in which the parent-child relationship exists can heavily influence how closeness is maintained and understood (Sillars, 1995).

Family Culture

Cultural identification and family communication often mutually reinforce each other, and cultural patterns are learned and lived through family interactions (Sillars, 1995). In LDS culture, families are encouraged to attend LDS religious services together (Church Meetings, 2000) study scriptures together daily (Durrant, 2018), and meet together at least one night a week (a tradition known as family night) to share religious doctrine (Oaks, 2007). Conversely, cultural traditions, celebrations, and rituals add to the richness and distinctiveness of family interactions; strengthening the collective identity of family members (Sillars, 1995). LDS families are 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.

Because of its early persecution and the modern media's mischaracterizations or mockery of the LDS church, a mentality of us versus them can be seen throughout LDS culture (Baker & Campbell, 2010; Perkins, 2018). LDS members even take pride in being a "peculiar people" because their belief system and social norms at times seems at odds with other Christian religions and societal norms (Turner, 1980). When individuals choose to leave the LDS religion, their ability to participate and enjoy family traditions can be hindered. For example, ex-LDS individuals cannot participate in LDS wedding ceremonies that occur within temples. Only members who act in accordance to church teachings are qualified to enter LDS temples, regardless of familial association. Because of its social and familial consequences, leaving the LDS church can be a difficult process for many individuals (Hinderaker, 2014; Hinderaker & O'Connor, 2015).

Leaving the church and becoming prodigal children

The population of people who are leaving or have left the LDS church is growing due to both controversial policies instituted by the LDS church and a generation of religiously skeptic youth (Moyer, 2015; Nielsen, 2017). Leaving the LDS church is often a fluid process, marked by cycles of quitting followed by recommitment, and a vacillation between exit and recommitment (Hinderaker, 2014). Leaving the LDS church has been characterized as both an experience of fear, uncertainty, and rejection, but also one of liberation and empowerment (Boyd, 2013; Hinderaker & O'Connor, 2015). When an individual chooses to leave the LDS church, they create new identities concerning their relationship with spirituality (Scharp & Beck, 2017).

When a child leaves the LDS church, it is not only a difficult experience for them, but it can be a moment of crisis for their 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 LDS church, parents who fail to instill strong LDS beliefs in their children are also seen as having failed generations to come (Maxwell, 1994). According to LDS church leaders, the departure of one's child from the LDS faith is one of the greatest pains a LDS parent can feel (Bednar, 2014). In LDS 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 child-parent relationships. When beliefs and cultural values are shared, there is less of a need for interaction to define the relationship (Sillars, 1995). Choosing to leave the LDS church might disrupt parent-child relationship expectations, resulting in several interactions and briefings to maintain and define the relationship (Sillars, 1995).

Turning points and relational mapping

Events that shape and contextualize relationships are called turning points (Graham, 1997). Such points become central to understanding a relationship's development and inner workings (Bolton, 1961). Having participants plot and discuss turning points allows researchers to explore how certain events influence and give meaning to relationships (Baxter & Bullis, 1986). Turning points also facilitate the creation of relational trajectories, or the holistic path that relationships take (Golish, 2000). Such trajectories give a visual representation of the fluid nature of relationships. The categorization of turning points and relational trajectories is called turning point analysis (TPA).

Though many researchers have used TPA to study relationships after significant events such as divorce, the birth of a grandchild, or relocation (Becker, Johnson, Craig, Gilchrist, Haigh, & Lane, 2009; Dun, 2010; Graham, 1997), researchers have yet to use TPA to investigate how ideological shifts can influence relationships. When families differ in religious or cultural identity, as in the case of ex-LDS children and active LDS parents, issues regarding family loyalty arise and create relational ambiguity for which there may be no well-established negotiation mechanism (Sillars, 1995). Because turning points capture communicative events where relationships are defined and navigated (Baxter & Bullis, 1986), we seek to understand how families negotiate differing values by asking the following research questions:

RQ1: What turning points exist within the relationships of ex-LDS children and their active LDS parent?

RQ2: What trajectories occur in relationships of ex-LDS children and their active LDS parent?

Method

Data Collection

With Institutional Review Board approval, we recruited 30 participants that fit our study's criteria. In order to participate in this study, participants had to: (1) be between the ages of 18-30, (2) have been raised in the LDS religion, (3) have at least one living parent still active in the LDS church, and (4) have had at least one conversation with their parent(s) concerning their departure from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Using convenience sampling, we recruited participants by posting the research call on a social network sites as well as ex-Mormon groups within the site.

After completing a demographic questionnaire, we employed a retrospective interview technique (RIT), a technique often employed in order to perform turning point analysis (see Baxter & Bullis, 1986) by asking subjects to chart a visualization of their relational path with one of their parents by plotting and labeling turning points. Participants plotted turning points using time as the x-dimension and a relational closeness as the y-dimension scale from 0%-100%, 0% meaning they felt completely separate and 100% meaning they felt completely together. Participants were asked to plot all the turning points from the first significant event where their differing beliefs in regards to the LDS church started to influence their relationship to where they felt the relationship was at the time of the interview. After charting their relational trajectory and discussing the turning points they plotted, participants were asked additional semi-structured questions to gain further insight into their relationship with their parents. Interviews were conducted by phone call, video call, and in person in locations including library study rooms and a university conference room.

Interviews lasted 34 minutes on average and ranged from 15 minutes to 53 minutes. Each interview was recorded and then transcribed verbatim, during which time all identifying information was removed and replaced by pseudonyms. This process resulted in 283 pages of double-spaced text.

Participant Demographics

On average, participants were 23 years old, but ranged in age from 18 years old to 30 years old ($SD=3.64$). Of the 30 participants, 19 identified as women (63%), 10 identified as men (33%), and one identified as A-gender (3%). 28 participants reported as White, one participant reported as both Black/African American and White, and one participant reported as both Asian/Pacific Islander and White.

Data Analysis

To answer RQ1, we identified turning point themes that emerged from the interviews. We first listed all the turning points marked, using the labels that the participants gave each turning point. Participants marked an average of five turning points (Min:1, Max: 12), totaling 152 turning points for our dataset. Following Smith's (1995) guidelines for qualitative thematic analysis, we read the interview transcripts twice. In the first reading, we sought to gain a comprehensive perspective on the data. In the second reading we began to identify emergent turning point themes by using the interview transcripts in conjunction with the turning point labels given by participants. Tentative categories were formed by comparing turning point labels and the narratives behind them and then grouping them according to their overall theme.

To identify emergent relational trajectories (RQ2), we analyzed the 30 relational trajectories that participants plotted. We grouped the participants' relational trajectories according to their visual and pictorial similarity (see Golish, 2000). Special attention was paid to

the location of the final turning point and the turning point preceding it. A final turning point rated above the preceding turning point was seen as a "positive tail." A final turning point rated below its preceding turning point was seen as a "negative tail." Negative and positive tails helped to further delineate trajectory categories. Relational-maps were then grouped according to common/similar trajectories to identify emergent paths. We reached saturation, or the point where no new themes emerge in the data (see Corbin & Strauss, 2008), at Interview 8 for RQ1 and at Interview 11 for RQ2.

Verification

We employed three verification procedures to ensure the validity of our study. These procedures include (1) keeping an audit trail, (2) negative case analysis, and (3) seeking exemplar identification (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We kept detailed notes regarding our decisions concerning emergent turning point and trajectory types, creating an audit trail. Conducting a negative analysis required us to ensure that all emergent data was accounted for in our results, regardless of prevalence. Finally, when analysis had been completed, we found exemplars that characterized both the turning points and the relational trajectories.

Results

Emergent Turning Points (RQ1)

Turning point analysis yielded 14 categories of turning points that influence the relationships of ex-LDS children and their active LDS parent: (1) Discussions of values and beliefs, (2) decrease in church participation, (3) moving out, (4) physical proximity, (5) critical family events, (6) parent realizations, (7) sibling events, (8) romantic life events, (9) verbal boundary-setting, (10) social life conversations, (11) coming out, (12) personal value decisions, (13) parent interference, and (14) non-verbal events.

Discussions of value and beliefs. The most common turning point, discussions of value and belief, emerged in three subtypes of conversation: debates of morality and doctrine, expressions of doubt, and church exit revelations. Debates of morality and doctrine were often the most confrontational. Participants spoke of intense fights surrounding church's stance on homosexuality, the founding of the LDS church, and rules that participants found discriminatory. Participants consistently stated that such debates led to a decrease in closeness. When participants discussed instances where they expressed doubting their faith in the LDS religion, parents either expressed fear or dismissiveness. Participants discussed how both responses made them feel less close to their parents. Finally, participants telling their parents that they were "exiting the church" (no longer believing in or practicing the LDS religion) led to polarizing outcomes. This type of conversation at times did lead to higher feelings of closeness when parents responded receptively, but more often, participants expressed how detrimental the confrontational discussion was on their relationship with their parent. Gregory relates:

They both sat down and told me to sit down like, "Hey so we looked through your messages." And I'm like, "Alright, this is it, I finally have to [tell them]." I was hoping to graduate high school and move out and then be able to tell them because I knew it would be bad if I lived at home and they found out. So they just grilled me...like really ridiculing me. They said, "Do you believe in the Mormon church anymore?" I said, "No." [They were] really badgering me, but like being very rude...So I felt very attacked...My dad and mom were obviously very hurt so there was a lot of hurtful things that were said.

(Interview 13)

In Gregory's account, he reveals how much trepidation there can be before revealing one's disbelief. He also relates how such a revelation can lead to confrontation that is painful for both

the child and their parents. In other cases, participants told of how their parents tried to negotiate their child's decision. Chandler discusses when he told his mother about his decision to leave the LDS church:

She started crying a little bit and then talking about... apologetics basically, trying to argue me back into the church and like I said, I didn't have like, a very detailed grasp of what my thought processes were or how to describe them, so I was not good at expressing myself in response to what she was saying. But I also wasn't convinced obviously by what she was saying so...she just started asking me to give it another try, and so I said that I would and that was a lie [laughs]. I felt that I had already given it as many tries as I could in good faith, and then there was really nothing left for me in the church. (Interview 5).

Even though responses such as Chandler's mom's aren't particularly confrontational or aggressive, participants still felt less close to their parent as a result of the response.

Decrease in church participation. Differing from turning points concerning discussions of values and beliefs, decreased church participation turning points are instances where individuals decreased their involvement in or completely abstained from LDS religious observances. In most cases, this meant individuals stopped going to religious services or ecclesiastical classes, but sometimes this meant a complete withdrawal of membership from the LDS church. Addressing such actions with one's parents often was met with disappointment and anger, as Alan expressed:

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 she's like, "Well you could, you could, 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 journey." And she was, she was really angry for a while. (Interview 1)

A few participants mentioned how discussing their decreasing church participation with their parents often felt freeing and improved their relationships; however, the majority of participants, like Alan, stated that conversations concerning such decisions were abrasive and led to a decrease in the overall closeness they felt with their parent.

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 decrease of contact and oversight led to less conflict with their parent and a freedom to explore what they wanted and thus improved their relationship with their parent. 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. (Interview 11)

In the second category, participants talked about how the physical distance either made it hard to reconcile past arguments or made parents feel like participants had changed for the worse because of the new circumstances. Lydia relates:

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. (Interview 21)

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.

Physical proximity. Physical proximity turning points are characterized by events where participants were physically together with their parents, such as living together or reuniting for holidays. Participants who experienced physical proximity turning points expressed feeling restricted and constantly under supervision. Fred relates:

So, I kind of started, you know, skipping some weeks, or not going, you know, for the full three hours, or whatever, and, of course, because I'm living with my parents, they kind of noticed that and it kind of forced some conversations to happen. So I think that was kind of the first point where it's, like, you know, I didn't really go from being Mormon to Atheist overnight, but, you know, I was with my parents that entire time. So, every incremental step, they kind of noticed, so, good and bad, because it kind of forced me to have conversations with my parents about it. (Interview 11)

As Fred states, not only were his parents constantly aware of his church activity, but being physically close also prompted more conversations about his lifestyle. Physical proximity turning points usually led to participants feeling less close with their parents.

Critical family events. Participants described critical family events, such as the death of a family member or other intense family events, as polarizing incidents. According to participants, critical family events also could decrease closeness when parents responded by calling on the child for religious support or belief. Such responses led to feelings of hurt and suspicion. However, participants stated that in critical family events where family bonds were emphasized (either by the child or parent) closeness generally increased. Such phenomena emerged in Dillon's narrative when he spoke about his uncle being excommunicated (officially expelled from church membership by a disciplinary council) from the LDS church:

What's kind of funny is that we were really the only ones that offered my uncle any kind of support when he went through this and I think that brought my mom and I closer because...she was able to see how the excommunication was obviously abusive, but it was harmful to him, you know, just with he and his family... it didn't help, it made everything more difficult. (Interview 7)

Dillon specifically states that his relationship with his mom improved because his mom was able to overcome LDS norms regarding excommunication and focus on the importance of family ties.

Parent realizations. Parent realizations encapsulate turning points where participants felt that their parent expressed an effort to understand the participant's circumstance or point of view. Eric describes such an event:

She didn't say this specifically, the takeaway I got from the conversation was like, "Hey, I might not understand the exact problems you're going through but I--I've been there emotionally" basically. (Interview 9)

Like in Eric's narrative, participants felt deeply touched when they experienced such an event. Though not all parent realization events directly increased the participants perceived closeness with their parent, all participants described parent realizations as a catalyst for positive change in their relationships.

Sibling events. Participants also mentioned that the way their parent treated their sibling were also influencing events. In some instances, participants felt their parent treated siblings active in the LDS church better than they were treating the participant. In other cases, they felt that their parents were treating their siblings unnecessarily poorly for not following church teachings. Nadia tells the story of when her parents found out her sister was gay:

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. Because at that point my mom still viewed it as like a disease. (Interview 23)

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 as well.

Romantic life events. Romantic life events are turning points that occur when participants felt that their parent was making judgement calls on the participant's romantic relationships. In most instances, participants related how their parent disapproved of them dating someone who did not belong to the LDS church or doing things abnormal in LDS dating culture (premarital sex, living together, etc.). An example of such event, Melody relates:

I hadn't been going to church that whole year and I had my first boyfriend at that time, and my mom thought I was doing things I wasn't supposed to be doing with him. And our relationship, we just kind of distanced ourselves from each other at that point and she didn't trust me, I didn't trust her. (Interview 22)

Like Melody describes, dating people outside of the LDS faith can put a strain on the parent-child relationship, and participants often told how when such relationships ended or if they started dating a believer, they would feel like they could be closer to their parent.

Verbal boundary-setting. Boundary-setting turning points occurred when the ex-LDS child initiated conversation with their parents to discuss what they could and could not discuss when together. Oscar talks about his experience setting boundaries:

I like, just kind of like, set 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." So yeah, I just set that boundary. And after that like, things were pretty decent. (Interview 25)

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 LDS church.

Social life conversations. Social life conversations were turning points that consisted of events where a participant's parents found out about a participant enacting new social behaviors (drinking coffee, going to bars, online dating, etc.). Sometimes this led to ex-LDS children feeling more accepted by their parent, but usually social life events were described as more confrontational in nature as in the case of Patricia:

My mom had heard that I had started drinking coffee and that I had drunk alcohol on occasion and that I was using a dating app. So I came home for my sister's birthday... and my mom let loose on me. She basically called me a slut. I don't remember what words she used, but she accused me sleeping around which was not what I was doing. (Interview 26)

Patricia's story highlights the sentiment of many participants who felt that their parents were drawing inaccurate and negative assumptions about their social behavior, thus such participants felt less close with their parent.

Coming out (Gender/sexuality reveal). Coming out turning points include revealing one's sexual orientation or gender identity. Because LDS doctrine preaches against the practice

of homosexuality and gender fluidity, parents often respond negatively when their children express such inclinations. In her story, Quinn expressed:

After I came out to both of my parents as a transgender that was probably the lowest. 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 is what they told me. (Interview 27)

In this excerpt, Quinn references how her parents were coming to terms with her lack of belief, but the revelation of her gender identification proved to be somewhat insurmountable. Though some ex-LDS children who came out to their families found support from their parent, many felt disenfranchised.

Personal value decisions. Personal value decisions consist of turning points where participants felt that an ideological decision they had privately made put them at odds with church doctrine and influenced their relationship with their parent. Samantha tells about how her private choice to be non-religious created a noticeable distance between her and her mother:

I fully embraced my non-religious self, because I definitely struggled with a lot of things. So I feel like, you know, in the LDS church you're taught like all of these things, like don't do this, don't do all these things, they're bad. And I definitely struggled being like "Well, you're not a bad person if you drink, you're not a bad person if you drink coffee," and it like took me a little while to realize that that wasn't lining up 100%. And at this time I still felt like my parents expected those things though, and so if I didn't line up

with that thing they said then I would be a bad person even though I myself didn't feel that way, and so... I was like "yeah, I like alcohol..." Not too much has happened other than that, but then I think... my mom definitely felt like the distance that I put in between us. (Interview 29)

As shown in Samantha's experience, these personal value decisions still shaped relational behavior and closeness, despite being unspoken.

Parent interference. Parent interference turning points categorize events where ex-LDS 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 LDS church teachings. An exemplar of such turning points, Ingrid recounts:

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. (Interview 17)

Like Ingrid, even when participants conformed to the wishes of their parents, more often than not, this resulted in ex-LDS children feeling less close to their parents. Participants who expressed parent interference turning points, saw such instances as serious relationship violations.

Non-verbal events. Sometimes, turning points took the form of unspoken communication. Such events included physical affection, body language, and acts of service.

Participants related instances where they tried to engage in positive non-verbals to improve their relationship, seen in Emma's recounting:

I gave him a hug and stuff but I like I don't feel any closer to him, because I gave him a hug. I'm just trying to say like "Hey, I don't want to have a weird relationship with you so I'm trying." But I don't know, he's just being weird now. (Interview 8)

Because nonverbal communication is often hard to interpret, participants described difficulty understanding the meaning of their parent's nonverbal actions.

Emergent Trajectories (RQ2)

Through a pictorial analysis of the relational trajectories drawn by participants, eight relational trajectory patterns emerged: (1) minor setback, (2) reconciliation, (3) delayed reconciliation, (4) reluctant reconciliation, (5) positive turbulent, (6) negative turbulent, (7) moderate turbulent, and (8) diminishing closeness.

Minor setback. The brief setback relational trajectory is characterized by starting at a turning point between 50% and 80% closeness and quickly increasing in closeness with each subsequent turning point. Participants who graphed this trajectory discussed how even though the initial turning point distanced themselves from their parent, this was soon rectified by feeling unconditionally accepted (see Figure 1).

Reconciliation. Reconciliation trajectories appear as a wide V, where the first turning point is rated moderate to high in closeness, the lowest rated turning point (rated below 50%) occurs somewhere in the middle of the trajectory, and the closeness of the last turning point is rated right below the rating of the first turning point. Participants who graphed this trajectory described how, even though they felt that their relationship with their parents was improving,

they felt that they would never feel as close to their parents as they did before leaving the church (see Figure 2).

Figure 1: Relational Trajectory of Minor

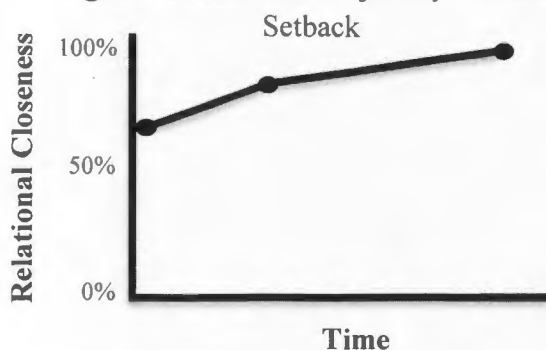
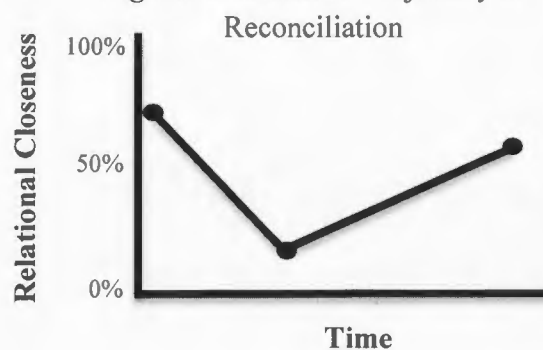


Figure 2: Relational Trajectory of Reconciliation



Delayed reconciliation. The delayed reconciliation trajectory is characterized by an initial decrease in closeness from a moderately rated turning point (around 50%) to lower than 30% for the next several turning points, and then a steady increase to a turning point above the initial turning point. Participants who drew this type experienced several concurring low turning points, and closeness only began after a positive discussion of belief or the setting of boundaries (see Figure 3).

Reluctant reconciliation. The reluctant reconciliation relational trajectory starts at a low turning point rated around 15% closeness and then slowly increases in closeness with each subsequent turning point, reaching its highest point around a 50% closeness rating. Participants who plotted these trajectories discussed that their relationship had made a lot of progress since the first turning point and would hopefully keep progressing (see Figure 4).

Figure 3: Relational Trajectory of Delayed Reconciliation

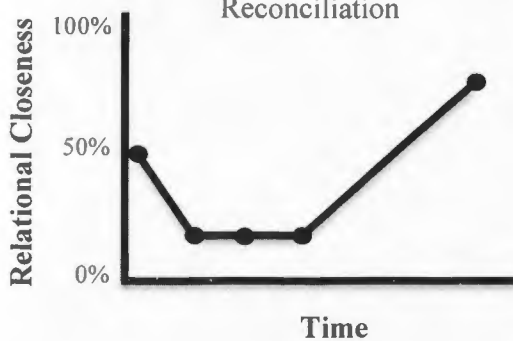
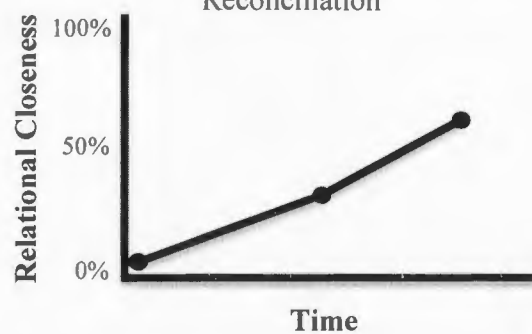


Figure 4: Relational Trajectory of Reluctant Reconciliation



Positive turbulent. Positive turbulent trajectories contained turning points that would alternate from highs (around a 70% closeness rating) to lows (around a 30% closeness rating). Ultimately, these trajectories ended in a positive direction. Participants who graphed these trajectories discussed that in some ways, their relationship with their parents was better because it was more honest, however they were still unsure as to what to expect in the future (see Figure 5).

Negative turbulent. Similar to positive turbulent trajectories, negative turbulent trajectories contain turning points that alternate from high highs and low lows; however, these trajectories terminate in a negative direction (see Figure 6).

Figure 5: Relational Trajectory of Positive Turbulent

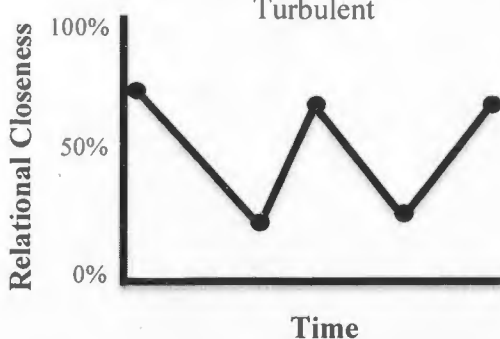
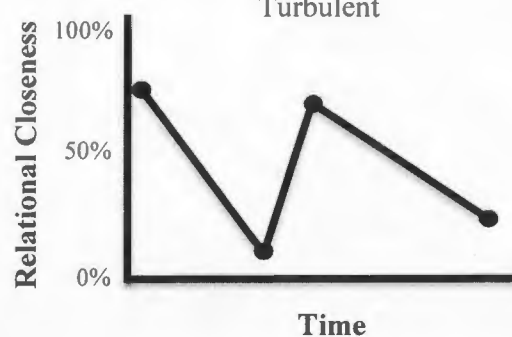


Figure 6: Relational Trajectory of Negative Turbulent



Moderate turbulent. Moderate turbulent trajectories containing turning points that also alternate in highs and lows, however each turning point is near a 50% closeness rating (see Figure 7).

Diminishing closeness. The final relational trajectory, diminishing closeness, is marked by a slow decrease in closeness at each turning point, with the final turning point being the lowest point (see Figure 8).

Figure 7: Relational Trajectory of Moderate Turbulent

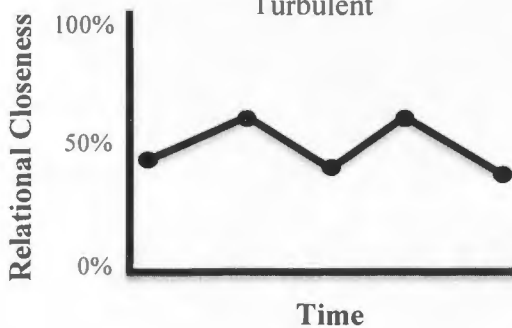
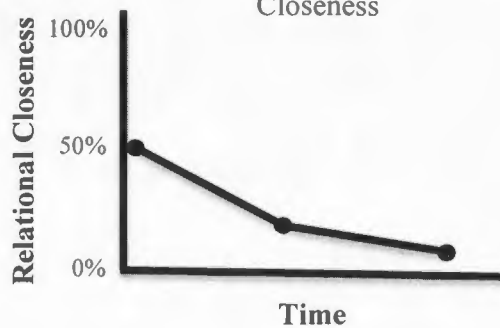


Figure 8: Relational Trajectory of Diminishing Closeness



Discussion

The purpose of this study was to observe the changing nature of closeness in emerging adult child-parent relationships within the context of a child exiting the LDS church. Through analysis of participant interviews, 14 categories of turning points and 8 trajectories of relational closeness emerged. The following discussion highlights how these findings contribute to understanding child-parent relationships in emerging adulthood and how families negotiate differences in religion.

Familial Boundaries and emerging adulthood.

First, the results revealed aspects of how emerging adults set boundaries with their parents. Currently, most literature on boundary-setting concerns adolescents and not emerging

adults (Afifi & Affifi, 2009; Guerrero & Afifi, 1995; Petronio, 1994). In this study, emerging adults, like adolescents, started to regulate parental interactions by limiting parental access to previously accessible information (Guerrero & Afifi, 1995), in this case, norm-violating social behaviors. Scholars characterize such behavior as a defensive mechanism to protect privacy and prevent parental interference (Afifi & Afifi, 2009; Ledbetter et al., 2010); however, participants in this study describe avoidance tactics as necessary to *maintain* the relationship and to respect parents' wishes.

This study also supports Petronio's (1994) claim that this sort of secretive behavior likely increases parental uncertainty and motivates and shapes parental theories about their children. Themes arose consistently where ex-LDS children felt judged according to what their parent's imagined what was going on, and not the behavior itself. According to Sillars, it is difficult for children to draw new boundaries and difficult for parents to recognize and acknowledge them (Sillars, Smith, & Koerner, 2010); however, the emergence of verbal boundary-setting turning points revealed that emerging adults also initiate conversations to explicitly set up conversation rules with their parents.

Families with Religious Differences

Through this study we also sought to answer Sillar's (1996) call to understand family communication in the context of its surrounding culture. In this context, the LDS church and its doctrine can be a double-edged sword to family closeness. Much of church rhetoric focuses on how the gospel strengthens and unifies families. LDS evangelical classes often focus on how to promote a loving and nurturing family life (Teaching Children, 2000). Church leaders have given several discourses on the responsibility of mothers and fathers to their children (Maxwell, 1994).

Despite the familistic focus of the LDS church, the narratives in this study reveal that when children choose to leave the church, LDS religious views can be one of the principle roadblocks to familial closeness. Participants discussed how parents invaded their privacy, leveraged resources, or became verbally aggressive in order to get ex-LDS children to adhere to LDS teachings and doctrine. As postulated by many scholars (Ledbetter et al., 2010; McLaren & Sillars, 2014; Petronio, 1994), such parent interferences were perceived as serious relational transgressions and significantly decreased feelings of closeness.

Many participants shared how their parents were ashamed of the sexual identity of the participant or the sexual identity of the participant's sibling. Despite the LDS church's media effort to promote a more inclusive orientation towards individuals on the queer spectrum (see Mormon and Gay, n.d), the suicide rate among queer youth in Utah continues to rise (NBC, 2016), a trend attributed to LDS doctrine concerning the sinfulness of homosexual relations and the sanctity of heteronormative marriages and families (Christofferson, 2015; Oaks, 2018; see Perkins, 2018). Ex-LDS children may present a tricky dilemma to their families, where active LDS parents might feel like it becomes a decision between following church standards and doctrine by trying to reconvert their ex-LDS child or accepting their child's deviating way of life.

Although the current study adds to our understanding of how families negotiate differing values, it has limitations. First, because we only interviewed the children, there might be more turning points that emerge in relationships of Ex-LDS children and active LDS parents when interviewing the parents. Second, given the retrospective nature of the data, events might have different saliency depending on the temporal proximity of the event. Third, despite the LDS member population being principally white, our sample of predominantly white participants might not capture the experiences of ex-LDS children of active LDS parents of different

ethnicities and cultures. By having participants of different nationalities, researchers could potentially see how the LDS church influences family communication differently depending on different cultural meanings of family. However, such an analysis was outside the scope of the current study. Because most emergent turning points in this study were not exclusively positive or negative in their relation to closeness, further research might investigate how child or parent communication strategies shape the outcome of the turning point. Researchers should also seek to investigate how other cultural exits influence the parent-child relationship.

Word Count: 6,249

Reflection

As a result of my education to date, my research interests ultimately lie at the intersection of interpersonal, family, and health communication. Specifically, I am interested in how families negotiate differing values and the personal, relational, and health implications thereof. My primary interest is to explore how individuals resist family pressures to conform, and the ways in which those differences are negotiated. My future goals include investigating the experiences of individuals experiencing stigma within their own families and other interpersonal relationships. My project investigating the relationships of ex-LDS children and their active LDS parents was my first step into this field of research.

I brainstormed this project with my mentors, Dr. Kaitlin Phillips and Dr. Kristina Scharp in early 2018. The topic of ex-LDS individuals and their parents emerged because I was, at the time, witnessing the interactions between my mother, who had left the church, and her mother, who was extremely active in the church. I observed how my mother felt ostracized and judged, but also, paradoxically, sought after and wanted by her family and how the very nature of her communication with and about her family changed. Not only was the topic timely in my own life, but due to controversial policies, excommunications, and other actions by the church, an increasing number of individuals were leaving the church. We decided to approach the matter qualitatively in order to capture the complexity of the relational events that occur.

From the onset, my goal was to get 30 extensive participant interviews. I was told that though possible, it was an ambitious goal. After a grueling IRB process that took nearly three months (and several tears), I finally sent out my recruitment protocol. I was shocked by the response. It was re-shared in several post-Mormon groups and I quickly reached a pretty large participant pool including people around the world. Because of the IRB delay, I only had a week

and a half to do the 30 interviews, which proved grueling. Not only was I doing endless hours of interviews, but each one was intense and discussed sad events where families did or said very hurtful things. By the end, I was emotionally and physically drained; however, I found that I also felt more invigorated and excited than ever about the significance of my project.

Though this project was originally intended to focus primarily on family communication, I was surprised at the rhetorical bent that it naturally took throughout the process. Examining the discourses present in the LDS church that inform family communication was a fascinating experience for me that helped me realize the wide approach I can take to family communication. I hope that I can further refine my rhetorical methods in graduate school so that I may be able to better dissect social messages and their influence on interpersonal interaction.

I believe that my study has already helped several ex-LDS individuals feel identified and validated. I also know that it has helped open a dialogue between parents and children regarding how they communicate their religious differences. As far as future directions with this specific paper, will be presenting and discussing it at this summer's Sunstone Symposium, an academic conference which promotes reflective research and discussion surrounding the doctrine, history, and culture of the LDS church. I have also submitted it to this fall's National Communication Association conference. I'm incredibly grateful that the Honors program pushes students to do long term, high quality capstone projects. I know I probably would not have done a thesis otherwise. This project, more than any other accomplishment in my undergrad, truly represents a satisfying and culminating finish to my time here at USU. The Honors program also provided matching funding for the URCO grant I received this past fall, which enabled my project to have a large sample of participants for a qualitative study.

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Appendices

Appendix (A): Recruitment Protocol

Were you raised to be an active member of the LDS church, but no longer identify as such? If so, I would love to hear about your experience!

As part of my honors thesis at Utah State University, I am conducting a research study about the relationships between children who have left the LDS faith and their active LDS parents.

In order to participate in the present study, individuals must meet the following criteria: (1) are between the ages of 18-30 (2) have at least one living parent still active in the LDS church (3) have had at least one conversation with their parent(s) concerning their beliefs since leaving the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to take a short demographic questionnaire (5 minutes) and to discuss events that have influenced your relationship with your parent(s) with an interviewer for about 30-45 minutes. Participants will not be compensated for their participation.

I hope you will consider sharing your story with us and/or forwarding this announcement to other people you know who might be interested in sharing their experience.

If you are interested in participating, please contact: Jared Worwood, at jared.worwood@aggiemail.usu.edu (435)359-8653.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact Dr. Kaitlin Phillips at (435)797-4202 or kaitlin.phillips@usu.edu.

IRB Protocol: #9744

Appendix (B): Data Collection**Interview Protocol: ex-LDS children**

Hello. My name is Jared Worwood and I am an undergraduate student at Utah State University working on a study under the supervision of Dr. Kaitlin Phillips. We are conducting interviews to learn more about the relational trajectories and turning points of ex-LDS children and their active LDS parents. This whole interview will take about 30-45 minutes.

First, I'm going to ask you to plot and describe the turning points in your relationship with your parent starting from the first significant event where you feel that your differing beliefs in regards to the LDS church started to influence your relationship with your parent up until where you feel your relationship is today. At the end of this, I will ask you questions that require you to reflect on your experience and project what is to come.

Before we begin, in order for me to accurately retain all of the responses you provide in the interview, I will be digitally recording this interview. Your name and identity will only be linked to the information you provide in your interviews in case you want to withdraw your information, but will be used in no other way; the only people who will be allowed access to the digital recording will be myself and the faculty member overseeing this research project. Even though this interview will be transcribed, your name will not be indicated throughout the recording of this interview. I would like you to know that you are free to ask me to turn off the digital recorder at any time during the interview. You may also refuse to answer any questions without repercussions. Finally, there are no direct benefits to you as a result of participating in this study except potentially gaining a greater understanding of your relationship with your parent. Any responses, oral or written will be regarded with the utmost confidentiality. I also want to take you through the informed consent form and procedures for the study so you clearly understand your rights today. [Give the participant time to read and sign the form.] Do you have any questions before we begin?

ID# _____ Name: _____ Date: _____ Interviewer: Jared Worwood [TURN ON TAPE RECORDER NOW]

Part I: Filling out the RIT Graph Retrospective Interview Technique

Explanation of Purpose: The Identification of Turning Points

We can now begin the main part of the interview. We are primarily interested in your perception of the path of your relationship with your parent since your differing beliefs in regards to the LDS church started to influence your relationship up until today. I will be asking you to think of your relationship with only one of your parents and charting a visualization of this relational path by marking down events that influenced your relationship with your parent, whether it be positively or negatively. We call these influential events turning points. We will be asking you to plot the first significant event where your differing beliefs in regards to the LDS church started to influence your relationship and where your relationship is today, but all of the turning points in between are up to you to choose. Do you have any questions regarding turning points before we begin?

[Appendix (B): Cont.]**Calibrating the RIT Graph**

We're going to graph your relational turning points with your parent using this sheet [RIT Graph].

1. First, we need to construct the X- and Y- axes of this graph before filling it in.
2. The X-axis, or this bottom line, will mark the passage of time. You will be filling this in each time you mark a turning point. Though you can mark the specific date of the turning point, it is not required, however, we encourage you to write your best estimation (month and year, preferably) for each turning point.
3. The Y-axis, or this vertical line, indicates the amount that you feel close to your parent on a scale from 0% to 100%, 0% meaning you feel completely separate and 100% meaning you feel completely together. Each time you identify a turning point, I will ask you how close to your parent did you feel. Base your ratings on your own perception of closeness, not what you think other people perceive closeness to be.
4. To start, I would like you to graph the point of the first significant event where you feel that your differing beliefs in regards to the LDS church started to influence your relationship with your parent. Now I would like you to graph where you feel your relationship with your parent is today?

Plotting Turning Points

5. Now let's begin to plot the turning points. Think back to the first significant event that influenced your relationship with your parent after this first point.
6. Could you tell me the story of what happened; specifically, what happened, What did your parent say and do, What did you say and do, or anything that would give your story more context? Describe for me, in your own words, what happened that made this influence your relationship. How, if at all, has this turning point affected you as a person? How, if at all, has this turning point affected how you felt as a member of your family? [Ask additional questions if necessary to get subject to provide evocative descriptions.]
7. What was the next turning point when you experienced a change or transformation in your relationships with your parent, i.e., when you came to see your relationships with Your parent in a new way, whether positively or negatively. [Follow the same question procedure that is in step 6] Now I want you to draw the line that connects these two turning points in a way that best captures how you experienced the change.
8. [Repeat this plotting process as many times as necessary. When the subject appears to have finished graphing his/her turning points, ask him/her to look over the entire graph and to make any changes or additions that are necessary.]

Part II: Concluding Questions

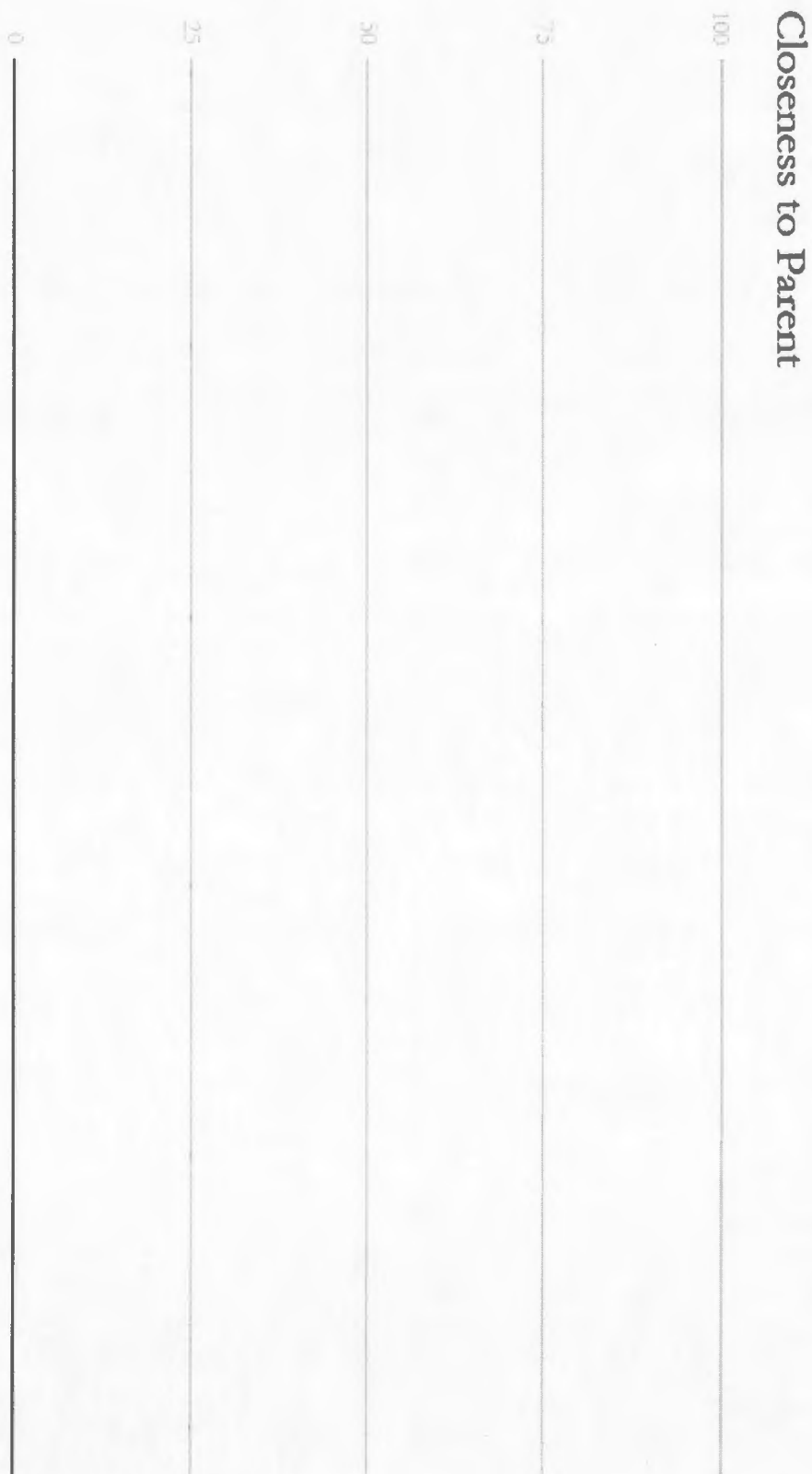
9. What do you hope will happen in your relationship with your parent in the future?
10. What do you think will happen in your relationship with your parent in the future?
11. What other information do you think would be helpful to me so that I can better understand your relationship with your parents?
12. What things have you learned from your relationship with your parents after/while leaving the LDS church?
13. What advice would you give to other people leaving the LDS church as to how to interact/communicate with their parents about their decision?

[Appendix (B): Cont.]

14. I understand that leaving the LDS church or no longer believing in its doctrine and teachings can be a complex process that can take many different forms. How would you currently describe your relationship with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?

15. May I contact you with future studies that may involve ex-LDS individuals? Thank you for sharing your experiences with me. Your time and willingness to talk is appreciated. If you have any questions please feel free to contact me at any time.

Appendix (C): Closeness Graph



Bio

Jared Worwood will be graduating with a B.A. in Communication Studies. He was recently named the Communication Studies Student of the Year and Undergraduate Researcher of the Year in the Department of Languages, Philosophy, and Communication Studies. As a result of his undergraduate research, he has co-authored an article published in the periodical journal, Communication Reports and received the Dawn O. Braithwaite Award for Qualitative Research. This summer he will be interning with Columbia University's Global Mental Health Program and later attending Illinois State University's master's program in Communication Studies this fall. He hopes to continue in academia as a professor of Communication Studies.