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Community and Cultural Reentry: Exploring Reverse Culture Shock Among Returning Missionaries of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints

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COMMUNITY AND CULTURAL REENTRY: EXPLORING REVERSE CULTURE

SHOCK AMONG RETURNING MISSIONARIES OF THE CHURCH OF

JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS

by

Sydney Pond

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

Communication Studies

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ABSTRACT

Community and Cultural Reentry: Exploring Reverse Culture Shock Among Returning

Missionaries of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

by

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Utah State University, 2021

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Department: Languages, Philosophy, and Communication Studies

Considerable research asserts that individuals who have immersive experiences in

foreign cultures may experience mental and emotional challenges upon returning home, a

phenomenon known as reverse culture shock (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963). The

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints annually sends tens of thousands of

proselytizing missionaries to various locations around the globe. These missionaries

typically spend 18-24 months away from home, and the nature of their missionary service

creates opportunity to become closely involved with local communities. Despite the large

number of missionaries going abroad and the level of cultural immersion that they often

experience, reverse culture shock among returning Latter-day Saint missionaries remains

relatively unexplored.

Using data from in-depth interviews, this study explored how returning

missionaries experience identity renegotiation—a process linked to reverse culture shock

(Smith, 2001)—and social support when interacting with their personal networks after

coming home from a mission. Data was analyzed using speech codes theory (Philipsen et al., 2005), and the findings reveal how culturally-specific communication about returning Latter-day Saint missionaries in the Mountain West community affect their identity negotiation and how they experience social support. Implications of these findings for future research on reverse culture shock, as well as practical implications for returning Latter-day Saint missionaries are discussed.

(54 pages)

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Community and Cultural Reentry: Exploring Reverse Culture Shock

Among Returning Missionaries of The Church of

Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Sydney Pond

Considerable research asserts that individuals who have immersive experiences in foreign cultures may experience mental and emotional challenges upon returning home, a phenomenon known as reverse culture shock. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints annually sends tens of thousands of proselytizing missionaries to various locations around the globe, and the nature of their missionary service places them at risk of experiencing problems during reentry. Despite this risk, reverse culture shock among returning Latter-day Saint missionaries remains relatively unexplored. The aim of this study was to examine how former Latter-day Saint missionaries made sense of their experiences returning to the Mountain West region of the United States and the social support that they received during reentry. Findings revealed that within the Mountain West community there are culturally-specific ways of speaking about returning missionaries. These ways of speaking influenced how returning missionaries went through identity-shaping processes linked to reverse culture shock, as well as how they experienced social support. These findings have implications for better understanding the role of family and friends' expectations for the returnee, as well as the importance of social roles, in reverse culture shock. The findings also provide specific direction regarding how to benefit returning Latter-day Saint missionaries.

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Sydney Pond

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Introduction

Considerable research asserts that individuals who have immersive experiences in foreign cultures may experience mental and emotional challenges upon returning home, a phenomenon known as reverse culture shock (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963). The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints annually sends tens of thousands of proselytizing missionaries to various locations around the globe. These missionaries typically spend 18-24 months away from home, and the nature of their missionary service creates opportunity to become closely involved with local communities. Despite the large number of missionaries going abroad and the level of cultural immersion that they often experience, reverse culture shock among returning Latter-day Saint missionaries remains relatively unexplored. Using data from in-depth interviews, this study explores how returning missionaries experience identity renegotiation—a process linked to reverse culture shock (Smith, 2001)—and social support when interacting with their personal networks after coming home from a mission.

Chapter II

Literature Review

Reverse Culture Shock

The concept of reverse culture shock, also known as reentry shock, was originally conceptualized as an extension of culture shock. Culture shock is defined as "a feeling of disorientation and discouragement due to the buildup of stress and unmet expectations," (Hall et al., 2018, p. 272; Oberg, 1960). In other words, culture shock results from the many expectancy violations that an individual encounters in a new environment, and from the stress of navigating that environment. In order to make sense of the culture shock experience, Oberg (1960) proposed a U-curve model of culture shock consisting of four stages. The first of these stages is the honeymoon phase, and consists of the initial excitement associated with a trip abroad. The next phase, known as crisis, occurs as the honeymoon phase wears off and the frustrations and difficulties of living in a new culture set in. The crisis phase is characterized by emotional difficulty as sojourners hit a mental low point. Following the crisis phase, the recovery phase occurs as the sojourner's ability to understand and cope with the differences in the host culture increases. In the final adjustment phase, emotional coping skills are thought to return to normal, as they were in the home culture (see also Lysgaard, 1955).

Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) theorized that this U-curve model should be expanded to a W-curve model, which includes the time period following the sojourner's return to her or his home culture, as many who re-enter their home culture experience the four stages once again in the process of adjusting to life at home. This happens for

several reasons, one of which being that the sojourner has undergone changes in their identity during their time abroad. Likewise, changes have occurred at home while the sojourner has been away, and so they are in a sense returning to a different place, as a different person, and must suddenly understand and integrate new identities with old ones (Smith, 2001). Adjusting under these circumstances can be particularly jarring and painful because these changes are largely unexpected; the expectation on the part of the sojourner being that home has not changed while they were away, and on the part of friends and family being that the returnee will think and behave as they did before they left (Martin, 1984; Mooradian, 2004). Relating to close family and friends upon returning to the home culture is therefore difficult for some returnees (Seiter & Waddell, 1989). As a result of the reverse culture shock experience, returning home can also be accompanied by a profound sense of loss. Chamove and Soeterik (2006) found that young students who experienced particularly strong reverse culture shock reported levels of grief comparable to those reported in conjunction with loss from death.

Scholars interested in reverse culture shock have since proposed further theoretical explanations for the phenomenon, which center on communication processes. Martin (1986) noted that the original process of becoming adapted to another culture includes coming to understand the way that culture uses symbols, and learning the cultural rules for communication, thus developing communicative competence in another culture. The reentry process involves making sense of changes in relationships at home and re-learning the communication patterns of the home culture. Martin thus argued that communication among the returnee and their network is what facilitates the reentry experience.

Other work focuses on the importance of identity in the reentry process. Overall identity comprises layered personal, relational, and communal characteristics and roles, all of which contribute to how individuals view themselves and are perceived by others. Different aspects of one's identity can become more or less salient depending on the context (Shin & Hecht, 2017). Cultural identity consists of the elements of one's identity—including values, communication tendencies, and roles—that are shared with a group, and that unite a person with a community (Chen, 2017; Kranz & Goedderz, 2020). To communicate competently in a new culture requires adopting as part of one's own identity the values, communication tendencies and roles of that cultural community (Martin, 1986). Different aspects of identity are developed or gain importance through formative experiences and interactions with others. This process is known as identity negotiation, and it frequently occurs while abroad, as elements of cultural identity become more salient to an individual (Ting-Toomey, 2017). Smith (2001) argues that the process occurs again upon returning home, as identity changes in the returnee and changes in the home culture necessitate that the returnee find elements of their identity that unite them with their home community. Thus, returnees renegotiate identity upon reentry, this time also making sense of previous identities and the internal changes which happened while abroad (Pitts, 2016). This unexpected process of relearning and renegotiation may be a part of why returnees express experiencing a second crisis phase when they return home (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963).

Social Support in Cultural Reentry

Because reverse culture shock can be an adverse experience, it is critical for researchers of intercultural communication to understand and develop ways to make the coming-home process easier (Koester, 1984; Szkudlarek, 2015). Social support in close relationships is likely important in facilitating a healthy transition home. Social support refers to an individual's perception of physical and emotional resources available to them via their social network (James et al., 2004), and it can help individuals to cope and be resilient in the face of stress (Barrera, 1988). The process of renegotiating identity can be a stressful experience (Smith, 2001), and so it is possible that social support could help to cope with that stress.

Research has demonstrated that social support can be helpful in coping with culture shock when going abroad. The quantity and quality of interactions with individuals both in the host country and the home country has been demonstrated to mitigate the severity of culture shock while abroad (Pantelidou & Craig, 2006). Because the internet facilitates access to a similar support network when coming home as sojourners have when going abroad, utilizing that support network to cope with reentry stress could be beneficial. Organizational social support (such as support from student organizations) can ease culture shock in sojourners by providing them with social and physical resources to help them navigate their new environment (Lin, 2005). If similar organizations exist in the home culture, it is possible for them to likewise provide resources to returnees, which might be helpful in the return process.

Furthermore, scholars have found that healthy interpersonal relationships with individuals in their home networks benefit returnees who experience reverse culture shock (Seiter & Waddell, 1989). Le and LaCost (2017) found that among Vietnamese

international students, interpersonal relationships were a major reason that some

sojourners returned to their home country, and that time spent away from members of the

home network while abroad often complicated interpersonal relationships and added

stress to their reentry. The importance of such relationships and the stress that might

result from relational strain may add to the overall stress of reentry. On the other hand,

social support from close networks that results from healthy interpersonal relationships

may help alleviate the stress of reverse culture shock. Martin (1986) found that different

types of interpersonal relationships (i.e. friendship, romantic, familial) saw different

levels of success in reentry, and posited that this may be because some relationships

benefitted more from supportive communication than others. It may be that individuals

who have interpersonal success during reentry enjoy higher levels of social support and

are thus better able to deal with the potentially stressful transition. For scholars studying

reverse culture shock, it is therefore important to investigate communication with close

networks during reentry, and especially whether that communication is supportive.

Returning Latter-day Saint Missionaries

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, an international Christian church

headquartered in Salt Lake City, Utah, maintains a sizable missionary program, which

annually sends tens of thousands of missionaries to nearly 400 designated locations

around the globe. These missionaries are typically between the ages 18-25, and spend 18-

24 months living in their assigned area of the world. Missionaries volunteer for service,

are unpaid, and do not know before receiving an assignment where in the world they will

be assigned, or whether they will learn a new language. While in service, missionaries

dedicate all of their time to proselytizing and humanitarian service, forego popular forms of entertainment, and have limited contact with home (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2014).

Returning missionaries are an excellent demographic to study when considering reverse culture shock. In order to experience re-adjusting to the home culture, one must have first adjusted on some level to the host culture (Wattanacharoensil et al., 2020). Missionaries typically spend 18-24 months immersed in their host culture. Unlike travelers who go abroad for work or military reasons and may avoid contact with the host culture or be unable or unprepared to immerse themselves in it, missionaries interact extensively with local people on a daily basis (Callahan, 2010). Indeed, that is their purpose and goal. Additionally, many missionaries learn a second language as a part of their missionary service, a process which has been positively linked to cross-cultural adaptation (Yu & Shen, 2012). Thus, missionaries are deeply immersed in the culture and so have a unique opportunity to adjust, both to the host culture and upon returning. Research has also demonstrated that a mission is a major identity-forming experience; missionaries in previous studies had internalized the social role of "missionary" as a significant part of their identity, and some expressed concern that they did not want to lose this identity upon returning home (Ault, 2018). This implies an added layer of identity to make sense of during the renegotiation process, which may pose added difficulty.

Despite this level of cultural immersion, the cultural transition that returning missionaries make when reentering their home culture remains relatively unexplored. To date, work on returning missionaries of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

centers on the impact of reentry on spiritual well-being (Madsen, 1977; Melton, 2017), academic achievement (Jepson, 2014; Palmer, 2009), identity discourses surrounding returning missionaries (Ferrell, 2019; Stone, 2018), and the impact of social media in facilitating contact between the returning missionaries and members of the host culture (Feller, 2018). With the exception of Callahan (2010), little work on returning missionaries focuses specifically on their cultural adjustment. Callahan's work on deculturation found that returning missionaries did not necessarily unlearn the host culture when they returned home, as some theories related to reverse culture shock might suggest. This implies that missions are such an identity-forming experience that they remain a part of missionaries once they are home. Interestingly, Callahan's study also indicated that the missionaries in the sample did not all report experiencing major difficulties upon returning home. This is consistent with other research on reverse culture shock, which has found that coming home is not always difficult for everyone, but that returnees experience varying levels of difficulty with reentry (see Le & LaCost, 2017; Wattanacharoensil et al., 2020; Zhu & Gao, 2016). The differences in returnee experience with reverse culture shock highlight the complex nature of reentry, and warrant further investigation in order to understand what differentiates positive return experiences from painful ones. Because Latter-day Saint missionaries are so deeply immersed in the host culture and face a potentially significant identity renegotiation process upon returning home, they are excellent candidates for studying reverse culture shock, and understanding their transition experiences might shed more light on variations in reverse culture shock.

In addition to their deep cultural immersion, returning missionaries are an interesting type of returnee because they return to a fairly unique home environment.

Previous work on returning sojourners has focused mainly on students who have studied

abroad (e.g., Akhtar et al., 2018; Chamove & Soeterik, 2006; Chang, 2010; Seiter &

Waddell, 1989), corporate employees sent abroad (e.g., Adler, 1981; Cox, 2004;

Hammer et al., 1998;), and military personnel (e.g., Elliot, 2019). When these types of

sojourners return home, they are presumably fairly alone in doing so. Students who study

abroad return to peers who for the most part have not had a similar experience. Ex-patriot

employees return to neighborhoods and offices where others are unaware of what their

experience was like. Military returnees similarly have few people in their home networks

who can relate to that experience. If these individuals do have other returnees in their

social networks, they are likely a minority. By contrast, many missionaries of The Church

of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints return home to a community of returnees in their

local congregations. There are approximately 65,000 full-time missionaries currently in

service (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2019). A large number of these

missionaries return to a fairly concentrated area in the Mountain West region of the

United States, and so the reentry process happens especially frequently within this

regional community. What's more, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints'

missionary force continues to grow, which implies that a continuously growing number

of returning missionaries are going through the reentry process. This process is so

common within this religious community that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day

Saints has a program in place to ease the adjustment, which encourages family members

and local leaders to be involved in a returning missionary's transition home. The

program's primary goals are spiritual development, goal-setting, and preparing for

educational and career opportunities. The program also contains guidance on coping with

life challenges, but interestingly does not directly address the cultural transition that takes place when coming home (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2017).

Because the returning missionary experience is a common aspect of regional culture, returning missionaries in the Mountain West region likely have many people within their personal networks who have some level of experience—whether personal or second hand—with reentry. This prior experience impacts the way the returnee communicates with their personal network, and thus influences the coming-home process. Communication with close support systems facilitates new understandings of identity in cultural transitions (Martin, 1986; Smith, 2001), and coming home to an environment where cultural reentry is common will likely impact the way a returning missionary fits in and communicates with close others, which by extension could also impact their understanding of their cultural identity. This unique environment can also impact how returning missionaries make sense of the social support that they receive when they come home.

Because the deeply immersive nature of the mission experience is likely to produce reverse culture shock in a population that has yet to be extensively studied in this context, and because the unique cultural environment to which they return has the potential to significantly impact the coming home process by affecting communication with home networks, this study seeks to better understand the way that returning missionaries of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints experience communication with their personal networks when reentering their home culture. Specifically, the aim of this study is to understand how communication with home networks impacts identity renegotiation in cultural reentry, and how returning

missionaries perceive social support while coming home. To accomplish the first of these goals, this study seeks to answer the question:

RQ 1: How do returning missionaries perceive the experience of renegotiating cultural identities during the transition back to the home culture after missionary service?

In order to understand how returning missionaries experience communication with and support from their networks during reentry, the study also explores the following question:

RQ 2: What kinds of support (both social and structural) do returning missionaries receive when experiencing reverse culture shock? How helpful is that support?

Chapter III

Research Methods

This study takes a qualitative approach to answering the above research questions. Qualitative research is conducted from an interpretive paradigm, which views social, organizational, and cultural realities as socially constructed. From this perspective, knowledge about one's self, others, and the world is created through interactions with others (Tracy, 2013). Understanding social reality thus involves exploring the details of how people perceive their lived experience and make sense of the world around them. The goal of qualitative researchers is to achieve such an understanding by having immersive experiences with target populations, which allow the researcher to explore the perceptions and context relevant to their research questions, and to provide detailed descriptions and interpretations of their findings (Firestone, 1987). Qualitative research thus uncovers a unique depth of perspective, nuance, and complexity inherent to the human experience, which is difficult to capture using other methods (Tracy, 2013). Because this approach aims to understand human perspective, it is well-suited to answering the research questions proposed in this study, as identity renegotiation involves an individual's own understanding of their place in the world (Smith, 2001), and social support is defined as the amount of support that an individual perceives to be available to them (James et al., 2004).

Participants

For this study, I interviewed 12 former missionaries of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who were assigned to a mission in a foreign country and returned home to the Mountain West region of the U.S. Of the 12 interview participants, 6 identified as men and 6 identified as women. Participants were eligible if they had been home for at least six months and for no longer than five years at the time of the interview (see Wattanacharoensil et al., 2020). To avoid a skewed sample, I recruited participants who came home before the COVID-19 outbreak, as coming home (in some cases abruptly) in the midst of a global pandemic may influence returnees in extraordinary ways. Participants represented missions in various areas of the world—four came from missions somewhere in Eastern Europe (including Russia), three in North America (including Caribbean islands), three in Southeast Asia and the Asian Pacific, and two in South America. To preserve confidentiality, participants were assigned pseudonyms, and any mention of the exact location of their mission in the transcript was replaced with its general geographical region.

Participants were recruited via my personal networks in local congregations and the Logan Utah Institute of Religion, which is owned by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and offers religious instruction to young adults. Recruiting through personal networks is a type of snowball sampling, which was necessary because the sample population is fairly specific and because COVID-19 restrictions at the time of data collection prohibited visiting these organizations in person to recruit participants. Having spent a significant amount of time among these organizations, I reached out via Facebook and email to locate and contact potential participants in my personal network.

Data Collection

To gather data for this study, I conducted individual, in-depth interviews with former missionaries of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints regarding what it was like for them to come home. Interviews allow the researcher to uncover a great amount of detail in the stories of the interviewees and can thus build on what other types of studies accomplish (Tracy, 2013). The interview data collected for this study adds important context and complexity to the quantitative work that has been done in support of the W-Curve model (Kranz & Goedderz, 2020), and the returning missionary reentry process (Callahan, 2010). Due to COVID-19, I conducted and recorded these interviews via WebEx and Zoom. Interviews ranged from 30-60 minutes in length, yielding a total of 9 hours of interview data.

Interviews were guided by an activity that relies on the premise of the W-Curve hypothesis. In the activity, the participant is given a blank graph (see Appendix) and is asked to attempt to complete the graph in a way that best represents their emotional experiences coming home. The graph can then be used as an elicitation tool to prompt further, deeper discussion about the coming-home experience (Talawanich et al., 2019; Wattanacharoensil et al., 2020). These drawings are good visual tools for both parties involved in the interview, as they offer the interviewee another communication medium to express how they perceived their reentry, and provide the interviewer with something concrete and specific to refer to when asking additional questions (e.g., What did you feel like during this period? Why did you draw this portion of the graph the way that you did?) (Talawanich et al., 2019). I adapted this activity to fit the purposes of my study by incorporating follow-up questions that centered around communication with others

during specific portions of the graph. Such questions included, "Do you think that the people around you noticed how you felt during this [period of time]?" and "What were some of the most helpful things that other people did during this [period of time]?"

Data Analysis

  I evaluated interview data using thematic analysis. The goal of analysis in qualitative research is to work with the data to uncover and interpret the perceptions and narratives of participants in ways that address real-world problems (Tracy, 2013). Thematic analysis looks for patterns in qualitative data, which provide meaningful answers to research questions (Scharp & Sanders, 2019). I conducted interviews until I reached saturation in the data, or until further interviews no longer added new or important information (Tracy, 2013). During the interviews, I made brief field notes, which I immediately expanded and added to upon hanging up with interview participants. Once interviews were completed, I transcribed the portions of the recordings that are specifically pertinent to the research questions. I analyzed the data by both watching and listening to interview recordings, reviewing field notes and participant graphs, and reading transcribed portions of the interviews.

  After transcribing interview data, I performed an initial round of coding, guided by previous work on reverse culture shock and by the two research questions proposed in this study. Initial coding yielded 15 broad themes relating to reverse culture shock, identity, communication, and social support. Several of these original themes had strong relevance to one another and were combined in a second round of coding. For example, participants discussed both their own expectations for what coming home would be like

as well as the expectations that others had for them. Originally, these types of expectations were coded separately. However, upon further analysis it became clear that both types of expectations stemmed from overall cultural expectations about missionary reentry, and that participants discussed both types of expectations in conjunction with one another. I therefore collapsed these original themes into one larger theme comprising cultural expectations for missionary reentry.

While refining the original codes I found that the most interesting and relevant themes in the data centered around what it was like to come home to a community that is familiar with cultural reentry. This discovery prompted me to examine my refined themes in terms of the culture to which participants returned, and I identified three overarching themes which became the basis for the findings discussed below.

Chapter IV

Results

The findings of this study support previous work on reverse culture shock. Specifically, participants in this study renegotiated their identities upon returning home from their mission, and for some this was a painful or stressful experience. The findings also reveal that returning to a culture of familiarity with cultural reentry impacted both how participants made sense of their cultural identity and how they received social support. Participants described making sense of themselves, their social roles, and the way they communicated with others based on cultural expectations about returning missionaries. Interestingly, participant responses to questions about social support likewise highlighted the significant impact that cultural expectations about the return process had on the way participants received and processed support from close networks. In this section, I first review several ways that the data supports previous work on reverse culture shock. I then give a brief explanation of speech codes theory (Philipsen et al., 2005), which provides a framework to examine communication within a specific community and can thus be used to analyze reentry communication within this unique context, before discussing how the theory may be applied three specific themes in the data. These themes, examined through the lens of speech codes theory, offer insights regarding how a culture familiar with reentry contributes to the way that returning missionaries renegotiate their identities and communicate with friends and family.

Identity Renegotiation

The findings support previous work done on reverse culture shock, which states that deep cultural immersion results in identity renegotiation during reentry, which can be an emotionally painful experience (Smith, 2001). Interview participants described feeling very immersed in their host culture in several ways—from being completely immersed in the language, to being the only American in the town where they lived, to spending large amounts of time with local community members. As a result of this immersion, many participants described changes in themselves that they noticed upon returning home, and what it was like to make sense of these changes. These stories match other descriptions of identity renegotiation, as returning missionaries sorted through their roles, values, and ideas about the world, and how they had shifted during their mission. Jackson, who later went back to live in the area where he served his mission and has since returned home again, described it this way:

> Just being home and feeling like I hadn't fully—like bits of me hadn't come home yet. Like, I had traveled home, but I was still in Eastern Europe. And so it was almost like a downloading; I was still downloading the American version. And parts of me stuck. And then coming home this time, I realized they didn't come home. They stayed there. And when I went back even more parts of me stayed there. And so I guess that first week it was difficult to really understand that I was home.

Many participants expressed that this transition was a difficult process for them. Eight of the twelve participants described experiencing difficulty in reentry, and most of the graphs completed by participants indicated that they experienced some degree of emotional dip after returning home, which they elaborated on in their interviews. Lissa, who served in a mission in North America, described feeling "a little lonely and adrift"

after the initial emotional high of returning home as she faced internal questions about her ability to build relationships and find purpose post-mission. "I had to figure out how to exist in real life," she said, "and that was the dip. And then I came back up to like, I'm more or less level." Lizzie, a missionary who served in South America, similarly described feeling an emotional high upon returning home, followed by the stress of dealing with life now that it looked very different than it did while on her mission. She explained the dip that she drew on her graph, saying, "So while figuring out that I definitely dipped in some negative emotions with that whole language barrier, and emotional barrier, and trying to figure out things for school and stuff." Like Lissa, Lizzie noted that her emotions stabilized after she had worked through her questions and could make better sense of her life at home. These descriptions are similar to those of others who have experienced reverse culture shock, and offer further support for the W-curve hypothesis (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963; Wattanacharoensil et al., 2020).

Speech Codes Theory

In addition to supporting previous research on reverse culture shock, the findings of this study add several important insights about how returning sojourners make sense of communicating with their personal networks during identity renegotiation. These insights are best understood through the lens of the culturally driven ways that people in the Mountain West community talk about the reentry of returning missionaries. These ways of speaking result from the familiarity of the culture with missionary reentry, and participants indicated that they used this culturally-specific communication to make sense of their reentry experiences and supportive communication from others.

Speech codes theory is especially well-suited to analyzing this type of communication. The theory was developed by Philipsen et al. (2005), and claims that people within distinctive communities use language to create culturally-specific meaning. The theory is typically used by ethnographers, who try to identify and describe the speech code of a particular community (Philipsen, 1997). However, the general premise of the theory—that the way people within distinctive cultures use language helps them make sense of their culture and their place within it—is relevant to reverse culture shock, as understanding one's place within a culture is an important component of identity renegotiation (Pitts, 2016). Thus, from a speech codes theory perspective, the way that returning missionaries describe communication with members of their home community during reentry can lend insight into how they made sense of this experience themselves. Proposition 3 of the theory states that, "A speech code implicates a culturally distinctive psychology, sociology, and rhetoric," meaning that speech codes provide understanding about how people within cultures view "the nature of persons, social relations, and the role of communicative conduct in linking persons in social relations" (Philipsen et al., 2005, p. 61). Three codes from the data can be understood in terms of these categories. Namely, returnees faced expectations regarding what returning missionaries are like, and compared themselves to those expectations (psychology), returnees struggled to understand their new social roles and the meaning attached to those roles (sociology), and returnees had difficulty communicating about their mission experiences in a way that produced connection with members of the home community (rhetoric).

Psychology

Speech codes theory claims that embedded in communication are assumptions about human nature, or what a person is (Philipsen et al., 2005). Expectations about human nature and behavior play an important role in cultural reentry. Reverse culture shock occurs partly because neither the returnee nor their support system typically expect that they will struggle to reintegrate themselves back into their home environment—it is often the process of coming home that reveals how much the returnee's identity and behaviors have changed (Martin, 1984). The participants in this study differ greatly from previous subjects of reverse culture shock research in this regard, because returning missionaries in the Mountain West region come home to a community of people who have either first- or second-hand experience with the return process. As a result, cultural expectations that returning missionaries will be different when they come home already exist. In fact, when asked the question, "In your experience, what are some of the most common things that returning missionaries hear while they are transitioning back home?" participants specifically recalled hearing many questions about "adjusting" to life at home, implying that they were not expected to slip seamlessly into their old lives. Lissa mentioned during her interview that some people acted "weird" around her and other returning missionaries when they first came home. John, who served in a North American mission, said that many people warned him that he would hate coming home. Juliet, who served in Eastern Europe, commented that, "Everyone kinda looks at you like a sick puppy for a little bit." These responses, and other similar statements from participants, indicate an expectation that returning missionaries will be, in some way, markedly different when they come home than they were when they left.

Analysis of the interview data revealed two types of cultural expectations for the nature of returning missionaries in the Mountain West: expectations about what returning missionaries *are* like, and expectations about what returning missionaries ideally *should be* like. Carbaugh (1988) referred to such expectations or assumptions about human nature as "models for being," or commonly held mental images of what people are (p. 195). Cultural assumptions about what returning missionaries are and what they should be contribute to such a model of returning missionaries.

Participants revealed several of the expectations that constitute a model for what returning missionaries are like. These include expectations that missionaries struggle to transition away from a highly structured missionary lifestyle, and that they are "awkward" or uncomfortable in certain social situations. For example, Carlton, a missionary who returned from South America, mentioned this expectation several times during his interview, commenting that "I think a lot of people expect you to feel awkward. That's probably one of the major things. And then I think some of them might think that you're going to keep the missionary schedule." Other participants similarly used words like "awkward" or "weird" to describe how other people expected them to behave in social situations upon returning home.

There is also an expectation that returning missionaries have a high level of spirituality when they first return home, but that this quickly declines. Several participants mentioned being warned that shortly after returning they would spend less time studying religious topics, and would not feel as spiritually uplifted as they did on their mission. Charlie, who served in Southeast Asia, recalled hearing this warning from friends who had come home from their missions previous to her return. These friends

told her that, "It's really hard and you don't do scripture study as much, and you're not on that spiritual high that you are on your mission, and you can get depressed."

In addition to expectations about what returning missionaries are like, participants recalled noticing idealized expectations that returning missionaries *should* also be religious role models. They described a cultural expectation that returning missionaries are "perfect," and serve as role models who never speak profanely and are completely consistent in personal religious practices such as reading scriptures and praying.

In the interviews, participants described comparing themselves to both levels of cultural expectations about returning missionaries. While discussing the cultural expectation that returning missionaries are good religious examples, Charlie explained that she gets annoyed when people say, "You're a returned missionary, you shouldn't be doing that," in response to certain behaviors, such as using swear words, because as a returning missionary she *should* be "super spiritual." She then clarified, "It's not that I'm not that—I am that [highly spiritual]," and continued to say that she just doesn't fit the idealized expectation that returning missionaries will be perfect. In this way, Charlie compared her understanding of her identity (a spiritual person who is nonetheless not a "perfect" religious example) with the cultural expectations for what she should be (a spiritual person who always does the right thing).

When referencing cultural expectations about returning missionaries, many participants noted ways in which they differed from what was "normal." For example, several participants emphasized that they did not try to maintain a rigid schedule when they came home, contrary to the perceived expectations of those in their home communities. In developing speech codes theory, Philipsen (1997) found that individuals

use speech as a tool to uncover the aspects of one's self that are alike to one's peers, and thus affirm identity. Similarly, participants in this study compared themselves to imagined models of what returning missionaries are and should be to make sense of their own identities and coming-home experiences.

In contrast to other populations that have been the subject of reverse culture shock research, returnees in this study returned to a community with expectations that they had undergone changes while abroad. Interestingly, however, multiple participants noted that although people expected them to be different, those differences were sometimes treated as temporary. Beni, who was in an Eastern European mission, recalled feeling annoyed and frustrated when people told him that if he gave it a few days or weeks, he would be back to normal. "I really didn't like that at all," he remembered, "because, you know, in two years you have quite a bit of time to develop yourself." He acknowledged that there is some adjusting that takes place when coming home but emphasized that hearing comments from others anticipating that he would completely revert to his former self really bothered him. He went on to explain, "It almost felt like they were trying to diminish the stuff that I had learned or experienced, and just say, 'Oh yeah, great experience, but let's get back to who you are.'" Previous scholars have posited that one of the reasons reverse culture shock can be such a negative experience is not only that friends and family don't expect that the returning sojourner will have problems reentering, but also that they don't expect the returnee to have undergone any real changes in identity while abroad, and become frustrated when the returnee behaves in new and strange ways (see Martin, 1986; Mooradian, 2004). It is thus interesting that within a community that does expect returnees to struggle with reentry, and to behave

differently when they come home, the expectation that returnees will eventually return to

"normal" still exists. It may be that family and friends don't recognize the depth of the

identity renegotiation process that some returnees experience while abroad, and so

changes in returnee behavior can be written off as a "phase" rather than significant

changes in identity that the returnee must make sense of during reentry. It may also speak

to the power of the expectation that returnees will behave the same as they did before,

that even in a community that anticipates changes among returnees, those changes are

still only viewed as temporary.

Sociology

  Speech codes theory also assumes that cultures have distinct sociologies, or

cultural assumptions about how individuals can and ought to interact and form

relationships (Philipsen et al., 2005). Understanding the sociology of a culture or

community includes investigating the social roles held by members of that community

(Carbaugh, 1988). The social roles adopted by returnees upon reentry are therefore useful

in understanding how returnees relate to members of their home community. Gullahorn

and Gullahorn (1963) list the ability to be flexible in enacting social roles as one of the

major factors impacting the intensity of culture shock. This makes sense in terms of

identity renegotiation; an important component of understanding one's own cultural

identity is making sense of one's place in that culture, which includes social roles (Smith,

2001). Re-negotiating identity within the acculturation process can therefore include

coming to a new understanding of one's social role(s). Returning missionaries face a

major shift in roles as they transition home, which many of the participants mentioned as

a source of difficulty. This transition seems to have been especially difficult to navigate as returnees moved from having the somewhat singular social role of missionary, with a very defined purpose attached to that role, into a more ambiguous state in which multiple social roles became possible. For example, Beni explained that even though he anticipated the transition home, "It's just a little bit hard to find a purpose when everything shifts from doing missionary work to going home and having to get a job and provide for yourself."

In response to the shift from being a missionary to being something else, many participants expressed difficulty finding purpose in their new (or rediscovered) social roles. This challenge was related to a struggle to find meaning in the relational and other activities that the returning missionaries performed as a part of these roles. Walter, whose mission was in Southeast Asia, explained that nothing in post-mission life, "seems like it's very important, or interesting, or as cool or as fun as Southeast Asia was." He remembered thinking to himself, "Man, I'm just doing dumb stuff like earning money and going to class—this doesn't have any meaning," and wishing that he could be back on his mission, where he was doing something that meant a lot to himself and to others. Margo, who was also in a mission in Southeast Asia, remembered that having meaningful conversations was the hardest thing to do when coming home. She explained that when she was on her mission, she tried to ensure that everything she said or did—down to sending text messages or meeting people on the street—had a purpose behind it, which was usually to help someone else. "You're just always, always, always focused on that," she said, and went on to share that she disliked having conversations with friends and family when she came home, because the conversations didn't seem to have a clear point

or meaning. "It kind of made me not want to talk to people," she admitted, "I was just like, 'There's no point. There's no point in talking to people." With one exception, every participant discussed what it meant to return home and face this loss of purpose.

Having a purpose was also overwhelmingly seen as a way to cope with the challenge of returning home. Nearly every participant discussed the importance of actively finding meaning in their daily activities upon returning home. In response to the question, "What advice would you give a returned missionary who is struggling with being home?" Abigail, whose mission was in Eastern Europe, suggested finding something meaningful to do. "Find some way to progress," she said, "because I think that really helps with returning home from a mission, is having a purpose again in your life."

Finding meaning in new or rediscovered social roles is one way of making sense of those roles, and thus of one's identity. The influence of the mission experience can be seen in the way that participants found meaning in their new roles. Many adapted, as much as was possible, the purposes attached to the role of missionary to the roles that they took on at home. For example, some found volunteer opportunities with religious and/or humanitarian purposes similar to those of a mission. The idea of purpose in reentry is not new to reverse culture shock research. Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) found that among professors who conducted research abroad, "those who were able to become involved in creative work immediately on return reported less intense feelings of isolation and alienation," (p. 40). They also noted that returnee relationships with home support systems might be improved by working together with close others toward a common purpose. Foreign sojourners go abroad in many capacities (military, school, work, etc.), and those roles often have express purposes attached to them. Reverse culture

shock research might thus be benefitted by further examining not only changes in social roles upon returning home, but also the purposes attached to those roles, and the meaning that sojourners attach to those purposes.

Rhetoric

According to Philipsen et al., (2005), within the context of speech codes theory, rhetoric refers to "strategic conduct," or intentional communication acts that individuals within a culture perform (p. 61). This portion of the theory explains that these strategic acts of communication play a role in helping individuals accomplish certain ends, which include making sense of themselves as individuals and members of their community (Philipsen, 1997). Participants in this study engaged in strategic communicative conduct within their home community regarding disclosure of emotional reactions to reentry. Specifically, the interviews revealed that returning missionaries who struggled to some degree with the adjustment to their life at home chose not to freely disclose their distress. In fact, several participants expressed that they hid the negative emotions that they experienced. Beni said of being frustrated by cultural differences, "I felt like when I was in Eastern Europe *and* being home, like, I did a pretty good job of hiding it." Jackson likewise indicated that he hid his distress, elaborating that, "I am one that tends not to show feelings too much…. And so even if I am going through something, I will brave through it."

Of those who did disclose that they were struggling, most noted that they only chose to confide in close family and friends. For example, Jackson mentioned that he spoke about the return process with his brother, who was experiencing a highly similar

transition. Strategic communicative acts, such as choices about disclosure, are relevant to the goals of creating, maintaining, and changing relationships within a community (Philipsen, 1997). Within literature on reverse culture shock, relationships between the returnee and home support networks have been found to impact the reentry process in various ways (Le & LaCost, 2017; Martin, 1986; Seiter & Waddell, 1989).

Recognizing the importance of building and maintaining relationships offers a potential explanation as to why returning missionaries did not openly disclose their emotional distress—many felt alone in their adjustment to life at home. When asked whether the people around her noticed that she was having a hard time, Charlie explained that she tried not to show it, and that she "shut down" and avoided talking to others about it. She further explained why she shut down, saying, "I felt at the same time that they wouldn't really know how to relate, which was partially true because they had never dealt with anything like that."

Within speech codes theory, rhetoric can refer to whether individuals have access to the communicative tools (e.g., language) that can help them accomplish goals, which include making sense of their own identities and relationship to others (Philipsen 1997). Among participants in this study, one of the primary reasons for feeling alone after their mission was an inability to share their mission experiences in a way that produced connection. Most described the very personal nature of their mission experiences as something that they felt could not be understood by others. Abigail shared an analogy that she heard from another missionary, who said that going on a mission is like living an entire life, and then placing that life in a bubble or balloon, which sits in the returning missionary's mind, untouched:

It's just sitting in your mind, and there's no way you can really open that up to other people and make them understand the experiences that you had and what you went through in that time. So it just feels like, like you leave, and you'll never really be able to explain all the things that you did or encountered or felt perfectly to someone. It just has to stay in a little bubble that's untouched in your head and no one can ever fully understand what you went through or what you experienced.

Participants' belief that they did not have the ability to adequately communicate what their mission experience was like negatively impacted the degree of connection that they felt in some of their relationships. Walter expressed that as a returning missionary it can feel like no one understands what the transition is like. "It can be very isolating," he explained, "You think that 'I must be the first person ever to go on my mission,' which is obviously not true." This comment emphasizes the difference between returning missionaries and other foreign returnees: they are returning home to a community of people who are familiar with missions and the subsequent adjustment to life at home. Walter and other participants discussed taking comfort in hearing from previously-returned missionaries who said that the return home was hard for them, as well. Despite being around people familiar with the adjustment itself, participants expressed that it was hard not to be able to adequately communicate their own personal mission experiences to others. This theme echoes previous literature, which has found that returnees can become frustrated when they cannot adequately convey what their experiences abroad were like (see Smith, 2001). Given the importance of relationships in reentry, lacking the communicative tools to feel understood regarding such deeply meaningful experiences might contribute to the challenge of returning home, even within a community sympathetic to that challenge.

Chapter V

Discussion

It is important to recognize that while the above findings are organized into distinct categories for the purposes of this analysis, each category is merely one possible lens for observing communication about returning missionaries. In reality, communities make sense of their psychology, sociology, and rhetoric using communication in various ways, which often overlap and intersect. For example, rhetoric is concerned with whether individuals have the communicative resources to accomplish a certain purpose (Philipsen et al., 2005), and many returning missionaries struggle to find purpose in new social roles. It may thus be difficult for returning missionaries to use strategic communication, because they do not readily see a purpose to which they can apply such communication. Similarly, the expectation that returning missionaries should be perfect religious examples can apply to sociology, as "returning missionary" could be viewed as a social role with the attached purpose of being an example to others, and thus a way for a returning missionary to fit into society. It is therefore important to remember that there are not firm boundaries around what functions as psychology, sociology, and rhetoric within a speech code, but that the three operate together to create meaning within a community. The organizational choices in this analysis yielded important findings about identity renegotiation and social support in cultural reentry, the various implications of which are further explored below.

Expectations of Normalcy

The results of this study have fascinating implications regarding the strength of expectations that family and friends have for returnees. The strong societal expectations that returning missionaries will be different are an indication that the frequency of missionary reentry in the Mountain West has influenced the region's culture. It is thus somewhat surprising that participants described family and friends' expectations for the changes they underwent during their mission as only temporary—there was a stronger expectation that they would soon return to "normal." If identity renegotiation produces personal change (Smith, 2001), and the culture is truly familiar with identity renegotiation, it would be logical that the society would expect to see more permanent changes in returning missionaries.

Existing literature on reverse culture shock offers little explanation for this expectation. Several studies have included expectations from others that a returnee will not have changed as a reason that reentry can be difficult (Akhtar et al., 2018; Martin, 1984; Martin, 1986; Mooradian, 2004; Pitts, 2016), however less work exists regarding how these expectations are formed. One potential explanation may be found in expectancy violations theory, which claims that humans have strong expectations that patterns will endure, both at a societal level and an interpersonal level (Burgoon & Walters, 1990). Very strong expectations of continued normalcy may override the societal expectation that returning missionaries come home changed, meaning that friends and family could assume that returning missionaries will soon return to their former behavioral patterns, even if they know that many people act different after a mission. If this is true, it speaks to the power of such expectations, and could offer further

support for expectancy violations theory. To better explore this, scholars of cultural

reentry should further investigate how and why the family and friends of returnees

develop expectations regarding the returnee's behavior.

It may also be that the expectation that differences in returning missionaries will

soon wear off is self-perpetuating. Pitts (2016) noted that sojourners returning to the

United States readopted American societal norms in part because it was practical to do

so. Something similar could happen among returning missionaries—if a returning

missionary feels that they can better meet expectations and navigate their life at home by

returning to former patterns, their doing so may reinforce the cultural expectations that

returning missionaries soon "get back to normal." Further research on returnee behavior

might take a longitudinal approach to explore the various factors, including societal

pressures, that influence how/if/when returnees begin to readopt the norms of the home

culture.

Layers of difficulty

These findings highlight that certain elements of reverse culture shock may be

easier to reduce than others. Participants said that it was helpful to speak with former

returning missionaries who could commiserate with them about the difficulty of returning

home, but still expressed that they could not describe their mission experiences in a way

that others could understand. This implies that there may be layers of difficulty within

reverse culture shock. One layer may be that it is difficult to renegotiate identity and to

make sense of a deeply personal and transformative experience abroad. Another layer,

which has been highlighted in literature on reverse culture shock (see Cox, 2004; Martin,

1984; Mooradian, 2004), may be that it is alarming to struggle with reverse culture shock because coming home was expected to be easy. Returning to a community that is familiar with reverse culture shock may help to mitigate this second layer. Regardless of an individual's actual mission experience, knowing that other returning missionaries have struggled with reverse culture shock can help a returnee have realistic expectations about what coming home will be like. Additionally, being around other returning missionaries can help reassure returnees that their reverse culture shock is not abnormal, which may reduce the alarm that they feel when experiencing it.

Purpose in Reentry

These findings further reveal that identity negotiation not only involves changes in social roles, but also in the meaning and purpose that an individual gives to those roles. Missionaries are not the only sojourners who have express purposes when going abroad. Employees, teachers, researchers, students, and members of the military who go abroad, among other examples, have purposes attached to their role. While these purposes may not be as singular as that of a missionary for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, they can still be very meaningful to those individuals and may be difficult to lose upon returning home. In the future, scholars of intercultural reentry might examine how changes in purpose, along with changes in social roles, impact reentry.

In addition, cultural adaptation might impact how an individual perceives their purpose; a person may maintain a similar social role when returning from time abroad (e.g. the role of "teacher"), and yet the cultural meanings and assumed purposes of that role might differ significantly between the host culture and the home culture. Thus, in

addition to looking at roles and attached purposes, the meaning that an individual gives to their purpose might impact identity renegotiation, and is worthy of further consideration.

Returning Missionary Identities

Among the fairly unique difficulties faced by participants in this study as they renegotiated identity was losing the role of "missionary." The loss of this specific role warrants further exploration. Ault (2018) argues that missions serve as a rite of passage within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' community, implying that the missionary identity may not only be developed during the 18-24 months an individual spends on a mission, but rather over the course of a lifetime. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints encourages its members to consider missionary service from the time they are young. For example, one of the church's songs for children is titled "I hope they call me on a mission" (Brown, 1969). Culturally, many young adults in the church look forward to their missionary service, thinking of themselves as future missionaries (Ault, 2018). This means that for some, the loss of the "missionary" identity upon returning home may be especially profound, because it has been developing for so long. Future research on reverse culture shock in returning missionaries could examine how returning missionaries navigate this change in roles, taking into account how long the missionary identity has held importance to them.

Practical Implications

These findings indicate the importance of further normalizing reverse culture shock in the Latter-day Saint community. Although there do exist cultural expectations

that returning missionaries will come home with different mannerisms and may dislike being home, these expectations do not represent a robust understanding of reverse culture shock. This is further supported by the fact that many returning missionaries feel that their experiences cannot be understood and instead choose to hide their struggles when coming home. It may be beneficial for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to create spaces for returning missionaries to connect during the reentry experience, as these findings indicate that knowing others also encountered reverse culture shock helped some to feel less alarmed at the experience. These spaces could be physical or virtual; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has a considerable social media presence and several websites which could be mobilized to help returning missionaries share their experiences and connect with one another.

Returning missionaries could also benefit from cognitively reframing what it means to have a purpose. Previous studies support that flexibly adapting to new circumstances and positively reframing the difficult aspects of reentry are both helpful in coping with reverse culture shock (Le & LaCost, 2017; Pitts, 2016; Smith, 2001). One way for returning missionaries to practice such flexibility might be to assign a same or similar purpose as they had as a missionary (e.g., the purpose of helping others) to new or rediscovered social roles at home (e.g., brother, sister, employee, etc.), thus expanding their perception of how that purpose can be enacted. Because having a purpose is very meaningful to returning missionaries, maintaining and expanding what it means to have a purpose might be a beneficial component of their identity renegotiation.

Chapter VI

Limitations and Future Directions

The results of this research should be viewed within the context of its limitations. The findings represent data collected from twelve participants—a larger number of participants could yield new or different insights. Additionally, different host cultures have the potential to influence identity renegotiation in reentry (Le & LaCost, 2017), but that influence is difficult to detect in this sample, as the degree of geographical diversity in participants' missions did not allow for useful comparisons between host cultures. On a similar note, these findings represent missionary reentry in the Mountain West region, and yet The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has members located worldwide. Because the idea of missionary service is familiar to most Latter-day Saints, not just those in the Mountain West, it is difficult to say how much the attitudes described in this analysis are influenced by regional communication about missions and how much they are influenced by organizational communication. Future studies on missionary reentry should thus consider the distinct impacts of organizational, regional, and host culture on the reentry experience.

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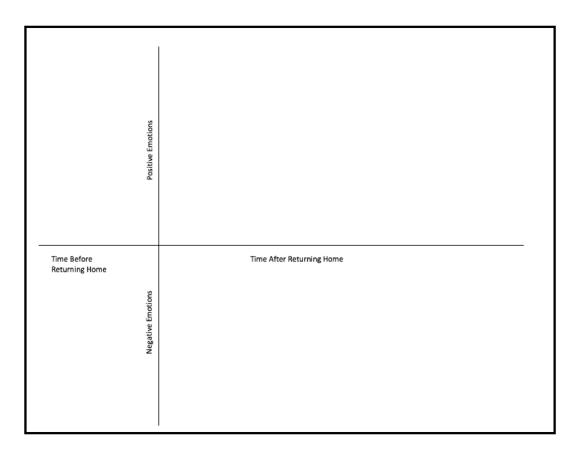
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Appendix - Graph Activity

This blank graph was e-mailed to participants prior to the interview, and they were invited to complete it in a way that best represents their experience coming home. Participants were asked to e-mail me a copy of their completed graph before the scheduled interview.