

# “Losing my religion”

## Identity (re)constructions in Mormon exit narratives

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The present study explores how former members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, who are often referred to as Mormons, construct their identities. Framed in an interpretive narrative approach, 150 online exit stories of members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that voluntarily left the Church were qualitatively analyzed. Findings reveal five prominent identities: (1) the disenfranchised victim, (2) the redeemed spiritualist, (3) the liberated self, (4) the (wo)men of science, and (5) the Mormon in name only. Results suggest that membership in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is inextricably connected to individual identity. Thus, exiting the Church is much more than leaving an organization. Future implications for research will be discussed.

**Keywords:** narrative, identity, LDS exit, interpretive narrative approach, narrative thematic analysis

### Introduction

For members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church hereafter), affiliation is typically something that begins at birth and lasts beyond death (LDS Church, 2016). Yet, on November 15, 2015, about 1,500 members of the LDS Church wrote formal letters of resignation to LDS headquarters in Salt Lake City, Utah, in response to an adjustment made to the policy regarding the baptism of the children of same sex relationships (Capelouto & Ellis, 2015). As it happens, Americans often affiliate and disaffiliate with religious institutions across their lifespan (Gooren, 2010). Although scarce, existing research on disaffiliation with the LDS Church specifically, suggests that the process is chaotic and on-going (Hinderaker & O’Conner, 2015) and that disaffiliating members often seek solace on online forums and support groups (Avance, 2013). This might not be surprising because Mormonism is considered one of, if not the most, high cost religions in the

United States (e.g. high demands from members, distinct in and out groups, high integration). Indeed, members leaving the LDS Church might experience processes of family estrangement, forsake friends, relinquish resources, upset communities, and disrupt a pervasive sense of self/identity (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010).

The first goal of the present study is to conceptualize the LDS Church as a way of life that encompasses personal relationships, organizations/work, community structures, and faith. Existing research characterizes leaving the LDS Church as merely an organizational exit (see Hinderaker & O'Conner, 2015). Conceptualizing the LDS Church as more than an organization further draws attention to the unique role it plays in people's lives and provides a rationale for why leaving it can pervasively disrupt a person's sense of self. Because those exiting the LDS church might be experiencing loss in multiple contexts, our second goal is to explore the ways telling stories helps people make sense of their lives, illuminates their values, and illustrates (or not) their resilience (Becker, 1997; McAdams, 1993). We also focus on identity construction because research suggests that across contexts, people who can reinterpret negative emotional events have improved subjective well-being (e.g. Gross & John, 2003). Specifically, people who construct redemptive identities are those that experience some sort of major disruption and are able to make sense of what happened, learn from the experience and/or identify positive outcomes that resulted from negativity (McAdams, 2006). A study by Slotter and Ward (2015), for example, found that people who can construct redemptive identities after they break up with a romantic partner experience decreased negative emotions and distress. Understanding the identities ex-LDS Church members construct, might provide insight into their subjective well-being as well as their ability to make sense of multiple disruptions simultaneously. Thus, our last goal is to determine whether the identities ex-LDS Church members construct address the experience of loss in multiple contexts (e.g. family, work, faith, etc.). In other words, we are interested in how/whether people can tell stories that address multiple threats to the self. Toward accomplishing these goals, we begin by establishing the LDS Church as a high cost religion before linking narrative, sense-making, and identity.

### **The high cost of LDS membership and disaffiliation**

Existing research has paved the way that links religious costs with the commitment of religious groups (e.g. Iannaccone, 1994; Iannaccone, Olson, & Stark, 1995). High-cost religious groups often strengthen the bonds among members by stigmatizing and limiting ties with nonmembers. As a result, the identity of in-group members become much more integrated with the group (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2009). Scholars typically regard the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints as one of

the “most demanding, high-cost, theologically and culturally exclusive groups” in the United States (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010, p. 326; see also Iannaccone et al., 1995). Thus, exiting the LDS Church might be difficult and bear its own costs.

According to a study by Scheitle and Adamczyk (2010) people who leave the LDS Church experience significantly poorer health than those that leave other religions. They argue:

Those who leave will find those ties represent a large liability that must be paid upon exit. Strained or severed family relationships, loss of self-identity, social isolation, and the personal stress that accompanies these issues are all representative of the costs that are enacted upon exit. (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010, p. 327)

Indeed, the 2011 Pew Research Center Report on Mormons in America (2012) finds that 57% of Mormons surveyed at large, and 73% of members living in Utah, report most of their friends are also members of the church. This high percentage might not be surprising considering members often attend church with those living within their neighborhood (LDS Church, 2016). This might become particularly complicated for ex-members who no longer attend church with their neighbors but continue to live next door. Because LDS wards (i.e. local congregations) often host many local activities, ex-members might not only be isolated from their church, but also the community in which they live.

The costs of losing friendships might pale in comparison to the potential familial loss people who leave the LDS Church might experience. Research on family estrangement suggests that this process is traumatic and complicated by cultural beliefs that families are nonvoluntary (Agllias, 2011; Hess, 2000; Scharp & Thomas, 2016). Thus, family members (bound by blood and law) in the estrangement process are often engaged in an on-again/off-again relationship for which there is no end and no relief (Scharp, Thomas, & Paxman, 2015). This in-limbo relationship might be even more distressing for members of the LDS Church who believe that family relationships are eternal (LDS Church, 2016). Indeed, according to the LDS Church (2016), family relationships perpetuate beyond the grave. This language becomes potentially even more powerful considering LDS Church members refer to each other as brothers and sisters (Preach my gospel: A guide to missionary service, 2004). Thus, regardless both friendships and family relationships (bound by blood and law) might be an extremely significant loss.

Loss might also manifest in relationship to work. In the LDS Church, members are asked to serve in voluntary positions or assignments known as “callings”. Since the Church has no paid clergy, lay members perform the responsibilities associated with local worship and managing Church affairs. Church callings might include leadership of local congregations, teaching positions, financial clerks, and music directors (LDS Church, 2016). This voluntary work comprises, if not becomes,

the lives of Church members as they dedicate to callings extra time, effort, and money outside of regular church worship. Thus, exiting the LDS Church involves leaving organizational work opportunities associated with the Church. According to Garrett-Peters (2009), to lose work is “to lose not only an identity but also the routines and relationships that may substantially undergird one’s feelings of self-efficacy” (p. 552). Indeed, Hinderaker and O’Conner (2015), who position the LDS Church as a type of organization, suggest that exit from it might require multiple attempts unlike exits from for-pay organizations.

Furthermore, leaving the LDS Church might also disrupt an individual’s faith identity. Individuals’ lives are influenced by their membership, and faith organizations, in particular, help to construct, reflect, and reify the values, practices, rituals, and relationships that play primary roles in members’ daily lives (Hinderaker, 2015; Rollie & Duck, 2006). As such, religion offers a variety of contexts for self-exploration and formation. According to Ebstyn King (2003), religion provides a distinct ideological, social, and spiritual setting for identity development and commitment. Particularly, the LDS Church provides members with an understanding of self in relation to God (LDS Church, 2016). Thus, exiting the LDS Church might disrupt members’ spiritual belief system that served to anchor an integral part of the self.

In addition to relational, social capital, institutional and faith costs, ex-members might also lose tangible resources such as welfare, employment, and family services (LDS Church, 2016). Even everyday life becomes disrupted upon exiting the church considering Mormons spend more time both in church and enacting church practices than members of other faiths (Givens, 1997). Rollie & Duck (2006) argue that routines often provide structure for daily life as well as a sense of identity and purpose. They continue to suggest that the value of these routines is not fully realized until they can no longer be enacted. In sum, membership in the LDS Church is not merely being a part of an organization but might be a way of life inseparable from one’s identities.

### **Narrative, sense-making, and identity**

Aligning with the present study, one process that has received increasing attention from scholars taking an interpretive narrative approach is identity (re)construction in the face of dissolution and loss (e.g. Harvey, Weber, & Orbuch, 1990; Pederson, 2013; Thomas, 2014). Scholars who take an interpretive narrative approach align with a tradition of scholars who believe that narratives constitute our way of being in the world (see Koenig Kellas, 2015). Indeed, Esin (2011) suggests an interpretive narrative approach centers narratives ontologically, and not merely

epistemologically. In other words, interpretive narrative scholars emphasize the way stories construct new realities, new identities, and how meaning is made in the telling of stories instead of simply viewing stories as a form of data.

As it happens, dissolution is a particularly salient context for narrative scholars because loss, or in this case disaffiliation, often creates significant disruptions to people's identities. For example, Pederson (2013) explored the identity (re)constructions of people who lost their jobs and Thomas (2014) took to analyzing the narratives of former foster children. As such, it might come as no surprise that narrative scholars often focus on the way stories have the power to help individuals make sense out of their lives and to create logic out of complex events (Becker, 1997). In fact, one of the primary functions of stories is to create identities. Bamberg (2011), for example, asserts that stories enable individuals to create, destroy, or repair identities. Likewise, Fisher (1987) emphasizes that the purpose of stories are the creation and evolution of self. Specifically, evolution of self is necessary following an identity disruption. Riessman (2008) contends, "When biographical disruptions occur that rupture expectations for continuity, individuals make sense of events through storytelling" (p. 10). Thus, the performance of stories can work to negotiate and stabilize identity (Linde, 1993). According to McAdams (2006) evolving stories, also known as narrative identities, provide life with meaning, unity, and purpose. He argues that telling disruption narratives has three important implications. First, telling stories following a significant disruption can positively influence the narrator's wellbeing. Second, stories can potentially be constructed in a redemptive manner, in which the disruption can transform into positive change. Finally, redemptive tales that involve positive change lead to future benefits (McAdams, 2006). Therefore, examining narratives of former members of the LDS Church is important to understanding how people make sense of the disaffiliation, but also how they communicatively construct and reconstruct themselves when multiple aspects of their identities are threatened. In light of the ability of narrative to (re)construct the self, we pose the following research question:

RQ: What types of identities do ex-members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints construct in light of their exit?

## Method

### Data collection

In concert with scholars who view narrative ontologically, this study also relates to narrative epistemologically. Put differently, stories are not only a way of being

but also a form of data analysis (see Koenig Kellas, 2015). With IRB exemption, 150 exit stories posted on *postmormon.org* were sampled to explore the identities of former members of the LDS Church. Specifically, we collected all of the stories available in September, 2016. The website defines post-mormons as, "members of a rapidly growing community of families and individuals who have voluntarily left Mormonism" (*postmormon.org*, 2016). Potential participants are prompted to share their personal account (i.e. story) of leaving Mormonism. Collecting stories corresponds with Avance's (2013) argument that Mormons construct their identities through interpersonal exchange and likewise tell stories to reconstruct their identities after they disaffiliate. Specifically, we oversampled and analyzed 150 stories to perform validation procedures. Saturation was reached by the 39th story, but all stories were analyzed (see Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Although narrators did not provide consistent demographic information throughout their stories, some narrators provided a general description of themselves. For example, several stories alluded to a male in a heterosexual marriage with children (see Limitations).

## Data analysis

In accord with an interpretive narrative approach, a method specific to the study of narrative was used to analyze the exit stories, viz. thematic narrative analysis (TNA). Riessman (2008) describes thematic narrative analysis as a process that enables the analyst to examine intact stories and identify the way themes coalesce within each narrative to form a type of story. Thus, Riessman (2008) states, "the narrative analyst does not fracture the biographical account into thematic categories as grounded theory coding would do, but interprets it as a whole" (p. 57). In other words, researchers should designate an entire story as a "type," or in this case, as an identity, as opposed to illuminating the themes within each narrative that speak to identity construction. Indeed, the entire story was served as the unit of analysis instead of utterances within a story.

To conduct the TNA, we assigned one identity to each story. This assignation, used by other scholars using TNA (see Pederson, 2013; Scharp et al., 2015; Thomas, 2014), was based on an adapted procedure developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The TNA consisted of five steps: (1) becoming familiar with the data, (2) identifying embedded themes, (3) defining and naming the themes, (4) generating identities based on the themes that answer the guiding question, "What types of identities do ex-members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints construct?", and (5) locating exemplars.

Becoming familiar with the data was achieved by reading and re-reading the data. Next, codes, which coalesced into themes based on the RQ, were identified.

For example, one theme that consistently emerged was seeking evidence to prove the truthfulness of the LDS Church. Stories were then examined to determine whether the themes coalesced to construct particular identities. For example, the themes of evidence, logical thinking, and education coalesced into the (wo)men of science identity. Exemplars were then identified in concert with the verification procedures listed below.

### Verification procedures

To determine the validity of the thematic narrative analysis, we conducted four verification procedures: (1) referential adequacy, (2) investigator triangulation, (3) the audit trail, and (4) exemplar identification (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, referential adequacy was achieved by dividing the data into thirds. The last two thirds of the data were archived, which allowed the first third of the data to be analyzed in comparison to the last two thirds. This extensive amount of analysis conducted by the first author served to verify that results show that no new types were discovered in the last 100 narratives. Verification also included investigator triangulation. Investigator triangulation occurred when the second author, who has experience conducting TNAs, read the first third of the data set and independently identified emergent identities. Although the authors named the identities differently, no new identities emerged that were separate from those originally identified. Finally, both authors kept an audit trail of detailed notes to illuminate decisions about the themes and identities. These notes facilitated the process of selecting exemplars, which will now be discussed in the results.

### Findings

In light of their exit, ex-members of the LDS Church constructed five prominent identities: (1) disenfranchised victim, (2) redeemed spiritualist, (3) the liberated self, (4) (wo)men of science, and (5) Mormon in name only. Contrary to literature that would suggest leaving the Church might be distressing and difficult, only two identities included stories of distress and disruption; one who felt like a victim and the other who overcame that disruption. Alternatively, narrators of the other three identities, for various reasons, did not find the disaffiliation problematic. Indeed, some narrators even felt that being a member of the LDS Church was more distressing than leaving it.

## The disenfranchised victim

Ex-members who constructed themselves as disenfranchised told stories of victimization, where they were neither happy as members of the LDS church nor ex-members:

During my 45 years as a member of the LDS Church, nothing motivated me more than the nightmarish thought of being separated from my family for eternity. The constant thought of possibly being separated from my loved ones in the next life chilled me to the very bone. I would worry about and question nearly every decision I made as a father or an individual, trying to determine the possible ramifications regarding the status of my eternal family, never feeling my efforts were sufficient. I believe as a result of this, the ‘faith’ I had developed in the LDS Church was based upon which for me was negative motivation, a faith based not as much upon my personal free agency or personal choice as upon fear of the alternative. It was a faith with few roots, not strong enough to survive when truly tested, a faith built upon sand rather than upon rock. (#39)

This narrator lamented making the decision to leave the church for fear of the relational consequences, particularly family-related, of disaffiliation. These fears came to fruition when he described missing his daughter’s wedding:

*Of course, anyone inside the ceremony could have (and would have) told you that I had this coming to me. I had brought this on myself, and had no right to be at my daughter’s wedding. I no longer had a right to enjoy this special day or others like it along with the rest of my family (although I couldn’t help noticing that no one objected to my paying for the wedding). After all, I had done the unthinkable – I had left the Mormon church. By doing so, according to the teachings of the church (which I was previously well aware of), I had given up my rights as a father to not only enjoy many special moments such as these here on earth with my family, but to even be a part of my family in the next life, a reward promised only to faithful Mormons. My children and their mother would live together in heaven as a family along with God (sans yours truly), and I would be assigned to a ‘lesser kingdom’ to live, not worthy of the family He had entrusted me with. The Mormon church teaches that the inside of their temples represents the kingdom of God on earth, and strictly enforces the Biblical verse stating that ‘no unclean thing may enter therein.’ (#39)*

This italicized portion of his narrative seems to “shout” the injustice and loss he experienced that day. Instead of situating his loss in terms of organizational exit, this author articulates his story of victimization in contrast to a larger discourse of what it means to be a *family* (see Segrin & Flora, 2011) and the American ritual/expectation that fathers walk their daughters down the aisle. This missed opportunity is only heightened by his reflection that the potential for these relational consequences will not only haunt him in this life, but for all eternity. Indeed, narrators who told

disenfranchised stories both struggled with past events and grieved future ones. Of note, these narrators did not tell stories of unemployment, lost faith, or missed resources. Instead, disenfranchised victims' stories more closely correspond to parent-child estrangement narratives (see Scharp et al., 2015) that focus on distress people experience when their familial identities are at stake.

### The redeemed spiritualist

Redeemed spiritualists told stories of disenfranchisement momentarily but moved on to reframing their disaffiliation as a spiritual experience. This narrator expressed that just as spiritual experiences lead individuals to the LDS Church, spiritual experiences can lead individuals away from the LDS Church:

Of course, admitting that to myself was devastating. Losing my religion, my identity (which was so tied up in the Church), and that very important element which I had in common with my family, friends and community, was terrifying. But living a lie would have been even more devastating, and would have caused me to lose something much more precious – the integrity of my soul. As hard as it is for believers to accept, sometimes sincere, obedient members who want nothing more in the world than for the Church to be true, leave because a genuine spiritual experience takes them away. It's that simple. And when I finally accepted what God had been trying to tell me all that time, it ultimately opened the door to spiritual experiences many times more powerful than I had ever experienced in the Church. Now, years later, I operate from a paradigm of spirituality that is independent of religion, but I have chosen to be part of a vibrant religious community which brings added richness to my spiritual practice. (#33)

In this way, the narrator illustrated that her faith was about remaining true to her spiritual experiences, rather than remaining faithful to the LDS Church. This is common of many redeemed spiritualist identities that reflected the desire to remain faithful to spiritual experiences even if those experiences directed them away from the church. Generally, these stories portrayed membership in the LDS Church as merely a step in a greater path. In another story the narrator expresses that by leaving the church he felt right in his relationship with God:

It took me a couple of years to really come out all the way, but when I finally acted on it, I felt very clearly that this is what god made me and what he wanted for me. For the first time in my life, I felt right. (#82)

In this story, it is as if God called the narrator to leave the LDS Church. As such, ex-members argue that even though leaving the Church was an identity disruption, they had to do so to remain true to their spiritual experiences. Unlike

disenfranchised victims who could not move past the relationship loss, redeemed spiritualists emphasized the importance of their faith identity. McAdams (2006) argues that when the core of people’s identities is disrupted, they often turn to hard work or God to redeem themselves. Although a unique iteration of McAdams’ claim, redeemed spiritualists still rely on God to make sense of their disaffiliation with the LDS Church as evidenced by the language of personal and spiritual growth. Taken together, redeemed spiritualists emphasize that faith transcends the organization and even the relationships associated with it.

### The liberated self

Liberated self identities emerged in stories where people expressed that they, personally, would be insincere to continue membership in the LDS Church. A variety of reasons led narrators away. However, each individual felt it necessary to leave to remain “true” to oneself. This narrator shared that remaining a member was to deny his genuine self:

I wanted to grow. I wanted to increase my awareness. But, due to the fear that had been conditioned into me from birth, I was scared to death of trusting myself and becoming an *authentic* person who lived with actual *integrity*. I denied my true, genuine self so that I wouldn’t be a disappointment. I denied the anger and the resentment that I felt. I buried it deeper and deeper with each passing day. I did it so well and for so long that I truly began to feel like a stranger to myself. In a discussion about anything remotely controversial, I would hear my voice speaking the ‘church position’ while my true self silently screamed the words that I really wanted to say. I reoriented myself. I found myself. The inner and the outer merged into one beautifully flawed human being. My thoughts are now my own. My actions now come from within. (#64)

This narrator emphasizes that by leaving the LDS Church, he became a better version of himself. Similarly, other stories highlight the authenticity, integrity, and sincerity gained by leaving the church and following one’s own path:

I live a genuine life now. I am not married because I don’t want to be. I love being single. I read voraciously. I have a successful business that keeps me busy and engaged. I have great loving friends and feel that I am one of the most blessed people on this earth. *I am living my deep seated values now*. Not the values of some organization. Now I know where the Mormon fatigue came from. I had outgrown Mormonism as a twenty-one-year-old missionary and it took me twenty-eight more years to realize it. (#7)

Thus, ex-members who constructed themselves as liberated selves emphasized the importance of being authentic and doing what was right for themselves. Unlike the disenfranchised victim and the redeemed spiritualist, those who constructed liberated self identities did not discuss the ways exiting the LDS Church negatively influenced their lives. Rather, being a member was the actual negative disruption. Leaving the LDS Church, then, rectified a chronic identity problem (i.e., membership) and challenges the idea that what we do is necessarily who we are. For these members, what they did was more of an obstacle to who they believed they could be. Consequently, disaffiliation was a positive disruption that problematizes the idea that a person's identity is not already disrupted prior to some sort of major change. Indeed, what these people did was not who they thought they were. Thus, people's evaluation of what they do might also weigh heavily into their perceptions of themselves, not simply that they do it.

### The (wo)men of science

Many narrators described a process of seeking answers about questions related to the LDS Church. The participants' questions typically stimulated a veracious study of history or science, in which hard evidence led them to doubt their faith. The evidence found was often unexpected and contrary to the teachings of the LDS Church. This former member illustrated the identity disruption that emerged from discovering unknown facts:

How could I ignore these facts? The more I tried to defend the church by exploring the church's past, the more I came across evidence that was showing me a different church than the one I was taught growing up. Mormon apologists I read and corresponded with were like a defense attorney making excuses for the videotape, the confession, and the fingerprints on the murder weapon that no objective jury would buy. Once I had discovered a large body of evidence showing the church was the work of men, I realized that all this evidence could not be ignored. When I tried to share this information with others I was often attacked as someone trying to prove the church wrong. When all I wanted was to learn the facts, and reveal the truth. After speaking with church leaders I realized that most of them just didn't want to hear the opposing viewpoint. They were like a juror in court who plugged their ears and closed their eyes whenever the prosecution stood up to present their case. It was then that I realized that I had to resign in order to maintain my integrity, and so around the age of 28, I sent my resignation letter to my bishop. I was finally free from believing in a fantasy that constantly conflicted with reality. I was about to tell my bishop that I was losing my faith in Mormonism. It sounds so dreadful doesn't it, losing one's faith in their religion? But I wasn't losing anything, I was gaining knowledge, truth, and insight. (#3)

This narrator made sense of the dissolution by appreciating the new knowledge gained. Indeed, the reconstructed identity reflects the acquirement of knowledge, rather than a loss of faith. In this way, (wo)men of science are similar to individualists because they did not perceive disaffiliation to be a loss. Rather, (wo)men of science “converted” to a new religion (i.e. science) and did not discuss the potential losses they experienced. Perhaps one reason for this, is that (wo)men of science often convinced their family members to (de)convert with them. Consequently, these narrators were able to maintain their relationships and their faith; just in different forms.

### The Mormon in name only

Finally, narrators who were Mormon in name only told stories of sacrifice and choice. Specifically, these authors talked about continuing to attend church because it helped maintain a relationship with an important other or because they were protecting an important other from anticipated consequences. Although, from an outside perspective, observers might argue that these Mormons in name only were still a part of the LDS Church, the narrators took the time to share their story on site that solicited stories of exit. One person shared:

I still sort of attend the Mormon church. Eventually, things improved at home as I grew more tolerant of Mormonism. It was no different than the other religions. It helped my family (parents and some siblings), and wife cope through the awful existential items of death and what lies beyond the grave. We eventually decided that we loved each other and could make it work... she displayed to me that our love was more than Mormonism. We both learned to accept each other's world view. Me an agnostic with atheistic leanings, she a devout Mormon. I learned a lot from that. I am utterly grateful that we were able to make it through that. To honor her, I choose to sit in the pews so that we can have a family religious experience each Sunday. This means that I am judged wrongly by many in our ward. Hurtful things are assumed of me. I have transcended Mormonism to the point that those types of things only serve to confirm the faulty foundations of Mormonism.

(#57)

In this story, this narrator clearly does not identify as a Mormon but continues to go to church to honor the relationship he has with his wife; suggesting that church attendance does not necessarily equate with faith. Indeed, other ex-Mormons shared stories that allude to this:

I am still discovering more facts, and I will continue to read and study documents. But I have made up my mind ... I am no longer a Mormon. I can't, for the sake of the kids, request to have my name removed. Because we live in Utah, in a very small

religious community, my kids would not benefit from having an “ex-Mormon” mother. The rumors would be horrendous for them ... so, for their sake, and the time being, I still remain on the roster. The bishop is my next door neighbor and there’s a temple in my backyard ... but I choose to overlook those things ... I admire nature and my neighbor is a good man ... (#16)

This mother, for the sake of her children, sacrificed her own preferences to spare her children the shame of her disaffiliation. Unlike the disenfranchised members who felt like they sacrificed their family identities, these individuals privileged discourses of community and sacrificed their individual wants/needs for the maintenance of their relationships.

## Discussion

Five prominent identities emerged from 150 stories LDS exit narratives: (1) the disenfranchised victim, (2) the redeemed spiritualist, (3) the liberated self, (4) the (wo)men of science, and (5) the Mormon in name only. These identities informed the first goal of our study by highlighting the various functions the LDS Church played in their lives and their perceptions of themselves (e.g. family man, person of faith, etc.). This finding extends the work of Hinderaker and O’Conner (2015) who noted that the process of leaving the LDS Church varied from leaving for-pay organizations. Indeed, the majority of reconstructed identities addressed relational and faith values as opposed to the activities that might be more in line with conceptualizing the LDS Church as an organization. With this in mind, this study helps answer why the process of leaving a church differs from leaving an organization as well as why the identities that emerged in this context might diverge from those told in unemployment narratives (see Pederson, 2013).

The second goal of this study was to illuminate the identities constructed in narratives of disaffiliation with the LDS Church. Despite research that suggests that the LDS Church is a high costs religion from which leaving might be a major disruption in multiple important aspects of a person’s life, only the disenfranchised victim and the redeemed spiritualist ever discussed the devastation they experienced upon exit. Moreover, redeemed spiritualists were able to quickly leave the story of victimization behind. Alternatively, liberated selves told stories about how their membership in the LDS Church posed a more significant disruption to their identities than leaving. By exiting, these narrators felt that they could be a more genuine version of themselves. This finding challenges the assumption that disruptions are initially and inherently problematic. Indeed, major life disruptions might lead to significant improvements immediately for those who experience them. For example, research on parent-child estrangement (see Scharp et al., 2015) details experiences of significant

neglect and abuse prior to the removal or distancing respectively. Although gaining distance from a family of origin can be traumatic, many of their participants came to tell stories about how leaving the family of origin was a healthy solution to unhealthy relationships. Although being a member of a church is certainly different from being in an abusive relationship, the parallel to estrangement suggests that not all major life disruptions begin with distress (before redemption). Indeed, it might be the high costs of being a member of the LDS Church (see Iannaccone et al., 1995; Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010) that make leaving it a positive experience. In sum, the liberated self identity emerges to problematize assumptions that belonging to a group (e.g. Church, organization, etc.) is inherently positive and ultimately offers a re-imagined way to conceptualize disruption. Next, unlike liberated selves who positioned membership in the LDS Church as problematic, (wo)men of science appeared to merely convert to another belief system. This finding corresponds to research that suggests that "deconversion" can be simply a form of conversation to another belief system (Barbour, 1994). Finally, those who constructed themselves as Mormon in name only felt separate from the LDS Church but continued to engage in behaviors of members to avoid relationship disruption. This identity, in particular, complicates the idea that we are what we do. Despite attending church, these members adamantly discussed the separation of faith and church attendance. Similar to the way the liberated self complicates the idea of disruption, Mormons in name only problematizes the simple equation of what we are is what we do. In the future, researchers should examine other instances when there is dissonance between people's behaviors and their perceptions of themselves.

Finally, the last goal of this study was to explore how ex-members did or did not address the multiple identity fissures brought on by exiting the LDS Church. Findings suggest that ex-members tell stories that almost exclusively address one particular type of identity threat. For example, disenfranchised victims and Mormons in name only focus on relationships, whereas redeemed spiritualists, liberated selves, and wo(men) of science focus more strongly on their (absence) of faith identities. This finding suggests that when faced with multiple identity threats, it is possible that people focus on the most salient one and reconstruct their identity around what they value most. It is also possible that when faced with multiple threats, narrators tell a story that might be easily understood by the most listeners. Given Avance's (2013) research that suggests disaffiliated members of the LDS Church use online forums to reify their beliefs, it is possible that the identities people reconstructed were meant as a persuasive message for those were thinking of leaving or as a statement of support for those who had left. Future research should be conducted to further illuminate the mechanisms that influence narrators to tell particular stories when multiple aspects of their identities are threatened.

## Limitations and directions for future research

As with all research, this study has limitations. For example, the data corpus was taken from a website that prompts individuals to share their personal account of leaving Mormonism. Additional contexts (e.g. other websites or interviews) might contain narratives in which different identities emerge. Furthermore, narrators did not provide consistent demographic information. Demographic information could provide a cultural framework to facilitate further understanding of identity. For example, it is possible that ex-Mormons living in Utah might experience leaving the church in a vastly different way from someone who did not live in a predominantly LDS culture.

Finally, there was no way to gauge at what point in the exit process narrators were sharing their story. This is relevant because identities are fluid and have the potential to change. The narratives analyzed in the present study reflect only a moment in the lives of participants. Participants' identity and faith has the potential to further evolve. Thus, it could be fruitful to longitudinally explore the evolution of the identities and conduct interviews longitudinally to parse out distinctions. Of note, some of the emergent identities might make reaffiliation easier or more difficult. For example, redeemed spiritualists or liberated selves might easily find their way back to the LDS Church if they feel that God has lead them back or they can be more genuine as members (respectively). (Wo)men of science, however, might have a considerably more difficult time narrating why "the facts" are irrelevant if they decide to reaffiliate in the future. Future researchers should explore, broadly, how certain identity constructions facilitate (or not) identity movement and how other identities constrain new constructions.

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