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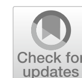

Negotiating Leaving Religion, Family Relationships, and Identity: The Case of LDS Faith Transitions in Therapy

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Abstract

This paper chronicles the process through which five clients in therapeutic sessions work through their experiences with leaving the LDS (Mormon) church, including the associated friction with immediate and extended family and the consequences these experiences have on participants' sense of identity. Using grounded theory to analyze client notes, we discovered three broad "central categories" across all five research participants. These categories include first, the process of leaving the LDS religion and church and associated faith crises (of various degrees), second, the experience of tension between the need for authenticity and family expectations concerning religion and faith, and sometimes sexuality, and the resulting feeling of "leading two lives," and third, the consequences of the faith crisis and friction with family members on clients' sense of identity, and their work towards the achievement of identity at the same time.

Keywords LDS religion · Deconversion · Identity · Grounded theory

Introduction

In this article, we chronicle the process through which five clients in therapeutic sessions work through their experiences with leaving the LDS church (also known as the Mormon church or The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints), associated friction with immediate and extended family, and the consequences these experiences have on participants' sense of identity, applying Marcia's theory of identity. At the same time, participants were actively working through these identity issues with the help of therapeutic intervention. We first illustrate the relevant literature on the topic, starting with a description of religious trends, the process of deconversion[1] in general, and then discuss deconversion, specifically from the LDS church. We also illustrate the consequences deconversion has on participants' sense of well-being and identity. The literature review is followed by a description of our methodology (grounded theory), and then an elaboration of our findings. We discovered three broad "central categories" across all five research participants (including subcategories). These categories include first, the process of leaving the LDS religion and church and associated faith crises (of various degrees), second, the experience of tension between the need for authenticity and family expectations concerning religion and faith, and sometimes sexuality, and the resulting feeling of "leading two lives," and third, the consequences of the faith crisis and friction with family members on clients' sense of identity, and their work towards the achievement of identity at the same time.

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[1] While the terms "deconversion" and "apostasy" have similar connotations of distancing oneself from and leaving a church body and faith, in this paper, we prefer the term deconversion, since the concept of apostasy can carry a negative connotation (e.g. see Bromley, 1988 for a discussion of this). However, if an author uses the term apostasy in his/her own work, we may use the same term when referring to his/her article.

Literature Review

In the area of religion, a steady shift is occurring in the United States. Overall, the number of people who identify as Christians is down 12% (now 65%) while the "none" category, which includes agnostics, atheists, or "nothing in particular," is up 9% (now 26%) over the most recent decade (Pew Research Center: Religion and Public Life, 2019). These findings show that while men and women are unaffiliated at roughly the same rate, millennials are leaving religion at more than double the rate of Gen X and triple the rate of Baby Boomers. College educated, white (non-Hispanic), left-leaning individuals represent the largest increases in the "none" or unaffiliated category, though every group is seeing a decline in Christianity. At the same time, the overall share of the U.S. population who identify as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS or Mormons) has held steady at 2% over the past decade, and the LDS church has been one of the fastest growing religions worldwide (Brooks, 2020). Nevertheless, some adherents of the LDS church do leave this religion each year, and in this paper, we are interested specifically in the commonalities and differences experienced by people who move through this process and how clients in therapy cope with it.

The Process of Leaving a Faith in General

Leaving a religious group, especially a high-cost religious group, is not an easy or smooth process, but one often fraught with tension, anxiety, and conflict (Bromley, 1988; Brooks, 2020; Ormsbee, 2020). High-cost religious groups are "theologically, socially, and culturally exclusive" (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010, p. 325) and have been referred to as "quasi-ethnic" groups (Sherkat, 2001, p. 1467). Research has shown that exiting the LDS church, along with leaving other "high-cost" religions, can be a costly and sometimes risky endeavor (Brooks, 2020). In addition, leaving a religion and church body is generally not a "one-time event," but people often leave in stages, sometimes over an extended time frame (Ormsbee, 2020). In the section that follows, we first discuss the general process of deconversion, and then focus more specifically on the deconversion process among LDS church members, while also touching on issues of definition.

The general process of deconversion (renouncing previously held religious beliefs) has been studied more extensively and has received more attention in recent years than previously (Streib, 2021; Perez & Vallières, 2020; citing Streib et al., 2009; Streib & Keller, 2004; Paloutzian et al., 2013).

Fisher (2017) presents a model in which individuals who are religious move through a process with three phases; questioning, doubt, and reconfiguration. Essentially, *questioning* is brought on by conflicts between established and new worldviews. These could include conflicts between science and religion, social issues, and personal suffering. Questions become *doubts* when individuals are unable to resolve the conflict observed through questioning. Krause and Ellison (2009) describe doubting as a process—first an event that evokes questions, experiencing doubt when the question is unresolved, coping reaction, then an outcome. Doubt has been found to have an association with poor connections to other members (Krause & Ellison, 2009), personality traits (openness, social intelligence, and a disregard for what others think of them) (Puffer, 2013), people who value scientific inquiry (Smith, 2011), and even family of origin strictness (Hunsberger et al., 2002). Doubts occur when the answer to initial questions do not fit neatly within the individual's established religious worldview. Having religious doubts has been shown to be associated with psychological distress (Ellison & Lee, 2010) and lower sense of wellbeing (Krause, 2006). The groups with the highest wellbeing have fewer doubts, which holds true for those who are confidently religious and those who are confidently agnostic or atheist (Galen & Kloet, 2011). The *reconfiguration* phase represents a decision about how an individual will relate to their faith in the future. It is a resolution, of sorts, between the internal model of the world and the religious organization. The individual resolves their doubt or doubts toward orthodoxy or away from it. If doubts are resolved away from orthodoxy, the individual is left with three options, according to Fisher (2017): Switching, deconversion, or disaffiliation. *Switching* either occurs within broadly similar religious traditions or between them (Cragun & Hammer, 2011). *Deconversion* occurs when "…doubts are not adequately addressed in favor of the existing religious framework…" (Fisher, 2017, p. 361) and the individual experiences a loss of faith or belief in the religion. In addition, the term *disaffiliation* has been described as a process with two dimensions—ending membership and disidentifying with the group and their system of beliefs (Bromley, 1991).

In addition to *deconversion*, some also use the term *faith crisis:* According to Webb (2001), a crisis of faith involves the disintegration of a person's religious identity. The shattering of trust in the theology and truth claims of a religion creates a seismic shift in the person's worldview. This is a more extreme experience than implied in the doubting, questioning, or reconfiguration processes alone. However, the term deconversion is not favored by all researchers in the literature.[2]

[2] For example, McKnight and Ondrey (2008) along with Cragun and Hammer (2011) suggest that deconversion is nothing more than conversion to non-believing. While the ways by which deconversion and

Barbour (1994) identifies four characteristics of deconversion; intellectual doubt, moral criticism, emotional suffering, and disaffiliation from the religious community. While the first two may illuminate the process of deconversion, the second two, as Fazzino (2014) notes, represent the narratives of deconversion. Likewise, Perez and Vallières (2020), using a grounded theory approach, discuss various paths to deconversion, which overlap to some extent with Barbour's findings. The reasons for deconversion they discover fall broadly into three core categories: "Reasons and enquiry," "criticism and discontent," and "personal development." The authors come to similar conclusions as Barbour (1994) (as well as earlier studies), especially in the area of "reason and enquiry."

Intellectual processes can contribute to leaving a religion (e.g. Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1997; Caplovitz & Sherrow, 1977), such as the prevalence of doubts about the religion's truth claims (e.g. in bible stories, specific assumptions) among college students (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1997). In addition, belonging to the category of "criticisms and discontent" (Perez & Vallières, 2020), some have pointed out that deconverts often struggle with questions of "integrity" prior to the actual deconversion, and "conflicts between religious views and how they felt towards issues such as abortion, sex, gender inequality, women's—and LGBTQ rights" (Perez & Vallières, 2020, p. 13). The last category discussed by Perez and Vallières (2020) was "personal development," which "is characterized by a process resulting in the discarding of religious belief and the desire for a greater sense of freedom, empowerment, honesty, and an interest in self-knowledge" (p. 14).

The Process of Leaving the LDS Church and Religion

What are the main factors regarding deconversion, specifically from the LDS religion? In one study (Ormsbee, 2020), some deconverts were already marginal at the time of their decision to leave, while others were at some point fully committed members, but experienced doubts that eventually led to leaving their faith. Ormsbee (2020 found that leaving "high cost" religions like Mormonism

> consisted of a series of lesser breaking points that were neither end-points nor the cause of their leaving; rather, such experiences seem far more like "punctuating moments," moments of disruption, rethinking, and adjustment. In other words, formerly devout Mormons went through a series of ruptures, over time (p. 303).

Punctuating events were, for example, "crises" in the personal realm, intellectual insights, or/and conflicts with family or the church. "They "severed only those ties to Mormonism that the leaver was prepared to sever at that moment, such that over time, more and more lines were cut with each new disruption" (Ormsbee, 2020, p. 303). What connected those experiences to each other was the critique of the LDS religion in terms of their "truth claims and moral authority—epistemology and ethics" in different areas (p. 303). This study is in line with other work on deconversion, such as Fisher (2017), Streib (2021), or Perez and Vallières (2020), since it also describes the process in stages, but focused specifically on LDS religion.

Gender-role related factors also play a role. Brooks (2020) narrates stories of Ex-LDS women, who felt that the church had strongly controlled them and their bodies, through its focus on chastity and denial of their sexuality, or when married, its immense focus on motherhood and child bearing. Here, some of the literature also hones in on the tension between an LGBTQ identity and the LDS faith (Lefevor et al., 2020; Wood & Conley, 2014). Identifying as LGBQT can put someone on the path towards deconversion (Wood & Conley, 2014), and attempts at restricting one's LGBTQ identity often are not successful and can do damage (Dehlin et al., 2015).

Consequences of Deconversion on Well-being and a Sense of Identity, Deconversion and Therapy

Current LDS members who are thinking of leaving the church, or are in the process of doing so, may suffer from a variety of mental health conditions, ranging from anxiety and depression to suicidal ideation, loneliness, and identity confusion (e.g., Ellison & Lee, 2010; Galek et al., 2007; Krause et al., 1999).

In this vein, those undergoing deconversion from the LDS church often experience "intense ontological insecurity" and distress. This experience can lead to a state of what Brooks (2020) calls "world collapse," defined as "a disintegration of the all-encompassing symbolic-existential framework of reality once provided by religion that induces psychosis-like experiences of (dis)embodiment, derealization, and loss of self-affection" (p. 307). These experiences differ significantly from what is normally considered depression or anxiety. Ex-Mormons also struggle with the loss of meaning upon leaving the faith, and at the same time, are sometimes plagued with "vague embodied memories" of their time as LDS believers. In addition, they struggle with the loss of

Footnote 2 (continued)

conversion happen may share similarities, Barbour (1994) argues that the narratives differ significantly (see Fazzino, 2014).

the familiar, of security, and of important relationships as a consequence of their transition away from the Mormon faith (Brooks, 2020).

At the same time, people who leave the LDS faith "are quickly branded 'apostates,' rhetorically referred to as lost souls destined to spend eternity in 'outer darkness,' and often shunned by family, friends, and neighbors due to widespread belief that apostasy stems from a personal decision to sin" (Brooks, 2020, p. 197; citing Bromley, 1998; Mauss, 1988). And even if the relationships with family members do not get completely cut, some have fraught relationships with their parents and other close relatives and a feeling of disenchantment pervading these relationships (e.g. Brooks, 2020).

The experience of "intense ontological security" connects to the themes of identity and identity development. Having grown up in a tight-knit family and religious community and then distancing oneself from it (or being distanced from it) can cause a sudden feeling of a loss of security and with it, identity. This can lead to a feeling of a "loss of self" and "a sense of existential liminality, of being somehow neither here nor there" (Brooks, 2020, p. 205). Thus, those who have left the church often second guess their choices and identity ("intellectually dissect" them) as a consequence of the disenchantment of the religious worldview and family (p. 205). Deconverts also need to reconstruct their sense of identity through new affiliations and roles (Nica, 2020).

While we found work on identity issues among LDS deconverts (e.g. Brooks, 2020; Nica, 2020), we did not find much literature delineating the role of therapy in this process. Secular therapy is often not able to address the concerns that ex-Mormons have, since they neither come from nor understand a religious worldview (Brooks, 2020).

In the next section, we want to outline James Marcia's theory of identity, which we think will help us better understand the process our research participants went through.

Identity Theories, and Marcia's Theory of Identity

Several authors have analyzed the development of identity (Erik Erikson, James Marcia), sometimes also in relation to faith (James Fowler). Erik Erikson's theory is probably the best-known theory in the field. Erikson (1963) conceived of identity development as a salient aspect of the developmental stage in youth, with adolescents fluctuating between the two poles of "identity resolution" and "identity confusion," with many factors, including earlier stages, influencing this process. However, we think that James Marcia's theory can add the most to illuminate this present research.

Marcia's theory of identity development stems from his interaction with Erikson's work. The author describes four categories of identity development, instead of Erikson's two poles only (Kroger et al., 2010; Marcia, 1966). The categories capture the ways young people go about investigating different forms of identities in several areas. After playing with these, youth generally settle on some beliefs and "commitments," as related to religion, gender, sexuality, and work life (Kroger et al., 2010; Marcia, 1966). It is assumed that "progressive forms of identity status change" towards identity achievement happen during adolescence as well as young adulthood (Kroger et al., 2010, p. 684). This theory of identity development is conceptualized in four categories, each capturing diffusion or resolution of a sense of identity: Identity Achievement, Foreclosure, Identity Diffusion, and Moratorium. In Marcia's (1966) words, someone who fits into the category of *identity achievement*.

> has experienced a crisis period and is committed to an occupation and ideology. He has seriously considered several occupational choices and has made a decision on his own terms, even though his ultimate choice may be a variation of parental wishes. With respect to ideology, he seems to have reevaluated past beliefs and achieved a resolution that leaves him free to act. (pp. 551–552)

On the other hand, those in the *foreclosure* category (a variant of the category of identity achievement), followed in their parents' footsteps without really reflecting on these choices. "He is becoming what others have prepared or intended him to become as a child" (Marcia, 1966, p. 552). Thus, in foreclosure, youth develop an identity but the identity is not based on individual preferences and on searching (Marcia, 1966).

There are two additional types of identity development, called *identity diffusion* and *moratorium.* The main characteristic of identity diffusion is "a lack of commitment" in the areas of work and beliefs and values (Marcia, 1966, p. 52). Here the subject is "either uninterested in ideological matters or takes a smorgasbord approach in which one outlook seems as good to him as another and he is not averse to sampling from all" (Marcia, 1966, p. 552). Similar to identity diffusion, but not the same, is the type of moratorium. Here, an individual is actively "in a crisis period" and exploring different commitments (Marcia, 1966, p. 552). According to Marcia, "although his parents' wishes are still important to him, he is attempting a compromise among them, society's demands, and his own capabilities" (p. 552). These individuals are often preoccupied with the search for their identity.

Our Approach

Despite the research discussed above, the way young adults work through the process of leaving the LDS religion and their own identity achievement while in therapy, and the

variations between them, has not been studied much. Fisher's model (2017) is immensely helpful in making sense of the process, but is not specifically focused on leaving the LDS church. We also did not find any research that directly ties deconversion from the LDS religion and church to Marcia's stages of identity development. In addition, not much literature exists regarding the ways social work practice can address these crises accompanying deconversion from the LDS religion, and in variations in how clients work through the stages of this process.

In this paper, we are concerned with exactly these processes. We are asking the following research questions: How do young adults experience and work through the process of a faith crisis and of distancing themselves from and eventually leaving the LDS church in the context of their relationships with immediate and extended family members and friends? What consequences does this process have for them, on their sense of identity, and how do they resolve these issues? Can we see variations in this process among the research participants? What implications can be derived from our findings for social work practice?

Methods

The material analyzed in this study is based on client therapy session notes over the span of 1–2 years. One of the researchers, also a therapist, became interested in the process of leaving the LDS church, and its consequences on clients' sense of well-being, since many of his/her clients were in this situation. This author asked the clients for consent to use their client notes prior to submitting a proposal to the IRB system, and upon receiving approval from the clients, stopped taking notes in further sessions for this research project. The project was submitted to the IRB system at the researchers' university, and approved in an expedited fashion. At the same time, the second author, with a long-standing interest in religion and spirituality, did not have any contact with any of the research participants at all.

The researchers analyzed the material using the constant comparative method according to *grounded theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 2012). Grounded theory is an established qualitative method in the social sciences, developed originally by studying the processes by which people die in hospitals. It is an excellent approach to make inductive sense of qualitative data, such as client notes and interviews, in regard to the deconversion process. This is due to its focus on understanding events and processes, based on concepts (instead of the understanding of population characteristics). While the methodology is flexible, it is also complex. It is used to construct theory from data systematically. Rather than seeking reliability and validity, the rigor from grounded theory comes from *authenticity* and *trustworthiness*. We started with the open coding of therapy session notes, then coded them axially and selectively towards the end, until several central categories emerged from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Open coding is a process of asking sensitizing questions such as the following: What phenomenon is being described? What strategies are being used to deal with the phenomenon? What justifications are being used? etc. The data are constantly compared to the codes being assigned as broad concepts begin to develop. Axial coding is a process of relating concepts to one another in clusters that centralize around emergent categories and subcategories. Selective coding is the process of integrating the overarching concepts, categories, and subcategories into an overarching theory that answers the question "what seems to be going on here" (Teppo, 2015)?

The research participants for this project consisted of two men and three women, who were all between 20 and 35 years old. They included one Latino, while the other four participants were white. All of the research participants were located in Utah, and all had been to therapy due to their experiences.

Results: Three Central Categories

The grounded theory coding process yielded three central categories, all interconnected with each other, and each including subcategories. These categories are:

- the process of leaving the LDS religion and church, and associated faith crises (of various degrees)
- the experience of tension between the need for authenticity and family expectations concerning religion and sometimes sexuality (such as coming out as gay, lesbian, or bisexual), and the resulting feeling of "leading two lives"
- the consequences of the faith crisis and friction with family on clients' sense of identity, and at the same time, resolving the identity confusion associated with the deconversion process, with the help of therapy

It is important to note that the five research participants were not all in the same stage of this process. That is, they differed in how far along they were on the route towards leaving the church, as well as in terms of resolving the loss or friction caused by the deconversion or faith crisis, and of gaining a sense of identity. We discuss these central categories (including variations within them as well as subthemes) in the following section.

Category 1: The Process of Leaving the LDS Religion/Church: Various Stages, and Intellectual and Emotional Factors

All five interviewees were in the process of distancing themselves from the faith and the LDS church. As discussed in the literature review, leaving the LDS religion and church is generally not a one step process, but happens over time. It can involve the processes of questioning, doubt, and reconfiguration (see Fisher, 2017, Ormsbee, 2020). This process happens in stages. First, we find initial doubts, which increase in intensity and frequency, and at times also sudden bursts of insight, which then lead to a reconfiguration of one's beliefs, and sometimes to deconversion or faith crises (as discussed in the literature above).

All of the five research participants could be placed somewhere in between initial questioning, doubts, and reconfiguration of their belief system in the process of leaving the church. They had decided that the LDS faith was not for them, that they did not believe in its doctrines anymore, and had stopped going to church but had not taken the final step of taking their records out of the church. Most had told their parents about their doubts, but not everyone had informed them about the full extent of their decision. In most cases, both intellectual and emotional factors played a role in leading to doubts, questioning, and eventual leaving of the LDS church. While for some cognitive reasons were more salient, for others, emotional factors were the deciding factors in their decisions.

As an example of someone at the beginning stages of this process, *Ron (client 2)*, a gay married man in his late 20s of a Latinx background, felt anger toward the church due to its stance over conversion therapy, having had a friend who went through conversion therapy and subsequently committed suicide (emotional factors). In addition, this young man had experienced sexual abuse at the hands of an uncle in Brazil, and had witnessed much hypocrisy in his extended family, which further contributed to his doubts and anger. He had not told his parents about his doubts and anger yet. At the same time, he had conflicted feelings about church. That is, in addition to the negative feelings, he sometimes also felt at peace while visiting it.

Another research participant, *Ted (client 1)*, a young white, single, and straight male in his early 30s, was a bit further along in the deconversion process than Ron. He described how he started reading what he called "hacker news," news about computers, policy, and philosophy, and that his questions and doubts started accumulating due to this reading (intellectual factors). He told us that he read a couple of articles about God, and that he started feeling that "maybe God doesn't make sense." As a consequence, he started questioning the church, and felt that he had been programmed by the church. He also needed some emotional distance from the church, did not feel like he belonged, and felt that "the church is doing damage." This process happened over the course of a few months.

Laura (client 3), is a young white, single woman, who identifies as bisexual. Like Ted, she was on the path towards deconversion. She currently identifies as agnostic, has stopped going to church, and has told her parents, but has not yet undertaken the final steps of removing her name from the church records. She describes the deconversion process as both emotional and intellectual. She told us about questions and doubts, and experienced the church as limiting and manipulating, having witnessed her mother's guilt and blind obedience to the church. She says she "felt that something was wrong" when in church (pointing to initial doubts). In addition, she felt that her worth in her parents' eyes was tied to fitting into church and to following traditional gender roles (since, as a bisexual, she herself does not fit these traditional gender roles). For her, going to BYU was an eye opener since "it was less strict than I was raised," and this increased her doubts. She now attributes the spiritual experiences she had at an earlier time to mind control and social influence. About the process of removing her name from the records (the final process of the deconversion process), she says:

> For a long time I was worrying my parents would find out, but then we had a conversation so they know I'm not going back. I've thought about it for a long time but all the hoops you have to jump through. I don't think that should be another thing in the back of my mind during the whole process. Waiting and worrying that it is finally done.

Clara (client 5), went through an extended process of deconversion that also involved intellectual and emotional insights that can be seen as sudden shifts (as a sudden reconfiguration or even a faith crisis). She talked about a myriad of intellectual and emotional factors contributing to her questions, doubts, and eventual reconfiguration of her belief system, such as the realization of the strict gendered roles in the LDS religion (e.g. witnessing other LDS girls get married and have children at a young age), feeling uncomfortable with the dress code, negative experiences with dating, and realizing that the system was "brainwashing" her and wanting to shut down debate. About the process of leaving the church, she says: "It feels like being in a divorce—it wasn't just a lifestyle fad. You never really get over, just adapt to your reality now."

Category 2: Tension Between the Need for Authenticity and Family Expectations, and the Resulting Feeling of "Leading Two Lives"

The process of questioning and doubting led to the need to live an authentic life. Sometimes, when clients felt

constrained in asserting themselves, they felt as if they were "leading two lives." That is, participants worried about present or future friction with either immediate or/and extended family members and friends or roommates. This potential or real friction was often experienced as problematic, and together with the disorientation that the deconversion created, exacerbated the distress felt by the research participants. For two of the research participants, the (potential) friction in the family was associated not only with their leaving the church, but also with coming out and telling their family about their lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity.

Thus, clients who had not officially or fully come out about their deconversion and/or their sexual identity sometimes felt as if they were *leading two lives,* a "fake one" for parents, extended family members, and other LDS members such as friends or roommates, and the "real" one, lived with close friends or intimate others.

Clara (Client 5) and *Katja (Client 4),* are both white, single straight women in their thirties. They had both told their families about their deconversion, and felt sad about their uneasy relationships with members of the extended family. *Clara (client 5)* felt less conflict with her immediate family members, such as her step-mother, but experienced conflict with her grandmother. This created a sense of general uneasiness. She described it this way:

> Saying I'm comfortable with how things are is overstating it. More like a truce or détente. I just never know what thing will set them off. It could be who I'm dating or some little conspiracy theory I didn't know anyone believed.

Katja (client 4), who struggled with social and religious family expectations, especially the expectation to be perfect,, also mentioned the differences between her immediate and extended family: While her immediate family is relatively tolerant and accepting of her deconversion, this is a different issue for the extended family members, whom she also describes as being very intrusive regarding her dating life. She distanced herself from the extended family**,** and felt like she did not fit in.

As someone who had been open about her deconversion, *Laura (client 3),* described the friction this caused in her family environment. She told us that her mother was feeling guilty and grieving that she was no longer a church goer, and was at times still "pushing religion" on her daughter. She also shared that she had a strained relationship with her sister and other siblings after this decision, though the relationship recently improved again. In addition, she hesitated to inform her parents about her identification as bisexual.

Overall, she felt that the family does not let her be authentic: Having concerns for her parents if she left the church on the one hand, she felt conflicted about her parents' reactions to her decisions on the other. Thus, she also felt like she was *leading two lives*, one in front of her parents and when at college (BYU), the other when on her own. She said that "being around family, you feel like you're hiding. You feel like you're lying and keeping up a façade. You feel lonely because people don't know you."

The young, gay, married man named *Ron (client 2)* we met above, similarly talked about how his goals (which were living a simple life, being happy and living authentically) conflicted with family expectations. He mentioned that his partner accused him of "caring too much what others think." In contrast to the three women mentioned above, he desired to inform his parents about not going to church anymore, felt tired of pretending, but was—at the same time—worried about their reactions. He also felt tired of denying his sexual orientation and "feeling like a bad person," saying "I do want to come out but I know work and family will be completely different."

Category 3: Struggling with Questions of Identity as Consequence of Deconversion and Family Friction, and Finding a Path Towards Identity Achievement

Abandoning a Foreclosed Identity and Resulting Moratorium

As a consequence of the doubts, feelings and frictions described above, all five clients struggled with identity issues, which in some cases resembled what Ormsbee (2020) called "intense ontological insecurity." Here, we think that Marcia's theory best captures this sense of abandoning a former identity and forging a new one. Along with their realization that they did not believe in the doctrines of Mormonism anymore, clients abandoned their former religious identity. Since they were now left with uncertainty regarding who they were and their place in the world together with the real loss of close relationships and regard by their family, feelings of loss, isolation, depression, guilt and even despair, emerged.

We find not only that the category of "foreclosed identity" fits their previous state, but also that "moratorium" describes these clients best as they struggle with finding a path forward. This is true for the religious realm, and—connected to it—also for other dimensions such as gender roles and sexuality. At the same time, most had slowly started on a path towards cementing a new sense of identity (identity achievement).

For example, *Ted (client 1)* mentioned that he left the LDS church (and thus his "foreclosed" identity) without a real foundation and that this contributed to a sense of meaninglessness. Similarly, *Clara (client 5)* and *Katja (client 4)*, the two women we met earlier, talked about "going through a seismic identity shift, and my mental health was at its worst"

(Clara) as a consequence of transitioning out of the church, or about feeling like "one's compass was off" (Katja). In Clara's case, his shift also led to mental health issues at the time, for which she used alcohol to cope. During this period, she felt insecure about her roots, felt like she was in a "liminal space," which she does not like, wanting to "feel more grounded" instead. In addition, Katja talked about being caught between the "two poles of overidentification and distancing" in relation to the LDS community, and that she experienced a sense of confusion about what she was feeling and thinking. All these indicators point to leaving a foreclosed identity behind and to a sense of moratorium at that time. Along with this, she also felt that she had lost some of her previous personality, and still struggles with this to a degree:

> Before I felt like I was fun and interesting, a good positive energy. I'm not an enjoyable person to be around. People have said things in a worried way. I don't want to be this troubled person you have to worry about.

Laura (client 3) also struggled for some time with her identity as a bisexual woman, but during therapy, was starting to feel better about her sense of who she is. However, compared to the others, she did also not feel a strong loss of identity in the first place. Instead, she felt she had to hide her identity around family and at BYU, where she was a student.

In addition, some of our research participants also brought up a sense of isolation and loss as a consequence of distancing themselves from the faith and the church community. *Katja (client 4)* felt a certain amount of grief over the loss of certainty, but also a sense of excitement, in short, ambivalent feelings. *Laura (client 3)* felt very isolated upon leaving the church. Research participants differed in the intensity of these feelings, for some, they were very acute, and for others, less so.

Working Towards Identity Achievement/Resolve

Our research participants, however, not only dealt with a sense of moratorium and loss, distress and despair, but had also started on a journey towards identity achievement/resolution, and to establish a life outside of the LDS church, with the help of therapy sessions. As discussed in the literature above, the movement from identity diffusion and moratorium towards identity achievement is an expected part of adolescence and emerging adulthood. Here the process was made more complicated by the deconversion from the LDS religion and thus also community and family, as we have seen above. Again, for some of our research participants, this process was related to publicly acknowledging their sexual identity. It was also often connected to a support system—with specific family members (often siblings), but also outside of family. Thus, while our research participants had been in the middle of the moratorium/crisis due to leaving their faith and distancing themselves from the LDS community (and some were still in it), most were now on their path towards identity achievement.

Laura (client 3), for example, was on the path to resolving her identity crisis and getting back to an equilibrium/achieving a stable sense of identity. The mantra she used was that "I do not have to be perfect" and that "I am enough." Her goal was to let go of some of the perfectionism that had plagued her, and find her own way. She did have a sense of resolve, and gained a sense of who she was. Upon coming out on social media, she also felt more empowered, and even though that caused conflict with her family, it helped her cement her sense of identity. At the same time, Laura also had a strong sense of ethics, described herself as "a good person", and said that she trusted the process. About her current situation, she says:

> I am very happy with where I am, more myself than I have ever been, and genuinely happy to be alive and experiencing life even though it took a lot of work and went through a lot of pain to get here. I am who and where I want to be.

She is also on the path of finding her own sense of what is right and wrong, her ethics, outside of the what the LDS church tells her to do:

> There is so much that you have to decide what is right versus wrong. You get to decide. That can be scary—I remember it being scary at first but after a while—I've always believed that people are inherently good—so now I'm not someone who will want to cause pain to others. This gave me comfort in trusting my moral compass. Then it became more fun to get to know myself and enjoy the freedom of not having someone dictate your every move.

Katja (client 4) now also "feels more centered than during the intense faith transition" she experienced a while back. She says her anxiety improved during the last month or so. Like Laura, she also feels freer now than in previous times. She recalls that in the past, "I've never given myself permission to think about what life could look like without the church." Now, she says, she is less anxious and gives herself permission to not have it figured out:

> I don't have it all figured out and I don't have to have it all figured out right now. I don't even have to have it figured out ever if I don't want to. I can breathe and not have to have it all figured out right now.

Summary and Discussion of Main Findings

In this paper, we chronicled the ways five emerging adults, who are currently in therapy, work through the realizations that the LDS religion and church is not for them, and how some of them experienced a tension also between their sexuality and the LDS doctrines. We find that all of them experience a tension between the need to lead their lives the way they see fit (authenticity) and the experience of friction with their immediate and extended family environment or, if they had not fully disclosed their deconversion and/or sexuality yet to family members, the fear of such friction. We also find that all five clients experienced a search for identity, leaving the foreclosed identity of being an LDS member behind.

What stood out from our research is that the five clients were on different steps along this path. Some were in the beginning stages of being open about their deconversion and (for some at least) sexuality, were understandably worried about the friction this would create with their family environment, and were struggling more with their sense of identity (Ted, client 1; Ron, client 2; Clara, client 5). Others had done so a while ago and were definitely on the path towards identity achievement (Laura, client 3; Katja, client 4).

Thus, where one was at in the process of distancing oneself from the church mattered for the path towards constructing a new, stronger sense of identity. Specifically, whether a person was in the early, tentative stages, during which she had not told one's parents or relatives that one did not go to church anymore, or whether she was further along in this process, made a difference for one's sense of identity. This was true also for the process of coming out for those who identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Social support also played a role in this process. Those who felt that they had a significant amount of social support from siblings, or friends or a parent, were further along on this journey than those who did not, and as we highlight below, therapy can be a form of social support.

These findings are in accordance with several studies, such as Brooks (2020) and Ormsbee (2020), both chronicling the deconversion process from the LDS church. These authors highlight how the process can be difficult and cumbersome, and far from a one-time event, and lead to a sense of loss of identity, hopelessness, and the total collapse of one's worldview (Brooks, 2020). Our research adds to the existing body of literature by focusing more in-depth on the process of moving from a state of a foreclosed identity to a sense of identity achievement, and highlighting the role of therapy in this endeavor.

Implications for Social Work Practice

As mentioned earlier, little research exists on the role of therapy in supporting former LDS members navigate this process. In this study, along with social support, therapy itself could be a factor in helping clients achieve an identity. The case notes clearly showed the therapist's use of reflective listening, narrative practice elements in helping clients think through, critically reflect on, and work through feelings of identity confusion, loss, and isolation. Some have chronicled how sometimes, when clients go to therapy, their concerns with the LDS religion and church community are not taken seriously, but they are nudged towards acceptance of the faith, which increases their dissonance instead of decreasing it. As Brooks (2020) argues:

> Paradoxically, some feel re-traumatized when therapists—both Mormon and non-Mormon alike—offer misinformed advice, such as suggesting to talk about their faith crisis with former church bishops, church-related friends, and estranged family members. (p. 194)

However, therapy that follows the guidelines of good, competent social work practice, and the social work Code of Ethics follows the principles of empathy, self-determination and support, and thus will help clients moving onto a path towards authenticity. Many methods can be applied, ranging from basic reflective listening to narrative practice and practice influenced by existentialist thought.

The process of leaving a high-cost religion such as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, though unique to each individual, is marked by varied experiences but with many commonalities. For these five participants, the church had provided for many of their basic needs, such as social support, a sense of shared meaning, and a ready-made moral structure. As they began the slow process of disentangling their identity from the dogma, tension arose when confronted with the decisions that would lead them away from the familiar structure of their church toward an authenticity to their preferred identity. For clinicians in the field of social work, it is essential to recognize the substantive role that certain high-cost organized religions play, a quasi-ethnic cultural influence that adherents use to define who they are and their relationship to others. The role of the therapist is to be culturally humble, respectful of the process through which their client is going, supportive as their fledgling identity develops, and from a position of non-judgment. Further research is needed into the effectiveness of various therapeutic interventions.

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Data Availability Session notes can be made available by demand.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors have no conflict of interest to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

Ethical Approval This research study was conducted retrospectively from data obtained for clinical purposes. We consulted with the IRB of our university who determined that an expedited ethical approval could be granted from the IRB of the researchers' university.

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