Deconversion from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Quest for Identity

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Abstract
Deconversion from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) is often an arduous process and can lead to a sense of losing one’s identity. This article describes the stories of people who deconvert from the LDS church while making sense of the link between deconversion and identity. The manuscript is based on 18 interviews with people leaving the LDS church. While some of the deconverts had achieved a stable sense of identity at the time of the interview, others were still struggling with this task. This article attempts to understand these differences while also paying attention to the role of gender. The study also has implications for pastoral care and social work practice.

Keywords Deconversion · Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints · Identity achievement · Identity moratorium

Introduction
Deconversion from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) is a varied process with significant impact on the identity and well-being of those who leave. Deconverts often struggle with questions of who they are in the context of their relationships with family, partners, friends, and the wider community and report stress, anxiety, and reduced well-being (e.g., Brooks, 2018, 2020; Ormsbee, 2020). Having been interested in the role of religion and spirituality in social work and sociology for some time, I recently started asking why people leave a religious group. Specifically, moving to LDS-heavy Idaho piqued my interest in this group and why members leave it. This article relies on 18 qualitative interviews with people leaving the LDS church. It examines variations in participants’ sense of identity in relation to their deconversion experience, a topic which has not received much attention so far. While LDS deconversion has been studied more frequently in recent years, most studies focus on commonalities instead of on variations in deconverts’ experiences and identity, which is what I discuss in this article. I also rely on interviews with ex-LDS members instead of on therapy client notes (as in Jindra & Lee, 2021). This study has implications for social work and pastoral care.
Literature review

Similar to religious conversion, deconversion is a complex term that can be defined in various ways. It can be described as losing one’s religious faith (Barbour, 1994) or as disaffiliation from a religious group by ending one’s membership or identification with it (Bromley, 1991). Others highlight the similarity of the deconversion process to the process of conversion (Streib & Keller, 2004). While the concept of “apostasy” is also sometimes used to describe the deconversion process, it has the added component of active rejection of a religious faith (Perez & Vallières, 2020), which is why I use the term deconversion instead.

The process of deconversion from the LDS church

The deconversion process has been documented among those leaving Christian groups, and some similarities exist between their experiences and the experiences of LDS deconverts. For example, Perez and Vallières (2020), studying formerly religious atheists and pastors, outline three general processes involved in deconversion: reasoning, critique of a religion, and factors connected to the development of one’s personality. Similar intellectual and emotional processes contributing to deconversion have been found in previous studies (e.g., Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1997; Caplovitz & Sherrow, 1977; Lee & Gubi, 2019; Wright et al., 2011). For example, in a study of deconversion narratives from various Christian denominations, Wright et al. (2011) found that participants discussed reasons such as an “interpersonal dissatisfaction with God,” frustrating relationships with Christians, and “intellectual and theological concerns.”

However, leaving “high-cost” religious groups (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010, p. 325) such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints can be more intense and filled with more uncertainty and tension than leaving other religious groups (Brooks, 2018, 2020; Gould, 2021; Ormsbee, 2020; Ransom et al., 2021). During the last few years, several studies have shed light on this topic (e.g., Avance, 2013; Brooks, 2018, 2020; McGraw et al., 2018; Ormsbee, 2020; Wright, 2021). Whereas some of these studies focus on the overarching elements and structure of narratives in ex-LDS forums (e.g., Avance, 2013; Wright, 2021), others discuss the reasons behind deconversion. Here, two studies especially merit attention: one on the reasons of formerly “devout Mormons” for leaving the LDS church (Ormsbee, 2020) and the other on the process and its consequences (Brooks, 2018, 2020).

Using a grounded theory approach, Ormsbee (2020) asks how those formerly active in the LDS church managed to leave it behind. For the previously strongly committed members, leaving was not an easy process as they had been fully immersed in it at an earlier time. The deconversion process happened gradually, as an “ongoing, effort-full process of immanent critique,” and was constituted of times of “disruption, rethinking, and adjustment,” what Ormsbee (2020, p. 303) calls “punctuating moments.” These experiences ranged from “personal crisis” experiences and “intellectual shocks or discoveries” to experiences of conflict and church politics (Ormsbee, 2020, p. 303). A quiet period followed, and then another “punctuating moment,” eventually leading to disaffiliation. Deconverts also struggled with the church’s truth claims, “whether it was the Law of Chastity, tithing, temple worship, volunteer service, weekly church attendance, or the World of Wisdom” (p. 304), often feeling strong cognitive dissonance. They also felt a conflict because they
were supposed to be happy all the time in church when the church itself contributed to their unhappiness (Ormsbee, 2020).

Some also discuss the role of gender in deconversion (e.g., Barbour, 1994; Jacobs, 1984). In his classic study on deconversion and autobiography, Barbour (1994) connects religion and gender in this way: “So deeply formative of personal identity are conceptions of one’s gender and religious convictions, that a radical change in either usually requires significant change in the other” (p. 186). Drawing on the historical narratives of four women (Mary McCarthy, Dorothy Day, Sophia Collier, and Jeanie Mills) in the twentieth century, the author depicts the role of gender-related themes such as a search for “intellectual independence and social recognition” and for a unique identity in Mary McCarthy’s case and striving for freedom from traditional religious morality in Dorothy Day’s case (Barbour, 1994, p. 189). Others left because of the experience of sexual abuse and forced celibacy in religious movements such as the People’s Temple (Barbour, 1994). Analyzing deconversion stories by women who had belonged to religious groups ranging from “charismatic Christianity to eastern Mysticism,” Jacobs (1984, p. 156) found that while women joined these groups for emotional reasons such as relationships with members and leaders of the group, they often experienced physical, emotional, and sexual abuse and left due to this abuse.

Some argue that women in the LDS church carry an “added burden” compared to men. Women who left the LDS church often reported having been pushed into an inferior sphere where men made the decisions while they had to follow strict gendered expectations both at home and at church (Ormsbee, 2020). In addition, female deconverts often felt the church inhibited their freedom and potential for self-development through its denial of their sexuality (Brooks, 2018, 2020). Married women also reported suffering from the idolization of motherhood and from the strong focus on childbearing in the LDS culture (Brooks, 2020).

The effects of deconversion on identity

In this article, I focus on the consequences of deconversion on participants’ sense of identity. What is identity? In the social scientific literature, identity is generally understood as meaning “selfhood” or “individuality” (Adams & Marshall, 1996). Across the social sciences, identity has been discussed from a social constructivist standpoint (e.g., Gergen, 2011), from an identity theory perspective (e.g., Stryker & Burke, 2000), and from a psychological viewpoint (e.g., Erikson, 1993; Marcia, 1966). Research from a social constructivist perspective indicates that, in contemporary society, people do not have a clear-cut sense of self but rather that the self is “dependent on the structure of language” and on one’s social interactions (Gergen, 2011, p. 111). This latter conceptualization of identity is in contrast to psychological views, which view identity as relatively fixed. In psychology, both Erikson (1993) conceptualization of identity and Marcia (1966) four identity categories have achieved prominence (Adams & Marshall, 1996).

What are the consequences of deconversion on deconverts’ identity? Deconverts from evangelical Christianity and other groups often experience not only regret and feelings of shame and guilt about having been part of the faith after their exit but also a sense of identity loss (Lee & Gubi, 2019; Nica, 2020). In addition, deconverts mention the loss of connections to family and friends (Wright et al., 2011). However, many also report a sense of liberation and new identity (e.g., Fazzino, 2014; Lee & Gubi, 2019; Wright et al., 2011). When leaving the LDS church specifically, deconverts experienced a sense of immense “ontological insecurity” (Brooks, 2020, p. 194). These experiences contributed to a
sentiment of “world collapse” (p. 196) as deconverts felt that they were suddenly cut apart from a comprehensive shared understanding of reality that their religion had constituted (p. 307): “As ex-Mormons’ adherence to their former belief-system faded, a world once infused with celestial meaning seemed to slip into a harsh, pitiless materiality— disturbingly alien, disquieting, and unforgiving” (Brooks, 2020, p. 202). They mentioned that relationships with family and friends changed, that these people “no longer seemed real,” and that they were at times haunted by “embodied memories” of their past (Brooks, 2020, p. 200). With the loss of a firm worldview, deconverts were found to critically reflect on every aspect of “their innermost being” (p. 205), and they talked about losing their previous sense of identity. Thus, those leaving a “high-cost” religious group often struggle with identity after deconversion (e.g., Brooks, 2020; Ormsbee, 2020). In fact, some describe the experience of deconversion as “a traumatic existential crisis” (Brooks, 2020, p. 199).

Few qualitative studies directly discuss the link between deconversion and identity. But some do, such as a study on deconversion narratives and identity construction using published “exit narratives” of those leaving the LDS church (Scharp & Beck, 2017). Analyzing 24 narratives with deconverts from strict religious groups, including the LDS church, Nica (2020) focuses on the relationship between well-being and identity reconstruction, finding that deconverts often mourned the loss of a role tied to the church and that establishing new social roles helped them in the identity reconstruction process. And Brooks (2018), though not explicitly focused on identity achievement in the aftermath of deconversion, describes the differences between ex-Mormons and “cultural Mormons,” which can be relevant in this context. While ex-Mormons construct their identity in opposition to the LDS church, “cultural Mormons” are less concerned with distancing themselves from the church and culture even though they don’t share the belief anymore (Brooks, 2018).

While identity can be discussed from various angles, in this article I am interested in how deconverts navigate their identity after deconversion from a psychological standpoint, building on initial insights from an earlier study (Jindra & Lee, 2021). In this sample, I found that Marcia’s (1966) identity categories map onto the ways deconversion processes are experienced. Marcia (1966) theory expands on Erikson (1993) typology of identity achievement and identity confusion. This theory can apply also to adults since identity development can go beyond the years of youth (Kroger et al., 2010). In Marcia’s identity foreclosure, parents’ or communities’ wishes are followed without much critical reflection (Marcia, 1966). On the other hand, in the stage of identity achievement, people have reflected on their choices in the areas of occupation, beliefs, and the realms of gender and sexuality and have come to a decision that is their own. Between these two poles are the stages of identity moratorium and diffusion. In identity moratorium, people are experiencing a crisis, are trying out different lifestyles and commitments (Marcia, 1966), and are often strongly focused on finding or establishing their identity. The individual searches for a compromise between his or her own wishes and abilities and the demands created by society and parents. In contrast, a person with no commitments in areas such as work, faith, and values is said to be in a state of identity diffusion (Marcia, 1966).

**Background of study and research question**

Variations within LDS deconversion experiences and their consequences on identity reconstruction have not been studied much (Brooks, 2020). In this article, I am interested in the process by which people reconstruct their identity in the aftermath of deconversion and in variations in this process. Are there differences in individuals’ identity reconstruction after
deconversion, specifically in whether deconverts have achieved a sense of identity at the

time of the interview or are still struggling with this task? If so, what contributes to these
differences? In order to answer these questions, I chose a qualitative, inductive approach.

**Methods**

**A grounded theory approach**

For this study, I conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with 18 former LDS
believers. The interview started out with a broad question asking interviewees to describe
the process by which they left the LDS church, followed by questions about the effects of
their leaving on their sense of identity, well-being, and relationships and how they coped
with the difficulties that emerged from the experience.

I used a grounded theory method in this study. Grounded theory is a qualitative, inductive
approach developed in the 1960s by Glaser and Strauss (2012). The goal of this method is the
development of emerging themes, categories, and possibly a theory related to a specific “phenom-
eron,” in this case, how deconverts reconstruct their sense of identity. Thus, processes, events, and
meaning-making are at the forefront of the analysis. Various forms of grounded theory have been
developed over time, with more emphasis on post-positivism and constructivism in later years
(see Rieger, 2019; Charmaz, 2006). The methodology can be employed in a relatively flexible
way (Ratnapalan, 2019). Here, I largely rely on grounded theory according to Strauss and Corbin
(1998; 2008; 2015). This approach involves induction but also deduction and verification. Once
some of the interviews have been collected and transcribed, the analysis can start using a specific
coding technique that begins with open coding. In open coding, sentences and paragraphs indicat-
ing a process, meaning, or event are assigned a code, and the researcher is developing categories
based on groups of concepts. In a second stage of analysis (though the two are not necessarily
distinct steps), axial coding is employed. Here, researchers are starting to make sense of the rela-
tionships between the categories. Axial coding is a technique that allows the researcher to relate
“categories to their subcategories to form more precise explanations about phenomena” (Strauss
& Corbin, 1998, p. 124). Finally, the researcher engages in the process of integrating categories
into a theory, what Strauss and Corbin (1998) called selective coding. In the course of the analysis,
several central categories pertaining to the phenomena of deconversion emerged.

**Selection and characteristics of participants**

In order to recruit participants, I contacted an organizer of an ex-LDS internet group, who
then posted an announcement in the forum and also on Facebook. Subsequently, I received
several emails from people interested in participating, and, due to the ongoing pandemic,
we arranged meetings via Zoom instead of in person. Over the span of a few months, a
total of 18 interviews were held, averaging about 40 min in length. The interview started
with a verbal consent form, and after consent was obtained, it was recorded. Interviews
were transcribed with the help of a transcription service.

Participants included 12 female and six male interviewees, ranging in age from 19 to
the early 50s, who were all in the process of leaving the LDS church. Most of them lived
in Utah, but a few resided in other states, such as California, Nevada, and Missouri. One
person from England was interviewed, and one interviewee resided in a country in Asia
for work reasons. The goal was to interview participants who were diverse in nature, and
while ethnic diversity was sparse in this sample, participants were diverse in education, gender, profession, marital status, years since leaving, and age. However, one limitation of this sample is that since the participants were drawn from ex-LDS groups, it is not representative of all who leave the LDS church (see also Ormsbee, 2020).

In qualitative research, the ability to be self-reflective is an important quality (Cresswell, 2007; Rieger, 2019). Self-reflexivity means that researchers are aware of their reactions to the setting and specific participants and of how their own background influences their writing (Cresswell, 2007). Even though I do not have a background in the LDS church, living in Idaho has made me aware of its dominance in this region, and of the issue of deconversion. Reflexivity is also important when it comes to being aware of the interaction that happens during an interview. For example, I was often asked whether I belonged to the LDS church, and participants relaxed when I answered that I did not. The online setting also impacted the interview. Since this study was conducted via Zoom, nonverbal communication was harder to gauge than if the interviews had been held in person. However, participants seemed happy to talk about their experiences, which they were not often able to do with others in their community, and many mentioned this in the interview.

A brief note on the meaning and accuracy of narratives

As with conversion narratives, there are different ways deconversion stories can be examined. A social constructivist view sees the commonalities in these narratives, the ways they are linguistically constructed and convey a specific meaning. In the conversion literature, this approach is best exemplified by the work by Beckford (1978). Similarly, some analyze the logic common to the stories narrated in ex-LDS forums (e.g., Avance, 2013; Wright, 2021). While I take account of the commonalities that exist between the stories of ex-LDS members, the focus here is on how people personally recall experiencing the process. With narratives, we have to rely on what interviewees tell us about their experiences (Yamane, 2000), including the reasons for deconversion. At the same time, a comparative analysis with grounded theory allows for the emergence of factors in deconversion and its consequences that are not necessarily directly articulated by interviewees (for more on this topic, see Jindra, 2014).

Findings

The comparative analysis revealed several central categories and variations within them, such as experience in one’s family of origin, deconversion path, gender, traumatic experiences, coping with trauma, relationship to one’s previous religious life after deconversion, and identity achievement or moratorium after deconversion. I first briefly discuss the process of deconversion as a whole, but the main focus in this paper is on how interviewees experienced the process as it related to their sense of identity.

Experiencing the process of deconversion: similarities and differences

Many of the people leaving the LDS church reported similar experiences, which is also reflected in the literature described above (Brooks, 2018, 2020; Ormsbee, 2020). Most interviewees told of a process in stages, which began with initial doubts and intensified with time. In some cases, the doubt was tied to relationships experienced as problematic and in some cases even abusive, sometimes in their family of origin and at other times in
a dysfunctional relationship with a spouse. In others, it was a process mostly guided by a sense of cognitive dissonance and curiosity. Thus, for some, intellectual reasons dominated, and for others, emotional reasons were prevalent; often, both were mentioned. Several of the women also talked about the constraints they experienced with regards to prescribed gender roles that led them to have large families or have children very early instead of a career they would have enjoyed. Thus, some of the female deconverts struggled with having given up their career goals or at least held back on them in order to raise a family, be there for their children, and submit to the roles the church wanted them to play. When they started the deconversion process, their wishes for a career became more pronounced, and some of them took active steps towards fulfilling their career dreams. Others came out as LGBTQ and highlighted how they did not fit into traditional gender expectations as a consequence, or witnesses family members in this situation.

**Deconversion and sense of identity: similarities and differences**

As visible in the case stories illustrated below, deconverts reported common experiences after having left the church, such as feeling ostracized, lonely, lost, confused, and sometimes guilty. Many reported the loss of important relationships or talked about a sense of strain in their relationships to parents, siblings, extended family members, or friends. This was especially the case for people from strict LDS families and backgrounds. Nearly all interviewees also reported a sense of identity loss after deconversion, but many also mentioned a sense of freedom and liberation.

When resolved well, one can understand the process of reconstructing one’s identity after deconversion from the LDS church as a move from identity foreclosure to the identity moratorium stage (see also Jindra & Lee, 2021). One woman (Holly) summarized the shift using the analogy of becoming an adult:

> There are so many things that trap people in adolescence, you don’t get to make sexual choices about your body, you don’t even get to choose what you wear, you have all these restrictions on what you can eat and drink. You can’t say certain words. Like, there’s all these restrictions, all the things that are that are restricted for adults are restricted to Mormons just in general, outside of, like, you’re welcome to rent a car, you should be voting, you know, but other than that, like, you can’t even drink coffee, can’t drink alcohol. You can, you have restrictions on how adult you can dress, you know. And so, and besides that, you’re just not allowed to make grownup choices for yourself. So that is, the biggest shift in my identity was when the responsibility for my well-being and my purpose, and my person and my path in life shifted from a bunch of old white men who have never met me before to me.

But there were also significant differences in the ways people reconstructed their identity after leaving the LDS church. While some were in the identity moratorium stage at the time of the interview, others reported a sense of identity achievement after initial struggles (Kroger et al., 2010; Marcia, 1966). Overall, out of the 18 interviewees, seven women and three men talked about a relatively stable (“achieved”) sense of identity, despite their initial identity crisis and hardship. The other eight (five women and three men) were struggling more, saying that they were still either “lost” and sometimes also angry and bitter though they were also actively trying to find a new sense of identity (identity moratorium).

What accounts for differences between people regarding identity achievement versus identity moratorium? In analyzing the interviews, categories emerged that were connected
to the ability to move forward and reestablish a sense of identity. I call these categories “coping with trauma” and “establishing boundaries in relation to one’s previous (religious) life.” These categories are linked because trauma could also make it harder to establishment healthy boundaries. Thus, I found that those who coped with trauma and/or were able to establish boundaries in relation to their previous life as LDS members were more likely to have an achieved sense of identity after deconversion. Coping with trauma includes ways participants with traumatic backgrounds were able to establish a sense of authenticity and well-being. Having clear boundaries in relation to one’s previous (religious) life, e.g., with family members or partners who stayed in the LDS church, was also related to identity achievement. Some who came from backgrounds where strict boundaries were not necessary because family members did not try to interfere with their decision to leave were also more likely to have a stronger sense of identity. In addition, having some social support after deconversion (e.g., from siblings and spouses) was related to identity achievement. The passage of time generally also helped people establish boundaries and a sense of identity, though not in all cases.

In what follows, I outline these categories using several case examples. These examples can be seen as representing different outcomes in the search for identity after leaving the LDS church or as different time points in the process.

The experience of trauma, coping with trauma, and identity moratorium or achievement

Several interviewees had experienced trauma and were often still searching for their sense of identity at the time of the interview (identity moratorium). In what follows, I illustrate the stories of two women who struggled with traumatic experiences (such as abuse in the family or rape) and also with their sense of identity, followed by the story of a woman who had had experiences with trauma in the past but had coped with it with the help of therapy and now had a stable sense of identity. Traumatic experiences in relation to identity have received increasing attention in the literature (e.g., see Berman et al., 2020) since they are associated with problems with identity (e.g., Carlson & Dalenberg, 2000; Clarke, 2008).

**Traumatic experiences and identity moratorium in the aftermath of deconversion**

Susan is a young mother of three children, one of them newborn. Growing up in Utah in a “good” LDS family, she married in the church at only 19 years old, but the relationship fell apart after a few years. Her ex-husband struggled with addiction and she with codependency, and at some point, even though she felt ambivalent about it, she decided to leave him. With her two children from this relationship, she then moved to a rental home in a new town with a large LDS population, where she felt alone and stressed but still attended church from time to time.

However, shortly after she moved, she was sexually assaulted by a police officer who knew her father and was connected to the LDS church. When she reported it, no one believed her, not even her father. After this traumatic experience, she says that she “felt very alone” and suffered from anxiety. Around that time, during a church service, she realized she did not believe in the doctrines. She says, “I don’t know what I was doing there. I already didn’t believe,” and says that she attended only “out of habit.” Unlike others, she did not read critical literature before she left but left solely based on her emotions and intuition. She says she needed to listen to her own feelings instead of to what the church was telling her, and she also felt that the rigid gendered expectations of the LDS church did not fit her. She stopped going to church shortly afterwards and removed her records a few years prior to the interview.
Leaving the church and her former town had several negative consequences for her at first. She felt isolated in the new town and said neighbors and friends did not support her. She hints at having suffered from PTSD, most likely from the experience of rape and its aftermath. She is still in regular contact with her parents, but her relationship with them is not ideal due to her leaving the church. She said she recently moved back to her hometown and now feels more comfortable, though she says she still “feels alone” most of the time. Connecting to the online post-LDS community helped her to some degree, but she also noted that there were many people in these forums who were bitter and not necessarily a healthy influence on her.

What clearly emerges from her interview is that she lost a sense of who she was as a consequence of leaving the LDS church (and likely also the experience of rape). For example, she said, “Ever since I felt like all the puzzle pieces fell out of my brain, like, and I didn’t know, I thought I had them perfectly fit.” When directly asked how leaving affected her sense of identity, she said:

I don’t think I have reestablished who I am. I don’t think it will ever come again. It was so ingrained into me that from the time I was born, that like I said, it’s been I’m, I removed my name [from the church records], like, three years ago. But like, it did nothing, it changed nothing. I am still just as lost.

This identity crisis is visible even in Susan’s dreams, and she also said that she was diagnosed with PTSD and agoraphobia: “I had nightmares, I just remembered, I would have nightmares of just being in the middle of this space, all of a sudden, nothing is beneath me.” Today, she says she is “very spiritual” and recalls a couple of episodes of feeling as if she was communicating with those that had “passed on,” which scared her. It is possible that these experiences are somewhat connected to her traumatic experiences and her loss of faith. But, currently, her relationship with her children is improving, she is in a new relationship, the new baby absorbs much of her time, and things are slowly getting better. Overall, she is searching for her sense of identity and is coping, but her life is not easy.

Hannah, a nurse in her late 20s currently living in the Bay Area, is also searching for her identity in the aftermath of deconversion. Her story is a story of experiencing poverty and neglect in her early years. She grew up in a large family; her parents got married after a brief dating period and had a large family. Her mother was under a lot of pressure to bear many children and ended up having six. Hannah says that she grew up in a neglectful environment, that “the dishes would always be piled up, there’s dirty laundry everywhere. We never had enough money for enough groceries. Like, the power would go out sometimes because they couldn’t pay the power bill.” And throughout these years, she was told to “have faith in the Lord,” but the situation never changed. She recalls that

all these inconsistencies throughout my childhood would just stack up and stack up and stack up, and they would say, “Oh, it’s okay, have faith, trust in God.” And I’d be, like, “Okay, I’m having faith. I’m trusting in God and read my scriptures every day.” And the situation is just terrible. It’s not livable, it’s not safe.

When she was 19 years old, she decided that she was “done with this religion.” The last straw happened when she was invited to attend an “endowment ceremony” (a secret initiation ceremony) and at the same time was told not to share her experience with others. She connects the experience of secrecy with the neglect and abuse she had gone through as a child. At that time, she started searching the internet for resources on the LDS church, including resources about Joseph Smith, in the process realizing that “he fabricated this
whole religion.” She then removed her records from the church but has not told her family about her leaving out of concern for repercussions.

When asked about her sense of identity and how leaving the church affected it, she says that at the time of leaving, she had a “total identity crisis.” Explaining the paralysis that stems from the loss of faith, she says:

At first, I was a daughter of God, and I had an existence in the previous life. And I had, like, a plan for what I was going to be doing after this life. And now, neither of those two exist, and I only just have this life, and I’m playing by a whole other set of rules. So I just feel like I wasted a big part of my life where I almost feel like I’m a coma patient. Where if I got into a car wreck when I was a baby, and I’ve been in a coma ever since. But I had this bizarre dream that I had a previous life and a post life. And then I woke up at 28 years old, and it’s like, nope, none of that’s real. It was all a dream. And now you’re in a totally other reality. I literally feel like I’ve been picked up from one person’s life dropped off in another and it’s like by figuring out where you’re going from here. It’s like I feel like a gross sense of abandonment in my own world. I’m a misfit in my own life.

She recalls that “a core part of my identity has always been that I have to fit in,” and “that’s really played against me, because I don’t have to fit in.” Today, she still struggles; she says she doesn’t know “how to live outside of the church” since you are told that “you can either be in the church and be successful and happy or you can leave the church and be totally miserable.” As a consequence, she has isolated herself because she feels uncomfortable making friends at work or in other settings.

However, while the above indicates a continuing crisis, she recently (10 years after leaving) started actively dealing with the trauma of her early experiences and is in the process of exploring a new sense of identity, doing therapy, and trying out new hobbies such as reading biographies, writing, and music. She has also reached out to successful people outside of the church, as well as to other ex-LDS members. Visiting her extended family in Germany was helpful for her as well since they reaffirmed her experience and choice to leave.

**Overcoming trauma and identity achievement in the aftermath of deconversion**

If a person is able to successfully cope with their trauma, identity achievement is more likely. **Lydia**, a woman in her 30s, had experienced some trauma in her family of origin but had worked hard to relying on her own feelings and, with the help of therapy, was able to reestablish a sense of who she was. She talked in depth about how self-reflection helped her cope with her background experiences.

She grew up in a relatively strict, orthodox LDS household, and her father left the family when she was young. She mentions that he had been abusive to her mother but also that she missed him as a father since, unlike her older siblings, she had never received much attention from him. In addition, she recalls “functioning from a space of trauma” due to verbal, emotional, and even physical abuse in her home growing up:

So, I grew up with eleven siblings in my home, and I was the seventh. I fell somewhere, you know, in the middle, and in our home, like, if you had your own thoughts, or were feeling emotions that weren’t positive, happy, you know, whatever, that was, that was considered wrong and bad.
Her choices were either to be rebellious or to be the “pleaser,” and she fell into the latter: “I just was always walking on eggshells trying to accommodate and, like, tend to my, my mom’s emotional needs.” As a consequence of growing up in these circumstances, she developed an eating disorder and depression, feeling a deep sense of “worthlessness.” Mental health was never an issue discussed in her family of origin, but she eventually found an outlet in school, got good grades, and went to an LDS college, where she studied public health. It was only when she took a class about “intuitive eating” that she realized she was suffering from an eating disorder. Afterwards, she said: “That journey into intuitive eating, letting go of this eating disorder, learning to trust myself, learning to trust my literal gut, but then also like my instinctual gut—it was a big turning point for me.” While she initially wanted to study social work, she realized that she had been taking care of other people all her life. She also had an interest in Spanish, and she changed her degree from public health to Spanish. She married during her college years and soon had a child, and she graduated when she was pregnant with her second child.

Another turning point came several years before the interview when she realized she could trust her husband unconditionally. Unlike in her relationships in her family of origin, she never felt that the love she received from her husband was conditional. Thus, she increasingly started to trust her own feelings. At the same time, she developed doubts that the LDS church was the “one true religion” due to her studies of various cultures, and she started to read more about it:

The more I read, the more I realized that the church had been acting as a security blanket for me because of my trauma but had also been feeding my trauma. It needed this dependency from me in order to function, and it was like being in a very unhealthy, codependent relationship, but it was with an organization instead of, you know, with a person, and I think as I became healthier and was able to recognize those, you know, it’s kind of the symptoms of an unhealthy relationship. Okay. Um, I just, I grew out of it, I grew out of that, I didn’t need it anymore. I realized I didn’t need even to have a sense of spirituality or a sense of meaning and purpose in my life.

About the process of identity reconstruction, she said that she struggled for two years but that it was a good process overall and that today she has a stable sense of who she is and is happy.

Establishing boundaries in relation to one’s previous (religious) life after deconversion, identity moratorium, or identity achievement

A second important category related to identity achievement is the ability to establish boundaries in relationship to one’s former (religious) life. This includes establishing boundaries in relationships with those who still belong to the LDS church, whether they are family members, partners, or even co-workers, and finding ways to move beyond constraining roles. Those participants who were able to do so had a stronger sense of identity achievement at the time of the interview than those who could not. Here, I first describe a few stories of those struggling with this process and with their sense of identity, followed by stories of those who successfully established boundaries.
Lack of clear boundaries in relation to one’s previous (religious) life and identity moratorium

Monica, a married mother with children who is in her late 30s, grew up in a devout family, and recalls her family as less strict than other families. But since she liked to know right from wrong as a child and liked to follow rules, she grew up trying to adhere to “the good girl Mormon plan,” doing everything right. Eventually she got married in the temple and had children, with whom she stayed home. She lived her life within the boundaries of the LDS church, and the only indicators of her future deconversion was an early period of doubt due to watching a PBS special series about the LDS church and having a brother who was born intersex.

About five years ago, she recalls, she was teaching LDS doctrine to a group of adults in the church and as part of that studied chapters in the Bible and also the LDS doctrine on marriage closely. She says that the lessons she taught and the Scriptures just did not add up, causing her doubts to reemerge and deepen, possibly accentuated by the family’s move to a new ward. These new doubts and realizations, together with her brother being intersex, eventually led her to stop attending church. She also let her “temple recommend” expire, and when she went to see the bishop to get it renewed, she realized she did not agree with the doctrine at all. As a consequence, she had a real, “visceral” reaction, a panic attack, but with time started feeling free and liberated: “And so when the shock wore off, I just felt this, like, freedom. I was just, I was released. I had been led out of a cage and all the feelings that everybody described as feeling the atonement in their lives.” From that point on, she said, she studied the LDS doctrine in depth, learning about Joseph Smith’s past and about other aspects of the church she found problematic. She also told her husband about her doubts and found out that he had also struggled with his beliefs. From then on, they started to read and discuss critical literature together.

When asked about the consequences of their decision to leave, she says that her family accepted their choice well (though she hesitated to tell her mother initially), and they were not shunned or “harassed” by anyone in their ward about it, in part because she was always respected for her honesty and insight. But she also says that she is left with anger and bitterness as a consequence and especially struggles with the idea that she gave up her dreams of a career and spent most of her life at home taking care of children. When discussing how her insights and subsequent leaving affected who she is now, she said:

Lying, it’s crushing, and all you can do is come to terms with it and then reclaim yourself going forward. Because no matter what I do now, I have to accept that, like, those opportunities that I passed on are gone. And my youth isn’t coming back. And motherhood doesn’t disappear. You know, like, time doesn’t unwind itself. To fix it all. It’s like, this is me now. And I won’t ever get to find out what like who I would have been if I actually got to make my life decisions based on my personal desires. I don’t, just don’t get to.

Since she is still living in the area where she grew up and is in regular contact with LDS church members, she often witnesses other LDS women who are overwhelmed in their roles as mothers, and this makes her angry. At the same time, she feels overwhelmed by the array of choices that are potentially available to her, which illustrates the stage of identity moratorium: “And now I have to figure out, like, okay, I can do whatever I want moving forward. But what is that? You know, do I want to chase my old dreams? Like, who am I now? You know, what do I want?” But she has also learned to cope by enjoying the little
things in life, things such as being able to wear what she likes, drink coffee, and drink alcohol occasionally, and is starting to orient herself towards the professional world.

Another example is the story of Stephen, an American working for the church in another country who is in his early 50s. Stephen grew up in an LDS family in California, reported a happy family background, completed his mission in a country in Asia, and married a native woman. He started questioning the LDS church after learning about “the second anointing,” which he says is “basically a secret ordinance for kind of elite members.” He was upset that he had never heard of this because of the “secrecy behind it,” began reading more critical literature on the topic, and realized that “all of the top leadership of the church over the past 200 years, they’ve all, that they’re all related, they come from the same clan.” Eventually, he concluded that the religion was “made up.” While declaring that he did not believe in the LDS faith anymore, he was still employed by the LDS church, could not be open about his decision, and was understandably very ambivalent about it. This becomes clear when he tells me about his decision to start drinking coffee, which he says would “immediately make me unworthy to do my job, okay, and to participate in certain aspects of the religion.” Due to this constant concern with boundaries, he struggled with feeling that he could not be “authentic” in his work and in his relationships. He also did not have a strong sense of identity at the time of the interview and said that he was suffering from an identity crisis and that the identity crisis was related to his continuing to work in the church.

Others who felt that they were not supported in their decisions and experienced continued interference by family members (e.g., Hannah, Helen) were also more likely to be unsure of their identity. Hannah, for example, whose story is told in the discussion on trauma above, despite being upset with her family, still was in touch with them and loaned her parents money every once in a while, at the same time being exposed to negative stereotypes her family held about deconverts. Helen, a mother of five in her early 50s, was surrounded by believing family members who had a hard time accepting her decision to leave the church, and she struggled with her sense of identity. In fact, several interviewees were considering moving out of state in order to establish a new life.

Establishing boundaries, and identity achievement in the aftermath of deconversion

Interviewees who were able to clearly establish boundaries in relation to their previous (religious) life with family members were more likely to develop a stable sense of identity than those who could not. The ability to establish clear boundaries was also tied to an environment that was understanding and to experiencing some support upon leaving. In addition, in contrast to the first group discussed above, and likely because they were able to live peacefully with their decision of leaving the church, some of the members of this group felt less of a need to distance themselves as radically from the church in the first place. Some in this group also still identified with the culture of Mormonism (e.g., Brooks, 2018) to a degree.

For example, Dominik, a married father of five in his late 40s who lives in one state but works in another, recalls growing up in a “devout Mormon family” as the “sixth of seven children,” in a happy environment. He says it was a traditional upbringing, and he “was raised to go on a mission,” which he completed in the South Pacific. Afterwards, he studied at an LDS university, where he met his future wife. Overall, he says he was “as much of a believer as anybody could be.” However, when he was about 30 years old, he came across information on the internet about the faith, beginning with the “Book of Abraham.” He
says he was “surprised that he had never heard anything about it,” was upset that the information had been kept secret, and subsequently engaged in a more serious study of LDS doctrine. Explaining this further, he says:

So I was, like, I am going to uncover every single rock that I can find. And, and then I’m going to, you know, just research it independently. I, I didn’t care if it was true. I cared if it was true or not. And to me, that’s a, that’s a huge difference. I was not, I did not start down this road trying to validate something that I already believed. I went down this road saying, I want to know reality, and I will adjust myself to whatever reality is.

Trying to understand both the apologetics and the critics, he found himself often “siding with the critics.” He was about six months into this study, while he still had an official role in the church, when it hit him that,

like, all of a sudden, when I looked at it through that lens and was able to allow myself to consider that, unlike everything makes sense if you, if you are approaching it from the point of view that it’s actually not true.

This realization came around the time his eldest daughter was going to be baptized, and he discussed his leaving the church with his wife and also told her he did not want his children baptized in the LDS church. As a consequence of leaving the church, he lost many friendships with LDS members and felt isolated at times. However, he kept some friends from the LDS church. In addition, several of his children eventually also left the church.

When asked how his deconversion affected him, he mentions that he had “not realized how much being Mormon was a core part of my internal identity” and recalls that “once I stopped believing, there was this entire gap that had, you know, been how I viewed myself and how I identified myself, that all of a sudden came into existence.” The quote below illustrates that although he engaged in the identity reconstruction process, he also kept a sense of who he was throughout, at least in part:

I feel like that part of my identity stayed throughout this whole process. But what I had to do over, it took years for me to do this, was I had to rebuild my worldview around everything that I had related to Mormonism. So, once I came to that understanding, I still viewed myself as Mormon, which is kind of odd, but you know, some people find out and they’re, like, gone, you know, whatever. And so, what I had to then do is kind of start through the process of saying, okay, here’s what I believed when I’m Mormon. What, what is it now that I actually believe, you know, for this to be true? And so, I feel like the elements of my personality that stayed the same are, you know, the fact that it’s based on sincerity, it’s based in reality. And for me, I’m extremely logical.

He says he recovered his sense of identity because it was not dependent only or even mostly on belonging to a community but was based more in rationality and searching for “the essence of truth that you can get to.” Thus, instead of depending on the church as before, he now “depends on myself.” In addition, he established clear boundaries in his relationship to his faithful in-laws as well as to his wife, who is still involved in the church, and they came to an arrangement that he would still go with her to some meetings but otherwise would not be involved. Working in another state for part of the time also removed him more from the influence of the LDS church. This, together with his rational approach, helped him reconstruct his sense of identity over time. Overall, he felt freer and relieved as
time went on, and he does not regret his decision. He feels good about himself, says that “life is good,” and he has a stable sense of identity.

**Cecilia,** a young white woman in her 30s with a PhD in bioengineering who self-identifies as queer, is another example of someone who has achieved a stable sense of identity after leaving. Although she recalled a happy childhood in the LDS church, she started feeling like she did not fit in during adolescence. She felt bad about her sexuality as a young woman, and specifically about masturbation, saying that in the LDS church she feels that “sex is akin to murder.” However, she started a relationship with a man at some point and realized she did not feel guilty about sex, and this changed her negative view of sexuality. When this relationship ended, she says that she lived in a single women’s ward, and she felt that she did not really belong to the LDS community: “You’re either, you’re either in or you’re out. And I’ve always been out in terms of... in terms of being able to fit in and stuff.”

As a single person in her 20s, she felt unhappy and said that the negative views the LDS church had of single women made things worse. Around that time, she started reading literature that was critical of the LDS church, and when she began working on her PhD, these doubts increased. She went through a period of intense anxiety due to her demanding PhD program and the cognitive dissonance it caused and felt that God did not respond to her prayers. She then realized she needed to take a break either from her PhD program or the church, and she chose the latter.

When she stopped going to church, she recalls experiencing an initial identity crisis, but then she realized she did not miss the church, and her anxiety levels decreased. She says she felt happier and freer after leaving the church, that the cognitive dissonance lessened. Her parents supported her leaving, and so did some of her siblings. Thus, she established a new life as a scientist and did not experience continued interference from family members trying to influence her to come back to the church. But she also has not removed her records from the church yet and says she still has a sense of identity from keeping her name on the rolls. Thus, in her case, the break from the LDS church was not as radical as in some of the other stories, and, like Dominik, she still identifies with the culture of Mormonism (at least to a degree).

**Amelia,** a young mother of three who had recently left the church, also had a stable sense of identity at the time of the interview. She left, after years of doubt and intellectual concerns about the church, due to her uneasiness with the restrictive nature of LDS doctrine when it came to her career choices as a woman. Similar to Dominik, after leaving she experienced insecurity about her identity and negative feedback from her parents and in-laws initially, but she eventually established clear boundaries with her family. This becomes visible when she tells me that she told her mother, who wanted to watch her children: “You can watch them on a Sunday. But you will not take my children to church. Religion is off the table. I respect you. I respect your choices. But I need you to respect my choices.” The family moved due to her new job, and at the same time COVID-19 hit, which provided an additional buffer. In addition, she had a good relationship with a brother and sister-in-law who had also left the church, thus giving her some social support. However, she was still careful not to reveal her ex-LDS identity at her new workplace out of fear of repercussions.

Though this can’t be described in detail in this paper due to space constraints, a few of the interviewees (Carl and Leo) reported having lost important relationships to family or partners still in the church. Thus, very clear boundaries between their old and their new life existed. At the same time, they found new relationships outside of it, and were also more likely to have established a sense of identity.
Summary of findings

In sum, the interlinked categories of coping with trauma and establishing healthy boundaries were important in this study. Participants who had left the LDS church and had dealt with LDS-connected trauma through therapy and self-reflection (e.g., Lydia) had a stronger sense of identity than those who had done less of this (e.g., Hannah and Sarah). Trusting their own emotions and intuition was important in this process. Similarly, those who had made their decision to leave clear to family members and were able to establish boundaries with parents, in-laws, and/or partners (e.g., Dominik, Holly, and Amelia) had a stronger sense of identity at the time of the interview than those who had not done so (e.g., Monica, Stephen, and Helen). In a couple of cases, relationships to family and friends in the church had been almost completely cut off, and while this was a hard experience, it allowed deconverts to establish a new life without interference. In addition, when the family was less strict, the exit was easier to accomplish because there was not such a strong need to put up boundaries in the first place (e.g., Cecilia and Leia). Here, we can make a connection to what some have described as “cultural Mormonism” (Brooks, 2018), with some still identifying with the culture of Mormonism, though not the beliefs, to some degree.

In addition, time since deconversion played a role in identity achievement as those who had experienced deconversion earlier were more likely to have achieved a sense of identity at the time of the interview. But this was not the case for everyone. For example, Sarah had left the church at age 19 and was still struggling at the age of 28, and Carl and Amelia, who each had a stable sense of identity, had left the church only a short time before the interview.

What is the relation between deconversion, gender, and identity achievement after deconversion? There was definitely a connection between gender roles and deconversion experiences. Monica and Amelia struggled with restrictive roles in their own life (as stay-at-home mothers), Hannah witnessed a dysfunctional home due to a very strong focus on traditional gender roles and childbearing, and Susan experienced a problematic marriage followed by sexual abuse by an acquaintance that was covered up by church members. Thus, there is clearly a gendered dimension to their stories, as pointed out in other studies (Ormsbee, 2020). However, identity reconstruction after deconversion was not necessarily a gendered phenomenon in this sample as both women and men struggled with it. Instead, the findings here are similar to those of Nica (2020), who found that deconverts who lost roles they had formerly held in the church but who had gained new roles could establish a sense of identity through them and that those who were in the “transitional stages of the exit” (p. 2127) were not doing as well. These findings also dovetail with what I and my coauthor found on how ex-LDS clients cope while in therapy (Jindra & Lee, 2021).

Implications for pastoral care and social work

What implications can we derive from the findings of this study for social work and pastoral care? In Shattered Faith: The Social Epistemology of Deconversion by Spiritually Violent Religious Trauma, Efird et al. (2020) write:

Many people lose their faith in God, not because of some knock-down argument against it, but rather because they were knocked down themselves, whether literally or figuratively, by the seemingly faithful. Many such people, those knocked-down by the faithful, are survivors of religious trauma and, in some cases, spiritual violence. (p. 119)
As illustrated above, some of the research participants suffered from traumatic experiences prior to deconversion that could be connected to family upbringing and the church. Basically, all suffered from an identity crisis afterwards, which can also be likened to a traumatic experience (Brooks, 2020).

Consistent with recent literature on trauma and religion (e.g., Streets, 2015), I think it is imperative that pastoral care workers recognize the importance of how traumatic experiences contribute to deconversion and thus work from a trauma-informed pastoral care perspective (Streets, 2015). It is also important that they recognize the consequences that deconversion has on the identity and well-being of those who leave. If trauma has occurred, they need to validate this experience and approach it from a strength-based perspective, with the goal of supporting deconverts in identity reconstruction. This does not mean that they necessarily need to discourage returns to the church in the future (the LDS church or other religions), but they need to validate and respect deconverts’ choices (see also Brooks, 2020). Consistent with this and from an explicitly pastoral perspective, Gould (2021) contends that pastors should listen reflectively to deconverts’ stories and validate their feelings: “The pastor’s role is to enable positive coping that fosters integration, wholeness and well-being—to nurture the individual’s growth as they reconstruct their story” (p. 38). This is also important for pastoral care workers within the LDS tradition. In social work, therapy needs to be in line with the social work code of ethics and to embody the principles of spiritual competence (Hodge, 2018), support, self-determination, and empathy. Specific methods used can include narrative practice, reflective listening, and existentialist practice (see also Jindra & Lee, 2021; for an overview of social work theories, see Thompson & Stepney, 2018). Thus, for both social work and pastoral care, client self-determination and spiritual competence are essential when it comes to deconversion.

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