



Faculty Publications

1996-01-01

On the Cross-Cultural Attitudes and Experiences of Recently Returned LDS Missionaries

Timothy B. Smith
Brigham Young University, tbs@byu.edu

Richard N. Roberts

Burton Kerr

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub>



Part of the [Missions and World Christianity Commons](#), and the [Mormon Studies Commons](#)

Original Publication Citation

Smith, T. B., Roberts, R. N., & Kerr, B. T. (1996). On the cross-cultural attitudes and experiences of recently returned LDS missionaries. *AMCAP Journal*, 22, 119-133.

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Smith, Timothy B.; Roberts, Richard N.; and Kerr, Burton, "On the Cross-Cultural Attitudes and Experiences of Recently Returned LDS Missionaries" (1996). *Faculty Publications*. 1151.
<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/1151>

This Peer-Reviewed Article is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

On the Cross-Cultural Attitudes and Experiences of Recently Returned LDS Missionaries¹

Timothy B. Smith, Richard N. Roberts,
and Burton Kerr

ABSTRACT

To examine the effect of the mission experience upon attitudes towards members of different cultures, 273 recently returned LDS missionaries and 493 LDS college students who had not yet served missions were administered measures of racial attitudes. Subsequently, the highest and lowest fifth of missionaries who had served in non-English speaking nations were interviewed. Results indicated that the missionaries did differ from the non-missionary sample in their racial attitudes and that several key qualitative pre-mission and mission experiences distinguished between the two groups interviewed.

Prejudice, with its attendant train of evil, is giving way before the force of truth, whose benign rays are penetrating the nations afar off. (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 1976, p. 184)

The message of the thousands of young adult LDS missionaries dispersed throughout the nations of the world is one of unity and brotherhood. Unity and brotherhood, however, are strongly challenged by situations these missionaries sometimes encounter. Ironically, these ideals are sometimes challenged by the missionaries

¹ This work was generously supported by a research grant from the Association of Mormon Counselors and Psychotherapists.

themselves, if they choose to accept common social beliefs which state that differences in socioeconomic condition, behavior, or physical appearance constitute real, immutable differences. In that sense, many young missionaries may find themselves in similar circumstances as the apostle Peter, who was first required to put aside the prejudices he had been taught before he could teach others the message of equity and peace (Acts 10). Thus, despite the loftiness of the word, the necessity of addressing the biases of its bearers appears to exist.

For many young missionaries native to the Rocky Mountain region of the U.S., their first month in the mission field may provide them with more exposure to poverty, family violence, and racial prejudice than the previous nineteen or so years of their lives. Exposure to cultural diversity has been found to reduce prejudice under certain circumstances, but under less than ideal conditions, exposure may actually increase prejudicial beliefs (Amir, 1969). Previous research in this area has also indicated that "culture shock" often impairs the abilities of those residing in foreign countries to cope with the unfamiliar environment (Zapf, 1991).

Given the steady increase in the number of missionary representatives assigned around the globe, as well as the importance of their work, the present study was designed to address several aspects of pre-mission and mission experiences as they relate to post-mission racial attitudes. Specifically, the following questions were asked: How does the mission experience affect attitudes toward other cultures? Does this effect, if any, differ between returned missionaries who served in English or non-English speaking nations? And, how do returned missionaries who report being highly accepting of other cultures differ from those who are less accepting in their pre-mission preparation and in various mission experiences?

Method

Sample

Returned missionaries. Using both fliers and advertisements, 273 white LDS recently returned missionaries were recruited. Fliers were

posted on the campuses of Utah State University, University of Utah, Brigham Young University, and Bridgerland Applied Technology Center (Logan, UT), and advertisements were placed in the following newspapers: *The Statesman* (USU), *The Chronicle* (U of U), *The Daily Universe* (BYU), *The Cache Valley Citizen* (Logan, UT), and *The Deseret News* (entire Wasatch Front). Potential subjects were offered a monetary incentive for their participation.

The sample consisted of 220 men and 53 women. Of the men, the majority (72%) were 21 years of age, with 21 percent being 22 and 7 percent being 23 or 24 (mean = 21.5). Of the women, most (52 percent) were 23, with 25 percent being 22, 22 percent being 24 or above (mean = 23.1). Of the total sample, 120 (44 percent) had served in the U.S., Canada, U.K., Ireland, or Australia, 69 (25 percent) had served in Central or South America, 44 (16 percent) had served in Asia, 35 (13 percent) had served in Europe, and 5 (2 percent) had served in South Africa. The majority of subjects (68 percent) indicated that their personal incomes were then less than \$6,000 annually, but the vast majority (approx. 80 percent) also reported that their family of origin was either middle class or upper-middle class.

Nonmissionary LDS. In addition, a sample of 493 LDS college students who had not yet served missions was recruited from introductory social science classes at Utah State University. This group consisted of 233 men and 260 women who were predominantly college freshman (60 percent). As above, the majority of subjects indicated having present personal incomes of less than \$6,000 annually, but most reported that their family of origin was either middle class or upper-middle class. Thus, a total of 766 subjects participated. The subjects were divided into three groups: those who had served missions in English speaking countries (N = 120), those who served missions in non-English speaking countries (N = 153), and those who had not yet served missions (N = 493).

Design

This study was conducted in two phases. First, all subjects com-

pleted a questionnaire containing the following measures of racial attitudes: (a) a revised form of the Social Distance Scale (SDS; Byrnes & Kiger, 1988), (b) a revised version of the Modern Racism Scale (MRS; McConahay, 1986), and (c) the White Racial Identity Attitude Scale (WRIAS; Helms 1990). Second, returned missionary subjects who had served in non-English speaking missions and who had scored among the highest or lowest fifths on the SDS were invited to complete a 30-minute structured interview regarding their mission and pre-mission experiences. Interviews were conducted by the first and third authors, who were blind to the subjects' SDS scores. Fifty interviews were completed, but data from two interviews were found to be incomplete and were subsequently removed. Thus, in the following section, data from 20 of the highest scorers and 28 of the lowest scorers are represented. The content of the interview itself is reproduced in the Appendix.

Results

Part 1: Questionnaire Data

Multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) conducted between those subjects who had served in English-speaking nations, those who had served in non-English speaking nations, and those who had not yet served missions revealed statistically significant differences on all three dependent measures ($p < .001$). Post hoc univariate analyses indicated that the two missionary groups scored as being more accepting of contact with members of other races (SDS), more prejudiced in their subtle racial opinions (MRS) and more developed in the acknowledgment and cognition of their own racial identity attitudes (WRIAS, Disintegration and Pseudo-independent subscales) than the non-missionary group. The two missionary groups did not significantly differ in their scores on the three measures.

Part 2: Interview Data

Important qualitative information was gleaned from the interview section of this research. In an attempt to better summarize these data,

a systematic content analysis was conducted. Following completion of the interviews, subjects' responses to each question were grouped by their content into "categories." Next, the percentage of subjects in each group (high versus low scorers on the SDS) who made a response falling into each category (content area) was computed. Because multiple responses were possible for each question, the response percentages reported below are for each category only; they do not sum to 100% across categories. Two of the questions (1 and 2) included subjects' ratings of the relative importance of their several responses on a 5-point Likert scale (see the Appendix). These ratings were subsequently averaged for each category of responses across the accepting (high scorers) and less accepting (low scorers) groups. Finally, ratings provided by the interviewer were also tabulated for the two groups.

Based primarily upon the opening non-specific question in which the subject was invited to describe their overall mission experience, the interviewer (who was blind to the subject's SDS score) rated the portrayed level of pleasantness of this experience on a 5-point Likert scale. The average ratings were 4.30 for the accepting group and 3.67 for the less accepting group, indicating that those subjects who had scored as being accepting of other cultures were rated as portraying their mission experience more positively than those who scored as being less accepting on the SDS.

For the first direct question, which addressed pre-mission preparatory experiences, four categories (content themes) were derived from the responses. In order of prevalence, these were (1) intercultural experience, subsequently subdivided into the areas of interpersonal contact (further subdivided into high and low quality), language training, and travel; (2) major life adjustments, including relocation of residence, economic independence, life "trials," etc.; (3) familial influence and upbringing; and, (4) nothing (i.e., they stated that no experiences prepared them for serving a foreign mission). Table 1 contains the percentage of responses falling in each of these categories by subject group. The average of subjects' own ratings (on a 5-point Likert scale) as to the importance of the experience in helping them prepare for a

Table 1
Pre-mission Preparatory Experiences for Serving in a Foreign Culture

Theme/issue	Accepting group		Less-Accepting Group	
	%	Mean rating	%	Mean rating
Intercultural Experience				
Personal contact				
High/Direct	30	3.8	31	3.1
Low/Indirect	90	3.6	39	3.8
Language	20	3.3	21	3.0
Travel	10	4.5	32	3.6
Major life adjustments	55	3.7	61	3.5
Familial influence	50	4.0	4	4.0
"Nothing"	5		18	

foreign mission are also provided.

As may be seen, these ratings were consistently high for the responses in the familial influence category. Thus, most subjects who reported being raised in homes where intercultural differences were minimized or accepted, rated their upbringing as being an important aid to their later mission experience. It should be further noted that the percentage of subjects who provided responses in this category was by far greater for those who scored as having highly accepting racial attitudes on the SDS.

The intercultural experience subcategories of travel and interpersonal contact were also rated by the subjects as being moderately important areas of preparation. Here also, the difference in the ratings and percentages of responses provided by the subjects were noticeable across the two groups. An extremely high percentage of the subjects in the highly accepting group indicated that having even low quality or indirect contact with members of foreign cultures prior to the mission was helpful, while subjects in the less accepting group rated having low quality contact (i.e., seeing them in a public setting) with members of foreign cultures as being more important than having high

quality contact (i.e., friendships) with such individuals. Finally, it should be noted that those subjects who reported having had previous language training in high school or college generally rated this as being less important than the other areas of preparation listed.

For the second question, which addressed difficulties in foreign residence, five themes were apparent in the responses. In order of prevalence, these were (1) language; (2) intercultural problems, subdivided into lack of awareness, cultural differences, and conflicting religious or moral values; (3) factually stated technical difficulties beyond the person's control, such as climate and illness; (4) complaints of differing routines and/or material goods, such as food taste, shopping inconveniences, or access to private automobile, etc.; and, (5) complaints against mission regulations. (It should be noted that responses in this last category were spontaneous, not solicited by the question content.) A tabular summary of the responses and the average level of importance ratings provided by the subjects' is presented in Table 2.

On the average, language difficulties were the most prominent

Table 2
Difficulties Experienced Serving in a Foreign Culture

Theme/issue	Accepting group		Less-Accepting Group	
	%	Mean rating	%	Mean rating
Language	60	3.8	79	3.7
Intercultural problems				
Lack of Awareness	40	3.1	32	3.1
Differences	35	3.0	46	3.3
Religious/moral values	15	3.0	25	2.7
Objective technical issues	40	3.1	46	3.0
Complaints of routine changes	30	3.3	57	3.1
Mission regulations	35	3.0	14	2.8

and the most problematic of those reported. Only minor variations in the percentages and ratings in each category existed between the two groups. Responses to the question addressing the subjects' experience in the Mission Training Center (MTC) were highly varied, in both positive and negative directions. Thus, although a great many responses were provided, they tended to be highly idiosyncratic, not amenable to concise categorization. However, one suggestion proffered by the majority of both high and low scoring subjects (65 and 68 percent, respectively) was that the "Culture Class" be altered so as to better prepare missionaries to live among the peoples native to their mission. Both high and low scoring groups were rated by the interviewer as having, on the average, a moderately positive experience in the MTC (3.4 and 3.6 on a 5-point scale).

The fourth question, in which the subjects were asked to describe their learning experiences living in another culture, also generated a wide variety of responses. These were broken down into six major categories, or areas of learning: (1) understanding of cultural variables, subsequently subdivided into perceived similarities and perceived dif-

Table 3
Issues Learned While Living in a Foreign Culture

Theme/issue	Accepting group %	Less Accepting Group %
Cultural variables		
Perceived Similarities	35	14
Perceived Differences	20	36
Personal insights	50	21
Appreciation for blessings	35	14
Irrelevance of material goods	20	14
Love for others	20	11
Language	0	18

ferences with U.S. culture; (2) personal insights for living, such as “the importance of the family unit,” “being yourself,” and “self-motivation”; (3) appreciation for personal “blessings,” such as being raised in a free nation; (4) lack of importance of material wealth or conveniences; (5) love for others; and, (6) learning a new language. As above, the percentage of responses falling into these six categories are presented in tabular form (see Table 3).

As can be seen, reported areas of learning did vary substantially. Although not extreme, the difference across the two groups in the perceived cultural similarities and differences was noteworthy. The accepting group reported learning how people are similar, regardless of nationality, more often than the less-accepting group, which in turn, reported perceiving more differences across cultures. By totaling the percentages on the table for the two groups, it may be observed that the accepting group gave proportionately more responses to this question. Averaged interviewer’s ratings on a 5-point Likert scale of the quality of the learning experiences did differ between the accepting and less accepting groups (3.75 and 3.27, respectively). Likewise, although not amenable to quantification, the individual responses provided by the less-accepting group were generally more superficial in their quality. Specifically, the response made by members of the less accepting group, “learning a new language,” is exemplary.

When asked to recommend strategies for individuals planning to live in a foreign country, the subjects provided a highly varied number of suggestions. These were broken down into four major categories of responses: (1) Have a positive/accepting attitude (“be open minded,” “don’t focus on material things”, etc.); (2) Read about/learn as much as you can of the language and customs; (3) Actively adapt and immerse yourself in the culture (“live like the people do”, etc.); and, (4) Observe and/or speak with natives or those familiar with the culture. Table 4 contains the percentage of responses provided by the two groups in these four categories.

Generally, the two groups were not dissimilar in their responses. An extremely high percentage in both groups suggested that having a posi-

Table 4
Areas Recommended for Foreign Sojourners to Prepare Themselves

Source	Accepting group %	Less-Accepting Group %
Positive/accepting attitude	95	93
Study language and culture	55	64
Actively adapt to culture	55	39
Talk with/observe others	30	14

tive/accepting attitude was important for individuals interested in living abroad. To a lesser degree, study of language and culture and taking action to adapt to cultural norms were suggested. Speaking with and observing natives or people familiar with the culture were suggested much less frequently.

Question number six asked what sources of social, emotional and spiritual support the subject used while in the mission field. Five major categories were apparent in the responses: (1) letters from family and friends, (2) interaction with other missionaries, including the companion, districts, and zones; (3) interaction with native peoples, including local church members and investigators; (4) spirituality, including scripture study, prayer, faith, etc.; and, (5) interaction with church leaders, including mission president and General Authorities. Table 5 contains the percentage of responses provided in each of these five areas across the two groups interviewed.

The vast majority of subjects indicated that receiving mail from home was an important area of support for them while on their mission. Contact with other missionaries was also perceived as being helpful for a large proportion, although this was noticeably greater among the less-accepting missionaries. Perhaps the most notable information gleaned through responses to this question was that much more of the racially accepting missionaries found association with native peoples to be helpful. It was also interesting to note that, on the whole, the returned mis-

Table 5
Sources of Support Used While Living Abroad

Source	Accepting group %	Less-Accepting Group %
Letters	85	93
Other Missionaries	75	93
Native Peoples	80	18
Spirituality	35	39
Church Leaders	30	36

missionaries interviewed in this study more often reported using interpersonal associations for support rather than spirituality.

Discussion

The results of this study provide some useful information for those working with returning or departing missionaries. However, there are several limitations in the data that should be noted. First of all, the data was collected in a post hoc design from subjects who, on average, had been home from their missions for several months. Had data been collected both prior to departure and then immediately following return, potential confounding influences would have been minimized. Second, only subjects residing in Utah were examined, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Future research may benefit from examining subjects from other backgrounds and nationalities. Third, although the interview format was standardized and the interviewers were blind to subjects' SDS scores, some (unobserved) experimenter bias might exist in the qualitative data. And, finally, the differences in average age between the non-missionary and returned missionary subjects made chronological maturation a potential confound for those between group comparisons. That is, the present data does not adequately distinguish between the effects of a mission and the effects of simply getting older. On a practical level, however, two

years is not an excessive time span and, more importantly, data collected from older LDS subjects who had not yet served missions would introduce a variety of potential confounds less amenable to measurement (spiritual commitment, etc.). Each of these four limitations should be considered as we analyze the responses given to the questions that served to elicit the data for this study.

Responses to the first question, "How does the mission experience affect attitudes toward other cultures?" were disconcertingly inconsistent. On one hand, returned missionaries in this sample scored as being more willing to engage in contact with ethnic minorities (SDS) and more developed in their awareness and cognitive acceptance of racial issues (WRIAS) than the subjects who had not yet served missions. On the other hand, they scored as having more subtly biased beliefs than the nonmissionaries (MRS). Further research will need to be conducted to verify this apparent contradiction and to explore viable explanations, including the effects of aging, if it is subsequently replicated.

The second question, "Does the effect [on racial attitudes], differ between returned missionaries who served in English- or non-English-speaking nations?" was more concisely answered by the data. No practical differences existed between them. Thus, it is reasonable to tentatively conclude that the mission experience itself, rather than lengthy exposure to foreign cultures, may produce differences in one's attitudes toward other cultures. This possibility would be better assessed, however, by a quasi-experimental design that includes a pre-mission pre-test.

The response to the final question, "How do returned missionaries who report being highly accepting of other cultures differ from those who are less accepting in their pre-mission preparation and mission experiences?", is highly complex. First of all, it was noted that the accepting subjects were more likely to report being raised in an environment where cultural differences were accepted. Although far from surprising, this finding does place added emphasis on the role of the family in preparing young men and women for mission service. It was also notable that the accepting missionaries also reported more indi-

rect or low quality contact with members of different cultures prior to their missions. Because causality was not established, this finding may be attributed to the relative weight given to such occurrences by members of this group, rather than a lack of exposure in the less accepting group. Nevertheless, it could also suggest that exposing children and young adults to other cultures may benefit their later preparedness to live among such peoples. Such experiences would also demonstrate that cultures are important and acceptable to their adult role models.

It was also interesting to note that the two groups did not differ substantially in the difficulties they experienced while living abroad. Regardless of racial attitudes, roughly one third of those interviewed indicated having some difficulties in either understanding or accepting the culture. The fact that an inability to communicate effectively was so widely cited served to reinforce the Church's policy of using primarily native missionaries, when possible. When considered along with the moderate ratings high school language training achieved, it also demonstrated that perhaps the MTC experience is neither too long nor too intense.

The finding that accepting subjects did tend to report having learned more sophisticated and personally relevant issues from living in a foreign culture was not surprising. It follows along the same line as the differences noted in the portrayed pleasantness of the overall mission experience. However, it does underscore the potential benefit of addressing cultural acceptance perhaps more explicitly, which many of the missionaries seemed to indicate by suggesting changes to the MTC "Culture Class."

That the two groups did not differ in their recommendations to one planning to live abroad may be due to the superficial nature of many of these responses. Cliches and strictly commonsense suggestions abounded. All this may say is that preparation for living abroad is difficult and not particularly amenable to psychological checklists. Apparently, given the heavy emphasis on attitudes and behavioral adaptation, preparation requires much more psychological work than material work. The fact that experiential activities, such as observing and speaking with natives,

were not suggested nearly as often seemed to bear this out. Finally, it was also observed that the two groups differed substantially in their use of native peoples for emotional and social support. Less-accepting missionaries appeared to have turned more to their own peers. Both apparently relied extensively upon family and friends back home, although it must be noted that the relative importance of each of these factors was not measured here. Given the nature of missionary work, it was surprising to note that the majority of subjects did not indicate that God or spirituality was a source of support for them. However, this finding may either be due to the phrasing of the question or to the social context of the interview, which were all conducted on university campuses, not in church meetinghouses.

Given the responses to the above questions, a summary question may be appropriately asked: "What can be done to improve the likelihood of successful cultural integration by LDS missionaries?" As counselors, opportunities for taking such action may be limited, given that few outgoing missionaries seek psychological services. However, in the roles of parent, church advisor, etc., there is much that may be done. Modeling appropriate cultural appreciation, providing opportunities for cross-cultural exchange, encouraging language and culture study, and emphasizing the attitudinal and behavioral components as much as the physical and cognitive are all areas where each of us can take a more active role.

Recognizing the importance of such preparatory assistance in the departure process, a final note is that the return journey home often presents as many or more challenges to a sojourner (Raschio, 1987). Fortunately, although the issues are often different, the process of readjustment to U.S. culture ("reverse culture shock") is nearly the same. Support, understanding, willingness to accept differences, and adapting to change all play a role.

References

- Amir, Y. (1969). Contact hypothesis in ethnic relations. *Psychological Bulletin*, 71, 319-341.

- Byrnes, D. A., & Kiger, G. (1988). Contemporary measures of attitudes toward Blacks. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 48, 107-114.
- Helms, J. E. (1990). Black and white racial identity: Theory, research and practice. Westport, CT: Greenwood.
- McConahay, J. B. (1986). Modern racism, ambivalence, and the modern racism scale. In J. F. Dovidio & S. L. Gaertner (Eds.), *Prejudice, discrimination, and racism* (pp. 91-126). New York: Academic Press.
- Raschio, R. A. (1987). College students' perceptions of reverse culture shock and reentry adjustments. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 28, 156-162.
- Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*. (1976). J. F. Smith (Ed.). Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book.
- Zapf, M. K. (1991). Cross-cultural transitions and wellness: Dealing with culture shock. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counseling*, 14, 105-119.

Appendix

Content of Interview

- A. Establish rapport and clarify expectations and roles.
- B. Open-ended question (approx. 5 minutes): "Please describe your experience living abroad."
- C. Direct questions (approx. 20 minutes):
1. "Please describe some of your experiences prior to your mission that you feel best prepared you to work among a different culture." "How would you rate each of these experiences?" (5 = very important, 1 = not important)
 2. "Please describe at least three difficulties you experienced living in another culture." "How would you rate each of these experiences?" (5 = very important, 1 = not important)
 3. "What did you think of your MTC experience?"
 4. "What did you learn from living in a foreign culture?"
 5. "What are your recommendations for other people who plan to live in a foreign culture?"
 6. "What were some of the most useful supports (emotional, social, spiritual, etc.) you had while living in a foreign culture?"
- D. Debriefing and response to subject's inquiries (5 minutes).
- E. Post-interview ratings: All subjects were rated on anchored 5-point Likert scales on: (a) The overall pleasantness of the mission experience, as they portrayed it, (b) the quality of the MTC experience, as they portrayed it, and, (c) the quality of the cross-cultural learning they experienced, as they portrayed it (5 = most positive or highest quality, 1 = least positive or lowest quality).