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VOLUNTEERISM AND MARITAL QUALITY
AMONG LDS SENIOR MISSIONARY COUPLES

by

Megan Oka

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science

Department of the School of Family Life

Brigham Young University

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

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This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

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ABSTRACT

VOLUNTEERISM AND MARITAL QUALITY AMONG LDS SENIOR MISSIONARY COUPLES

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Master of Science

Although research has been conducted on marriage and volunteerism in later life, little is known about the impact of volunteerism on marital quality, particularly intense volunteer experiences. Missionary couples for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) leave their homes for a period ranging from 6-18 months and dedicate the majority of their time to working in church assignments. Qualitative interviews were collected from couples who had served senior couples missions for the LDS Church and returned home in the last year. The mean age of participants was 69, and the mean length of marriage for couples was 37 years. Twelve couples were interviewed conjointly about the experience of their missions, and their perceived marital quality before, after, and during their missions. Qualitative analysis was conducted on these interviews, and several themes emerged from the data, as well as subthemes. The themes were divided into those that occurred prior to serving a mission, those that occurred during the mission,

and a separate section for marital themes. Pre-mission themes included factors affecting decision to go on a mission, prior experience. Mission themes included type of mission, adjustments, things enjoyed, and things not enjoyed. Marital themes included arguments, closeness, power, and stress. Each section included an in-depth discussion of what each theme incorporated, as well as quotes from the interviews. Overall, couples felt like their missions had a positive impact on their marriages. Comparisons were done among couples serving different types of missions, as well as couples in first, second, and third marriages. Type of mission and number of marriages had little overall impact on a couple's perception of the effect of their mission on their marriage. Therapists can use these results to inform couples who are contemplating an intense voluntary experience.

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Introduction

According to the 2000 Census, 12.4% of the national population is 65 years old or older. At the rate the population is growing, it is projected that by the year 2050, the percentage of elderly will have increased to 20.7% (Census Bureau, 2000). The transition to later life usually means retirement from one's life work. However, society-wide retirement is a relatively new phenomenon, shaped in the post World War II era with the advent of Social Security, company-based pensions, and Medicare (Hardy, 2002). Over the last 50 years, the proportion of older persons who are retired has increased to the point that today the vast majority of these older people are retired. In 1950, 45.8% of men over the age of 65 and 9.7% of similarly aged women were still participating in the labor force. By 2000, the percentages had decreased to 9.9 % of men and 5.4% of women (Cox, Parks, Hammonds, & Sekhon, 2001). Clearly, retirement now affects a large part of the current population and represents a life stage that the majority of people over 65 experience.

What do older people do in retirement? Some work in part-time jobs; some spend their retirement years in leisure and travel; some spend their retirement years involved in activities that build up their community (Cox, Parks, Hammonds, & Sekhon, 2001). One of the options for post-retirement senior citizens is volunteering. Many people in retirement spend time volunteering in community and church organizations. Volunteering helps keep people who have retired from the workforce stay socially integrated. In addition, volunteering is positively correlated with better health (Cox, et. al., 2001), and studies have shown that volunteering is associated with more positive affect and can lessen negative affect associated with role absences in later life (Greenfield

and Marks, 2004). In addition, a study by Kulik (2002) suggested the benefits of volunteerism on marriage.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) offers senior couples a volunteer experience that creates an atypical situation for this demographic group. Couples in retirement are given the opportunity to volunteer for the LDS Church as full-time missionaries. More than 2,100 retired couples are currently serving as missionaries for the LDS Church (Karford, 2006). These couples usually leave their homes and serve in other areas of the country; many serve in countries around the world. They spend the vast majority of their time together--often 24 hours a day--providing service to members of their church, as well as those who are not members of their church. Not only do the couples volunteer their time to their church, but they also support themselves financially during their service. The experience may be considered a sacrifice, but couples often cite personal growth and community-building as rewards for their service (Pinegar, 2002).

To date, no research has been conducted that examines the experiences of this group of older, retired volunteers. How does the experience of leaving one's home for an extended period of time, being away from children and grandchildren, and spending nearly every hour together affect their marital relationship? Although research has examined post-retirement marital relationships, with a limited number of studies focusing on the effect of post-retirement volunteering on marriage, no research has examined the effect of a full-time, intense, and prolonged volunteer experience, such as serving a full-time LDS mission, on marital relationships. This study will explore this issue from the perspective of the couple as they look back on their volunteer mission experience.

Literature Review

In recent years, a number of studies have examined marriages in later life, including issues such as marital satisfaction, retirement, and leisure activities, such as volunteering. Examining these studies makes it clear where the field has already gone in studying later-life couples, as well as gaps in the current research literature.

Marital Satisfaction. Research suggests that, for the most part, older couples report high levels of satisfaction in their marriage (Miller, Hemaseth, & Nelson, 1997). One reason for high levels of marital satisfaction among older couples is that, as couples age, they learn how to communicate in ways that are more fulfilling, and less damaging to their relationships. Levenson, Carstensen, and Gottman (1993) conducted a study comparing 156 couples in the age ranges of 40-50 or 60-70 to compare older couples with midlife couples. The study included surveys filled out by spouses independently, as well as observation of couples discussing their problems as well as those things that brought them pleasure. They found that older couples experience reduced conflict and greater pleasure compared to the younger cohort.

This same research team (Carstensen, Gottman, and Levenson, 1995) conducted another study that affirmed the developmental model of marriages. They employed John Gottman's research strategy that he used with younger couples (ages 40 to 50) and applied them to couples in later life (ages 60 to 70). Specifically, they were looking to see if the patterns of affect and affect reciprocity were more positive in couples who had been married 35 years or longer, as compared to those married less time. They found that older couples expressed less negativity and more affection than middle-aged couples, and that older couples displayed more affection and fewer negative emotions during conflict.

They also found that unhappy older couples were less likely to turn a negative comment into a negative interaction, which suggests that couples learn to “leave well enough alone.”

Retirement. A considerable number of studies have examined the impact of retirement on marital satisfaction, with these studies generally finding little impact. Cross-sectional studies have found little difference in marital satisfaction between still-working and retired couples (Atchley, 1992; Ekerdt & Vinick, 1991; Lee & Shehan, 1989; Szinovacz, 1996) and longitudinal studies have found substantial continuity between pre- and post-retirement levels of marital satisfaction (Myers & Booth, 1996; Szinovacz & Schaffer, 2000; VanLaningham, Johnson, & Amato, 2001). One important caveat is that research has suggested that wives who were employed after their husbands retired experienced lower marital satisfaction than wives who retired before their husbands, or wives who retired with their husbands. However, when these wives retire, the level of marital satisfaction increases again. This is consistent with later findings (Lee & Shehan, 1989; Myers & Booth 1996; Davey & Szinovacz 2004; Smith & Moen 2004; Szinovacz & Davey 2005).

The division of household labor is an important predictor of post-retirement satisfaction. (Szinovacz & Ekerdt, 1996). Employed wives of retired husbands tend to have lower marital satisfaction when they expect that their husbands will help more with household work after retirement and these expectations are not met (Pina & Bengtson 1995; Myers & Booth 1996). Kulik (2001) found that, although retired couples tend to have a more egalitarian division of labor, men tend to stick with those tasks traditionally

deemed “masculine.” In addition, it appears that, regardless of the division of labor or the employment status of either husband or wife, the balance of power does not shift.

Although most older couples report being satisfied in their marriages, and retirement generally has little impact on marital relationships, there is evidence that stress and daily hassles experienced by older couples can have a negative effect on their marital satisfaction. Harper, Schaalje, and Sandberg (2000) conducted a study on a sample of 472 married participants randomly selected from all 50 states in the US. Both spouses in the study had to be 55 years old or older. Participants were given the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale, the Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships, and the Hassles and Uplifts scale. They hypothesized that the “daily hassles” of married life would be negatively related to marital quality, that perceived marital intimacy would be positively related to marital quality, and that marital intimacy would act as a buffer against the negative effects of the daily hassles. The researchers found that the severity of marital hassles as reported by both husband and wife was significantly related to marital quality and reported that intimacy was a mediating variable between daily hassles and marital quality.

Recent research has focused specifically on what the daily hassles are for couples in later life. A study done by Henry, Miller, and Giarusso (2005) examined the most common relationship problems faced by older couples, the gender differences in perception of those challenges, the congruence of responses between spouses, and the differences between couples who had been married over 50 years versus those who had been married less time. The researchers used data collected from the University of Southern California Longitudinal Study of Generations. Researchers looked at a group of

105 couples within the survey who responded to the open-ended question, “In the last few years, what are some of the things on which you have differed, disagreed, or been disappointed about (even if not openly discussed) with your spouse?” They found that the most common themes were leisure activities (23%), intimacy (13%), finances (11%), no problems (11%), personality (9%), intergenerational relations (9%), household concerns (9%), personal habits (7%), health issues (6%), and work retirement (2%). Thus, leisure activities was the most common source of marital difficulties among later-life couples.

Volunteerism. It is estimated that 47% of people ages 55-64, 43% of people ages 65-74, and 37% of people over age 75 and older are engaged in some kind of volunteer work (Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, Rosario, & Tang 2003). As the aging population lives longer and healthier lives, they look forward to having more productive time in retirement. In addition, the current generation of retired people tends to be better educated, more affluent, and native born—all characteristics which are associated with higher rates of volunteerism (Chambre 1993; Jirovek & Hyduk 1998; Musick, Herzog, & House 1999; Shmotkin, Blumstein, & Modan 2003). One of the most common organizations seniors report volunteering in is some type of religious organization (VanWilligen 2000; Morrow-Howell, et. al. 2003). One study cited that 69% of its participants volunteered for a religious group, or within their own congregations (Musick, et. al. 1999).

Several studies demonstrated the benefits related to volunteering in later life (Musick, et. al 1999; Jirovek & Hyduk 1998; Morrow-Howell, et. al 2003; Shmotkin, et. al. 2003; VanWilligen 2000). For example, Cox, Parks, Hammonds, and Sekham (2001)

compared the health and life satisfaction among 342 older people who were working full-time, working part-time, retired and engaged in volunteer activities, or retired and engaged in leisure activities. They found no significant difference for any of the groups in regard to health, but they found that those who retired and became engaged in volunteer activities reported significantly higher levels of life satisfaction.

Most of these studies have linked moderate amounts of volunteering to greater health, lower mortality rates, and life satisfaction, and cite a curvilinear relationship between volunteering and physical and mental health benefits. However, these studies often differ on what “moderate amounts” of volunteering are. Musick et. al. (1999) defined less than 40 hours of volunteerism a year as the point at which benefits associated with volunteering max out, while Jirovek & Hyduk (1999) cited 500 hours (on a scale from 1 to 1000 hours) as the point where seniors in their study experienced the most contentment with life.

Another benefit of volunteerism is that it can help lessen the negative feelings associated with role-identity absences associated with later life (Greenfield & Marks, 2004). Perhaps this is why Jirovek & Hyduk (1998) reported that volunteerism was positively related to contentment with life when it was intergenerational in nature—being able to volunteer with a younger generation helps fill role-identity absences associated with launching children.

Marital status is associated with the likelihood of volunteering, as well as the benefits derived from volunteering. One study reported that those who are married are more likely to volunteer than those who are not (Chambre 1999), and other studies (Musick, et.al. 1999; VanWilligen 2000), while reporting no correlation between marital

status and volunteering, did report that the benefits associated with volunteering were greatest for those who were married.

Only one study to date has specifically examined the effect of volunteerism on marital satisfaction. Kulik (2002) conducted a study on 595 Israelis, ranging in age from 54 to 75 years old, to find out what their perceptions were of the effects of volunteerism on their marriage. Participants were given a questionnaire that included questions meant to gauge perceived beneficial effects of volunteering on marriage, spousal accommodation, and perceived harmful effects of volunteering on marriage. Participants were divided into four types of volunteer marriages: congruent-volunteers; congruent-nonvolunteers; noncongruent--spouse volunteers, participant does not; noncongruent—participant volunteers, spouse does not. Congruent-volunteers included those couples where both spouses volunteered; congruent nonvolunteers referred to those couples in which neither spouse volunteered; and the noncongruent volunteers were divided into two groups, one in which the participant in the research was involved in volunteering, while the spouse was not, and one where the spouse was involved in volunteering while the participant in the study was not.

Kulik (2002) found that those in congruent-volunteer marriages highlighted the benefits of volunteering on their marriage more than the other groups. Congruent volunteer couples were more likely to highlight a need for spousal accommodation than noncongruent volunteer families and were less likely to emphasize harmful effects of volunteerism. This study also found a significant positive correlation between hours participants spent volunteering and couples' emphasis on the benefits of volunteering to their marriage. In addition, the author reported that more time spent in volunteering was

associated with less need for spousal accommodation. There was no correlation between time spent volunteering and perceived harm to the marriage. This study also found that couples who were religious reported less harm to their marriage because of volunteering. The author makes the case that--based on the findings of the study--organizations should encourage joint volunteerism by spouses, as it seems to have the greatest correlation to marital benefits associated with volunteerism.

LDS Senior Missionaries. On the one hand, LDS missionaries have a unique volunteer experience. A full-time mission usually requires the couple to live away from home for a period of time ranging from 6 to 30 months. The LDS Church provides traveling expenses, but missionaries are required to support themselves financially while they are volunteering, including providing their own medical insurance. Costs for a mission usually range from \$1,000 to \$2,000 per month. Older couples serving on full-time missions are generally together 24 hours a day and may serve in various capacities, including helping with the church's education system, constructing or managing church facilities, working at centers for family history research, managing church farms, working as medical personnel, working at church visitor centers, or doing humanitarian work. The decision to serve a mission is made by the couple, but where and in what capacity the couple serves is made by ecclesiastical leaders (Pinegar, 2002). On the other hand, serving an LDS couples mission has many of the same characteristics of volunteer experiences cited in other studies as being beneficial to couples or individuals: it is religiously affiliated, it promotes joint volunteerism, and it is intergenerational in nature. With the exception of Kulik (2002), no other studies have been conducted specifically to look at the relationship between marital satisfaction and volunteerism in later life.

Theory

The life course perspective examines how timing and transitions influence individual and relationship development (Umberson, Williams, Powers, Chen & Campbell, 2005). The four major tenets of life course theory are: historical timing, timing of lives, interdependent lives, and agency. According to life course theory, marriages in later-life should be examined not just for their duration, but also for the unique transitions couples face in later life, due to the historical time in which they live, or the timing in their own lives. One such transition is retirement, which, today, is a common transition. Often, senior missionary couples have recently experienced a transition to retirement prior to beginning their missionary service. It is hypothesized that the transition to retirement will have an impact on a couple's marital interactions and marital quality within the context of serving a couple's mission. Another transition is the launching of the last child. For some couples, the timing of missionary service coincides with the last child leaving home. It is expected that transition out of the role of parenting will have an impact on a couple's marriage.

Another major tenet of life course theory is that of agency, or the idea that the life course of an individual or couple is impacted by the decisions made (Elder, 1994). It is expected that couples who choose to go on missions will have a different life and relationship experience than those who do not.

Statement of problem

Although in recent years much research has been done on couples in later-life, little research has examined the effect of volunteer experiences on the marital relationships of older couples. In particular, no research has examined the effect of full-

time missionary experiences on retired couples' relationships. What effect does serving a post-retirement full-time mission have on couples' marital relationship? Do couples report that it leads to higher levels of marital satisfaction? What are the mitigating factors to determining whether or not couples' missionary experiences have a positive effect on their marital relationship? In what ways did their relationship change as a result of volunteering together? What were some of the relationship challenges that they faced while serving full-time missions? How did they deal with these challenges? The objective of this study is to explore these questions.

METHOD

Sample

Participants were selected using a snowball sampling technique. Acquaintances of the researcher were asked for names of older couples they knew who had recently (within the last twelve months) returned from serving a couples' mission. Further, couples who participated in the study were asked for the names of other couples they knew who had also recently returned from missions. Those referrals were also contacted and invited to participate in the study. The total number of couples interviewed was 12 (n=24). Participants' ages ranged from 62-75 years old, with a mean age of 69. There were four couples for whom it was a second or third marriage for both partners. The mean length of marriage for participants was 37 years. All participants had children, with a mean of 6.13 children per participant. All of the participants were Caucasian, although two of the participants were born outside the United States. Of the 24 participants, all had graduated high school, and 22 of the participants had completed some college. Six had graduate or professional degrees and 6 had bachelor's degrees. Two couples had

participated in marital therapy at some point during their marriages.

Table 1
Description of participants

Participants LDS Senior Missionary Couples	Years Married	Type of Mission Served	Duration of Mission	First Marriage	Number of years retired
Couple 1	50	structured	18 months	Yes	H=2 W=N/A
Couple 2	6	unstructured	18 months	No	H=12 W=9
Couple 3	8	structured	18 months	No	H=9 W=N/A
Couple 4	10	structured	6 months	No	H=10 W=4
Couple 5	50	1=structured 2=structured	1=18 months 2=6 months	Yes	H=7 W=N/A
Couple 6	47	1=unstructured 2=structured	1=18 months 2=6 months	Yes	H=11 W=11.5
Couple 7	42	structured	6 months	Yes	H=2 W=2
Couple 8	47	structured	18 months	Yes	H=2 W=N/A
Couple 9	43	unstructured	18 months	Yes	H=5 W=1.5
Couple 10	48	unstructured	18 months	No	H=5 W=5
Couple 11	44	unstructured	18 months	Yes	H=3.5 W=3
Couple 12	49	unstructured	18 months	No	H=10 W=7

All participants had served missions away from their homes—although one couple was reassigned halfway through to a mission they could complete from home. Three of the couples had served multiple missions. Six of the couples served in missions outside of the United States. The majority of the couples were assigned to missions for 18 months, although three of the couples served 6-month missions. It was determined by the primary researcher that these variations in length of mission, place served, and

number of missions served did not significantly change the overall mission experience for the couples, and, therefore, they could be included in the study.

All participants resided in the western United States. Participants were informed that they had been selected to participate in the study because they had returned from serving a couple's mission away from home within the last year. The participants were told that it would be an interview about the experience of their missions, and it would cover topics such as daily routines, challenges, and marital stresses and rewards. Spouses were interviewed together, and then separated to give each person the opportunity to add other thoughts without his/her spouse present. It was hoped that the conjoint interview would allow the researcher to get a more in-depth picture of the experience of volunteering for the couple, rather than the individual members of the couple. In addition, it gave the researcher the opportunity to observe the marital dynamic during the interview, as well as getting the couples' perceptions of their marital dynamic. At the same time, the interviewer hoped that, by giving the spouses the opportunity to speak alone at the end, she would elicit any information that the spouses may have been uncomfortable saying in front of one another.

Procedures

This research study was qualitative in nature. Qualitative methods are used to understand the meanings of the experiences of the research subjects, particularly in cases where little is known about the subjects being studied (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Because LDS senior missionary couples have not been scientifically researched, a qualitative study allowed the researcher to collect richer, exploratory data. Qualitative analysis helped the researcher make meaning of the full-time mission experience of these couples

and how it impacted their marriage, not only with regard to their marital quality, but also with regard to their marital processes. The researcher utilized a retrospective semistructured interview format to obtain firsthand information about each couple's marital relationship before, after, and during their mission. Each participant was given a consent form prior to the interview (Appendix B), as well as an information sheet asking him/her to list basic demographics (age, race, years married, etc.) as well as contact information (Appendix C). Participants agreed to being contacted in the future if more information became necessary to complete the study. The contact information was then separated from the demographic information to protect the anonymity of the participants. The interviews lasted between 45 to 70 minutes, and the interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim.

Interview

Interviews enabled the researcher to gain “intimate familiarity” with the informants and their world (Loftland & Loftland, 1995). Retrospective interviews are used by researchers when they want participants to recreate past experiences and recall history (Fetterman, 1998). The goal for the qualitative interviews was to have participants talk about their experiences and the feelings associated with them without specifically asking for their emotional responses. The goal was to obtain responses from the participants that highlight their experiences without forcing them to make judgments or analyze their experiences (Matthews, 2005). Participants were asked broad questions first, and were encouraged to expound on their answers if necessary. However, in order to elicit responses that specifically relate to marital satisfaction and marital quality, the researcher asked some specific probing questions (Fetterman, 1998). For a complete list

of questions, see Appendix A. As interviews proceeded, questions were added or taken away, depending on how freely the couples shared their mission experiences unsolicited. Qualitative research methods utilize the interaction between the researcher and the data, so it is important to add the researcher as an instrument for both collecting and analyzing data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Researcher

The primary researcher is a single, twenty-four-year-old female graduate student. She is half Japanese-American and half Caucasian. She served an LDS mission as a young adult in western New York, specifically covering areas from Buffalo east to the Finger Lakes, north to Lake Ontario, and south to the Pennsylvania border. She lived in six different areas within this region, including two suburbs of Rochester, New York, and four rural areas. Her service lasted eighteen months, and during that time, she observed senior missionary couples who proselytized and those who gave tours at LDS Church history sites. Two of the places in which she served allowed her to have daily contact with at least one senior missionary couple.

Analysis

Because it was a qualitative study, much of the analysis occurred as the data were being collected in the interview (Fetterman, 1998). The primary researcher took notes after each interview, highlighting key moments of the interview, as well as those events and themes that were of importance to the couple. Because the main researcher conducted the interviews, she was able to highlight these events in the transcripts and ask for clarification during the interviews, as well as ask follow-up questions to elicit more

information about each couple's experience. As themes arose in interviews, questions about those themes were asked in subsequent interviews.

The researcher used content analysis to identify themes and patterns among the interviews. Content analysis includes “1. ‘Sense of whole,’ 2. ‘discrimination of meaning units within a psychological perspective and focus on the phenomenon being researched,’ 3. ‘transformation of subject’s everyday expression into psychological language with emphasis on the phenomenon being investigated,’ and 4. ‘synthesis of transformed meaning units into a consistent statement of the structure of learning” (Dahl & Boss, 1996). After the interviews were transcribed, the primary researcher went through hard copies of each interview. She then went through a second time, highlighting specific themes that had jumped out at her during the interview, as well as those that she noticed reading the transcript. She then constructed a separate framework or skeleton for each interview, breaking each interview down into themes and categories. She then took each skeleton and compared its themes and categories against the other skeletons, creating one master skeleton for all 12 interviews, marking which themes had emerged from which interviews. After doing this, she went through the master skeleton and highlighted the most frequently occurring themes and codes—defined as those that occurred three times (in 25% of interviews) or more. After the primary researcher finished this process, another researcher with similar qualifications as the primary researcher, read through 10% of the transcripts (2 transcripts). The secondary researcher acted as a check to make sure the themes and patterns were not the result of bias on the part of the primary researcher and to ensure that the themes that were developed by the primary researcher reflected the content of the interviews. When there were disagreements between the

coding of the primary and secondary researchers, they discussed the viewpoints until they reached consensus. These decisions were then applied by the primary researcher to the coding of the other interviews.

RESULTS

The results of the analysis revealed a common that couples tend to go through before, after, and during their missions. Within this process, several themes emerged that were common among most of the couples. For the sake of convenience, the themes are divided up into those that occurred before, during, and after the mission. Because couples were asked about specific dimensions of their marriages before, during, and after their missions, those are highlighted in a separate section.

Table 2.
Description of each theme, and subtheme, as well as what each captured in pre-mission stage.

Themes	Subthemes	Description
Factors affecting decision to go		Included all factors that made serving a mission more or less difficult.
	Retirement	Included steps taken toward retirement in order to serve a mission.
	Family	Included family responsibilities such as caretaking of parents or children, as well as apprehension over leaving behind family.
	Time alone together	Included real or suggested apprehension at spending so much time together as spouses.
	Desire to go	Included all internal motivations couples cited for wanting to serve a mission.
	Sense of duty	Included all external forces motivating couples to serve missions, such as responsibility to children, encouragement from church leaders, peer pressure.
Prior Experience		Included specialized training and prior volunteering

Pre-mission

Couples were asked about the factors that led to the decision to serve a mission, and many followed-up with details about the timing of their missions. These themes are summarized in Table 1.

Factors affecting decision to go

Half of the couples reported that the timing of their retirement was a factor in serving a mission. Six couples reported submitting applications to serve missions shortly before or after retirement. One husband described the timing: "...Friday night, I had my retirement party at work, and then...Monday morning, we flew to Hawaii, and I was retired, all in that short period of time, and it was a major adjustment to go from working all the time, and having lots and lots of responsibilities towards being retired." Another couple who served a mission in West Africa described timing submitting their mission application as they prepared to retire. "We knew we wanted to go on a mission, we knew I was retiring, so we put the papers in 6 months in advance to give them plenty of chance to look at it, so it was part of what we had planned," the husband reported. Many couples seemed to feel that, while they may have talked about serving a mission for many years, it became harder to actually apply for a mission as they approached retirement. As one wife, who had served two missions, said, "When you're 40, it's a great idea. When 65 comes, it makes you take another look at it and think, "Whoa, this is really jumping off."

Six couples also reported delaying service or limiting service based on family factors—three couples were involved in caretaking of elderly parents, and three couples had concerns with children that needed to be resolved before they could serve a mission.

One couple who served a six-month mission explained that the reason they served a shorter mission was because of caretaking,

“My parents are elderly—they’re in their 90’s, and I was concerned going out that something would happen. They’re healthy, but they still require care in as far as transporting them different places: the grocery store, the doctor, and just making sure they’re okay. But they survived; they didn’t die.”

Other couples reported concerns over their children. One wife explained that she and her husband already had their mission call to work in a temple in Palmyra, New York, “But the very week before we went down to Palmyra, we found ourselves down in San Francisco at Stanford University, with a baby having another open-heart surgery. Even then it was – however this turns out – because I didn’t feel like I could abandon my daughter, and if it didn’t turn out well I felt like I would have to be there for her for a few months.” Another couple reported timing their mission around their son. “We scheduled it so that after our one son got home from his mission (he was in Argentina), we were here for about a year before we wanted to go on our mission. So we went when he was a junior at the university. We got back for his graduation, but all the time he was a junior and senior we were gone.”

Most couples reported that they were reluctant to leave their children and grandchildren behind, regardless of the timing. As a wife who served a mission in Hawaii explained, “...The stress before I left was leaving my kids and grandkids. That was a hard thing for me to do...That was my biggest stress to even turn my papers in was I would have to leave my family.”

Most couples reported that they wanted to serve a mission, although 7 of the 12 couples also reported that they felt strongly encouraged by their church leaders to go if they were able. A wife who served a mission at a church history visitor's center explained her motivation for wanting to go: "For me, that's service. Our church is so service-oriented, and we just feel like we need to do that. We have the time, we have the health, we have the money, and we just wanted to do that. Plus we've been instructed by our prophet to serve."

Four of the couples reported apprehension at the prospect of spending so much time alone as a couple. Most of those said that they had heard stories about other couples who had a hard time with retirement. One husband who had recently retired said, "I worried about being together with my wife for 24 hours a day. I heard so many comments about that, you know, so, but we just got along famously." Another wife in her second marriage explained that when they were interviewed by their church leader, the first question he asked was, "How much time do you spend together?" She explained that this leader was concerned that couples tended to spend a great deal of time apart prior to retirement, and many of them had a hard time when they went on a mission.

Prior Experience

Seven of the couples reported that some prior experience made them well-suited to the assignment that they were given for their missions, whether it was teaching, working in LDS temples, or working with computers. One husband who had worked for IBM for many years was given an assignment to handle scheduling at the visitor's center in Hawaii. He explained how he used skills he already had to help with his assignment. "I developed computer programs for doing that scheduling, and so it was every half hour

from seven o' clock in the morning until ten o'clock at night. The Church does not provide programs to do that, so, everybody's kind of on their own...so I did that, and it ended up...being around 32,000 half-hour intervals you scheduled every six weeks.”

Mission

Type of Mission

Mission experiences couples had were divided into structured and unstructured missions. (The themes of the mission are summarized in Table 2.) Structured missions were those in which couples had regularly scheduled shifts and specific duties and assignments that they could plan on from week to week. Such assignments may have included serving in LDS temples—performing religious ordinances, welcoming patrons, doing laundry, or janitorial work, or working in LDS visitors’ centers greeting visitors, taking them on tours, and managing the physical facilities. Six couples had missions that were considered unstructured, meaning that they were given general guidance from church leaders, known as mission presidents, at the start of their missions, but they were left to decide for themselves how to structure their day-to-day routines. Typically, these couples also had to provide their own housing and furnishings, whereas those with more structured missions tended to live in housing that was owned by the church and already furnished. Several couples emphasized these differences in their interviews. One couple who served a proselytizing mission in Bagio, Philippines, talked about the lack of structure in their mission, “When we first got there, the mission president said okay, we want you to help in these two [areas]...and help strengthen the congregations, and help the [young] missionaries. But there’s no guidelines. So we were, sort of, ‘okay, what do we do?’” Another couple who served a proselytizing mission in Buffalo, New York

talked about some of the things they weren't prepared for: "It would have helped if we'd known we had to furnish an apartment from scratch. We might have been able to be prepared a little better that way." One wife who served a proselytizing mission overseas commented, "It just stressed me right out of my mind that we didn't have definite things to do." Later, she and her husband were relocated to the office for their specific mission and were assigned to do clerical tasks, such as keeping track of finances and other records for the missionaries in that area. The wife described the difference: "It was much less stressful, because you got up and you knew you were going to be in this safe place, not, 'Where are we going to be out [proselytizing] today?' and 'What's going to come of this day?'"

Those couples whose missions had more structure seemed to enjoy having their days planned out. One couple who served a visitors' center mission at LDS Church-related history sites in Western New York detailed a typical day in their interview: "As site missionaries, we had a weekly schedule, so we would work at the sites, for 4-6 hours a day, and then we'd be off the rest of that evening." A wife who served a visitors' center mission to church history sites in Wyoming described her experience this way: "There were times when I thought, 'This is the greatest vacation.' Because it was structured, we knew where we had to be every day. Starting at 7:30 in the morning, and we just did not let those outside things interfere."

It was common for couples in both structured and unstructured missions to take on additional responsibilities that were not specifically outlined for them in their assignments. These assignments included volunteering at other facilities or performing in other church duties, as well as generating ideas about how existing assignments could be

improved upon. One wife who was serving a proselytizing mission explained that when she and her husband arrived in their area of service, they learned that the young missionaries needed visual aids when they went out teaching. “So the first project we did was take—we were able to get a box of pictures—and we had a scanner on our printer. And we scanned them, and we made a booklet for every missionary in those two zones (geographical areas used to organize missionaries),” she explained. A couple serving a structured mission at church history sites talked about some of the other things they were able to do beyond their regular assignments: “They had a sign-up list that you could sign up for different events that you could participate in, whether you wanted to do pony express or whether you wanted to do the handcart pull, which is pulling the handcarts up over the mountains to give the young women and the young men the experience of what it was like to have to push and pull a handcart...Those would be above and beyond what you'd normally do during the day.”

Adjustments

All couples reported that their living quarters were smaller than what they were used to. One wife who served a temple mission described her apprehension about living in a campground: “I wasn’t sure when we went out if I would like it. I really had apprehensions about where we were going to live.” Another couple who worked at church history sites described the adjustment of living in a trailer: “It did help us as far as give-and-take more. In the trailer, you can touch your kitchen table and the kitchen sink and reach the knob on the bathroom and have almost one foot in the bedroom. We had to work at finding spaces for things and making it so that it was comfortable.” For the most part, though, couples felt like the close quarters brought them closer together. A husband

who lived in a 24-foot trailer during his mission said, “I think it made us appreciate one another more. And we certainly learned a lot more about each another in those closer circumstances.” A wife described the transition from a fifth-wheel trailer to an apartment partway through her mission: “We were able to move into an apartment, which was still small, but it was—you know, when I wanted to talk to him, he was around the corner with walls separating us. I miss that closeness probably more than him because I could talk to him whenever I wanted.”

Table 3.

A description of each theme and subtheme, and what each captured during the mission.

Theme	Subtheme	Description
Type of mission	Structured	Included all missions where couples' schedules and duties were clearly outlined.
	Unstructured	Included all missions where couples' duties were generally outlined and scheduling was determined by them.
Adjustments	Living Conditions	Included adjustments made in regard to housing as well as climate.
	Cultural	Included adjustments made in regard to culture, including language barriers and socioeconomic differences between couple and surrounding culture.
Things Enjoyed	Social Interactions	Included all interactions with other people: peer relationships, intergenerational relationships, and interactions.
	Spiritual Benefits	Included perceived feeling of presence of God, direct blessings received for serving, indirect blessings to children for serving.
	Time Alone Together	Included time spent together, time spent away from children, isolation from the world.
Things Not Enjoyed	Being Away from Children	Included frustrations over missing events as well as concern for children while they were away from them.
	Health problems	Included all health problems mentioned, from mild to severe problems that hindered the couple.
	Time Was Not Productive	Included statements that the couple felt like they did not have enough to do, or they felt like they could be doing more.

Regardless of whether or not they retired immediately prior to or several years before serving a mission, they spent more time together during their mission than they ever had before. The main difference between structured and unstructured missions was that those in structured missions often reported that, while they were always in close proximity to their spouses, they may have separate assignments that did not require them to work directly with one another. A husband serving at a visitor's center explained what it was like when he and his wife were apart: "Sometimes I'd be in the back working, and she'd be out in the other room...And usually, there'd be a couple of hours we'd go see each other even if we weren't together."

By contrast, those in unstructured missions generally worked together on most of their assignments, as well as in the routine household things, such as driving and shopping. One wife described the adjustment of having her husband with her while shopping: "We would shop together. We went to Costco and Wal-Mart, and that was really hard for me to have him with me. It was hard to shop. Very unusual."

Most couples, regardless of where they were serving, reported some adjustments, either pleasant or unpleasant, to the climate: "One couple serving in the Philippines talked about the climate they served in: "And air conditioning is very important because it is very hot down there, all the time, 24 hours a day. They have two climates: hot and hotter." Another couple serving in Buffalo described the change in climate when they got to their mission: "Traveling across the country, it was February, and we were worried that we could run into bad weather. And we had beautiful weather all the way. We got to Buffalo, it was snowing, and it was pretty deep snow."

Eight of twelve couples reported dealing with cultural adjustments. For couples who were serving in a foreign country, the cultural adjustments were commonly tied to language barriers. “You have to live with someone who knows it fluently like the [young] missionaries. Each new missionary comes in and is assigned to an older, more experienced missionary who knows the language well...But, we didn’t have anyone, and I spent a lot of time in the English/Tagalog dictionary,” a husband who served in the Philippines explained. Included in this category were reports of adjusting to living and working with those of a lower socioeconomic status. This was common to both those serving in foreign countries and those serving in the United States, although usually to a lesser degree in the US. A husband serving a Filipino mission described seeing the poverty: “That was what was different for us, to see these people who lived with dirt floors, no electricity, no bathrooms, no garbage pickup. That part of it was really quite different for us.” A couple serving in an inner-city in the United States talked about going to church in a poverty-stricken area: “You had to ring the doorbell to get into the chapel because it was right around the corner from a homeless shelter, and they would walk in and find a new coat because the coat racks were out in front of the chapel.”

Things Enjoyed

Couples were asked the question, “What did you enjoy most about your mission?” The most frequent response to that question had to do with relationships built with other people. Nine of the twelve couples specifically mentioned that one of the things they enjoyed most was the relationships built with younger (19-23 year-old) missionaries. A wife who described proselyting with young missionaries as her favorite thing about her mission talked about working with them: “We just tried to help the missionaries. And

we'd go to the...meetings once a week with them. And they were sure cute. We really enjoyed the [young] missionaries." Couples often mentioned working with younger missionaries in either a supportive or a mentoring role. "[It] was really good for the sisters to see us together all the time. You know, that really helps them out, to strengthen them and support them. We kind of became their parents. We loved them and they loved us," said one husband who had worked closely with young female missionaries at a visitors' center. Another wife who served closely with sister missionaries described some of the activities they would do together: "We, on the 24th of July dressed up like Pioneers and had a breakfast for the sisters outside... And on Halloween, we dressed up in costumes and went around to each of the sisters' apartments."

Seven of the twelve couples mentioned peer relationships with other senior missionaries as one of their favorite things. For some, it was the social interaction. A wife who served with other couples in a temple mission in the Philippines described socializing with other couples when they were not working: "Mondays were...our day off, and the temple was closed. And we'd go shopping...In the morning, you go to the fresh market...And after that, we'd go to the grocery store, and after that, we'd go to the mall. We'd just all get together and just have a good time." Another wife who lived in close proximity with other couples described the experience: "It was just like being in college because you could hear them going to bed, and you could hear them talking and getting up...It's such a sense of community because you could hear all the noises and, "Oh, so-and-so's at the [name of another couple's] home." Her husband added, "Or if you're baking cookies then they'll just run up and say, 'Can I have some cookies?'"

Some couples enjoyed learning how much they had in common with other couple missionaries. One wife who worked closely with 12 other couples said, “There was such big groups of couples to socialize with, and one of the things that made me realize, we all have the same quirks and problems in our marriages...” Another wife described being able to share experiences with other couples: “I mentioned that we had had a daughter that had had an unfaithful husband, they go, ‘Well I do too,’ and someone else said, ‘Well I do too.’ And it’s just something you wouldn’t tell...but it was so nice that there were so many of them who had had similar problem situations and worked it out and helped them...And it was really interesting to not feel so alone, that somebody had had to deal with our same problems.”

Several couples mentioned that they enjoyed forming relationships with those they worked with who were not missionaries, and others mentioned satisfaction with a feeling of making an impact on the lives of others. A couple who served a mission helping with church humanitarian efforts described the relationships they made with those they worked with: “[Our mission] allowed us to meet people in the country. We met the head of the Peace Corps, we met the nurse for the peace corps. We were asked to be the warden for...our church group for the United States embassy there.”

Most of the couples mentioned that they enjoyed the closeness they felt to God as they perceived themselves to be doing what God wanted them to do. A wife who worked in a visitors’ center where there was a statue of Jesus Christ described that: “I sat at the feet of the Christus every day of my life for a year, and the spirit and the peace that I felt every day was incredible. It is something that...you don’t really experience every day of your life anywhere else like I did there.” Another wife who served a visitors’ center

mission at church history sites described the same thing. “For me the highlight of the...mission was...daily contact with feeling the spirit when you [talked] to people at the sites and things.”

Many cited examples of ways they felt God was blessing them for their efforts as missionaries. These blessings included good health and fortunate circumstances. A wife who served in Hawaii described an experience in which she got fleas, but reported, “I don't think I could have handled that, but I—I just got along fine with it...I just thought, I could not have been able to get through this if I didn't have that special blessing.” A wife in an inner-city area described feeling protected by God: “I always felt protected. We both said that that we were being watched out for.”

Many of those who had trouble leaving their children while they went on their missions said that they felt their children were blessed by God because they were serving missions. One couple described: “we really had unbelievable blessings. Our daughter who couldn't have children had a baby while we were gone.” Another wife attributed fortunate circumstances of her children to her service: “...I had three grandchildren that were—two in automobile accidents, and one was hit by a car while we were gone. And none of them seriously hurt. So, we were blessed by going.”

Six of the couples reported that they enjoyed being together, or that they enjoyed being together without the distractions of their daily lives. One couple serving in Hawaii described time they would spend together: “We had a special spot picked out where we saw the sunset. We would go out and eat dinner there...We had a lot of fun things that we did together like that.” A wife serving in western New York talked about things she and her husband would do together: “It was just basically the two of us and we were

away from family problems.... You leave so much of that behind, and you know it's going to all work out. And we bought bikes and we just did a lot of things with each other. I thought that was really fun." A husband serving overseas talked about enjoying the isolation he and his wife experienced: "And when we went home, we were like we were on a little island in a beautiful little villa all by ourselves. And I loved that privacy."

Many acknowledged that, prior to their missions, they were distracted by jobs, children, and leisure activities that kept them apart. One husband remarked, "As far as the stress of the mission, it wasn't really that much more for us because we were very well-adjusted, and we already had some little stresses at home with families and things, so, actually the missionaries and the context provided less stress than our home environment..." Some of the couples decided not to watch TV while they were on their missions. A couple in Hawaii talked about this decision: "We elected that we would not hook up the TV...so we never watched TV or listened to the radio or anything like that, so we were always together when we were home together. There wasn't other entertainment going on to take away from between us at all." Some couples, while acknowledging that that they missed their children also acknowledged that they enjoyed being isolated from them. One husband told a story about his mission in New York: "After we got out there I gave a little talk...and I said, 'I haven't told [my wife], but one of my main motivations [for going on a mission] was having her to myself.' So I got her for 6 months to myself, because when you're a mom and a grandma, that's still your primary focus."

Things Not Enjoyed

One of the main things couples reported not enjoying about serving missions was being away from their children. Specifically, couples complained about missing events in their children's lives, such as graduations, marriages, and births of grandchildren. One wife said, "It seemed like the beginning part...because we were so busy trying to learn everything, it didn't really bother me that much until I got into it a little ways, and then I really started missing my family." Couples also reported that they felt like they were unable to help their children with problems that arose. A wife who had served two missions said of her second mission: "We had one of our children really struggling in their marriage...And there was nothing we could do—just prayed and prayed. And miracles happened. They're a really strong little family now. And we just felt like that was another blessing of the mission." All couples reported frequent contact with their children and grandchildren through phone calls and e-mails, and seven of the couples had visits from children and/or grandchildren while they were on their missions.

Interestingly, although couples who reported that they missed their families on their missions, they also reported that they enjoyed the fact that they were removed enough from their children that they couldn't be involved in their lives. One wife said, "That was kind of one of the nice things, was to be away from our families and say, 'Sorry, you'll just have to work that out the best you can.'" Another couple described that same phenomenon: "You get pretty well distanced from [your children]. Enough that you can talk to them – you have a phone, you can talk to them anytime you want, but they were very much on their own, which is kind of a good thing."

Another thing couples reported that they did not enjoy about their missions was health problems. Ten of the twelve couples reported some health problems, ranging from bad hips to heart problems to diabetes. However, only six of the twelve couples reported health problems that affected their missions. A wife who worked with young missionaries described an experience when she tripped in their apartment: “I didn’t fall, but it just jarred me, and it tore my knee, and, so then it just got worse and worse and worse while we were there. And that was my biggest stress was just my health and the pain that I experienced there.” In only one case the health problems were severe enough that the couple had to leave their mission early in order to take care of them. Other couples reported general fatigue associated with being older. A wife who gave tours at church history sites described working long hours during a busy season: “We would come home at night, and just turn on the cooler on high and lay on our bed...Just absolutely wiped out...We were just feeling our age. We were just exhausted, really. It’s a lot of work.”

Both couples who served structured and unstructured missions complained about feeling unproductive at times on their missions. Couples reported times when there were lulls in their assignments, or times when they had trouble finding things to do. A wife who served in a visitors’ center mission greeting visitors as they came in said, “There were days when it was very quiet. There were very few visitors coming in, and, I would just get so tired, just sitting there...There were times when I’d just be sitting there for so long, and I’d just think, “I need to go do something else.” Another wife serving a mission that was much less structured said, “We were not very busy. We wanted to do much,

much more work than we did... We would have loved to have done tons more work than we were doing.”

Marital Themes

Because the initial research question related to how serving a mission together impacts a couple’s marriage, extra focus was given to those themes during coding.

Analyses of the the responses to the questions regarding marital relationships revealed four major themes: closeness, arguments, power, and stress. (See Table 3.) These dimensions were looked at specifically according to how the couples’ felt like they changed due to serving a mission together.

Table 4.

A description of marital themes and subthemes that were impacted on the mission and what each theme captured.

Theme	Description
Arguments	Included perceptions of frequency of arguments, conflict, disagreement, etc. that couples experienced before and during the mission, as well as types of things argued about and ways they dealt with disagreement.
Closeness	Included couples’ perceptions of how close they were before and during their missions. Included shared experiences, shared goals, time spent together
Power	Included couples’ perceptions of how they negotiate decisions and who is usually in charge.
Stress	Included things that were sources of stress for the couple prior to the mission.

Arguments

The theme of arguments included frequency of arguments before and after the mission, content of arguments, and how conflict was handled. Most couples reported that the content of their arguments did not change with the mission. As one husband put it,

“We’ve always gotten along, and so it wasn’t much difference whether we were here or there, or wherever.” However, several couples reported a difference in the way they handled conflict. One wife who served around young missionaries explained a change that happened between her and her husband: “I find that if I suggested something, he’d really snap back at me, and he did it right at the first when we were in the car with some [young missionaries], and I said, you know I’m not going to do this if you keep acting like that, so he quit.”

Because of the spiritual nature of their missions, several couples reported that they avoided getting into arguments with one another because they felt like it kept them from feeling the presence of God or the spirit, which they cited as being very important to feeling like they were good missionaries. A husband who served a visitors’ center mission said: “In order for me to have the spirit of the Lord on the mission, I didn’t want to have an argument with my wife and go in there with a real bad attitude because you take that with you, and people notice that...I remember going in there sometimes, and I did not have the right attitude, and it affected me.” A wife who served both a temple mission and a visitors’ center mission observed: “We found out early that we had to not harbor any negative feelings or the spirit [of the Lord] disappeared...I found that both of us, I’d see it more in him—that things that he used to be angry about or upset about, he doesn’t hold at all anymore...We really became very close on the mission because you can’t feel the spirit if you are antagonistic toward each other.” This same observation was made by a wife who served a temple mission: “The neat thing about being as a couple in the temple is, you know, if you’ve had something that you’ve disagreed on, you better have it resolved before you go in that temple because you shouldn’t be in there.”

Couples who cited spirituality as having an impact on their ability to resolve conflict without arguments all considered this to be something unique to the mission; spirituality did not keep them from arguing before or after their missions.

Closeness

Closeness included couples perceptions of how close they were before, during, and after their missions. Couples discussed shared experiences, shared goals, and the time they spent together. Only two couples felt like their closeness stayed the same. All others felt like they grew closer as a couple during their mission. When asked why, one husband explained, “Because we were doing a common experience. Facing whatever came along together, whether it was the hot humid weather, and we couldn’t sleep at night, or the people playing the music upstairs that was loud and raunchy until 2:00 in the morning.” Another husband observed: “You’re more, both in the same direction. You’re not pulling at each other. You’re going the same way.” A wife who served with her husband in a foreign country said, “I think, over there, though, because we were dependent on each other, I think we became closer.” A wife serving with her husband in the United States expressed a similar feeling: “You rely on each other because no one else understands. No one else has those feelings. You live and die with every problem.” Some couples cited increased proximity to one another in their living quarters as a reason for their increased closeness. Other couples also cited spirituality as affecting their closeness. They felt like their common goal of serving God brought them closer together. Their involvement in the same activities, rather than being an irritant, helped them build their relationship with one another. Other couples also cited their isolation from their children, work, and other interests as helping bring them closer together.

This concept was further illustrated as several couples described frustration that, upon coming home, they felt themselves being pulled away from one another again by responsibilities of family, work, and home. Some felt frustration at coming back into the “regular world” again. One husband explained, “We’re involved in the same way as a couple, but with a different emphasis.” A wife who lived with her husband in a small apartment on their mission observed that no longer being in such close proximity affected their closeness: “This house is so much bigger, and so we’re not together, and when we got home, it was hard. It was hard for me to not be with him constantly because we enjoyed it so much.”

Power

Power was defined as how couples negotiated responsibilities and who was in charge of what. Most couples did not cite one person or the other being in charge or wanting to be in charge in the marriage. One husband who had worked from home prior to his mission observed of his marriage: “It was just a joint effort, I would say, as opposed to one being dominant over the other one. We were unified.” Most reported that they mutually discussed things and came to decisions together. Others reported having separate duties over which each was in charge before and during the mission. However, three couples described having to learn how to negotiate in specific assignments when both wanted to be in charge. A wife who had to work with her husband to create schedules for temple workers observed: “I think that was the hardest part...Over the years, with five children at home, and our various church callings, I have become some[what] of a leader, and he in his position as [a university leader], always in administration, strong leader, and we both knew we were right. All the time.” Other

couples pointed out that, in some situations, their roles shifted. Because of her husband's eyesight, one wife found herself driving during the mission. Husbands reported helping with chores during the mission, a change from before their mission. A wife serving an unstructured mission expressed frustration with her husband over their different work styles: "I had to be the organizer, because he's kind of a studier, so he would be fine to just sit home and think he was doing good because he was studying all day, and I'm thinking, you know, we need to do more than that. So I just took over and planned and we got doing it."

Stress

Stresses were defined as things that caused couples strife prior to and during the mission. Most couples cited their top stresses prior to their mission as children, finances, and career troubles. Some couples found that those things carried over into the mission. One husband who retired very shortly before leaving on his mission said, "I had some stressful circumstances, too, that happened because of work. You know, carry-overs because of work. And, uh, it was very, very stressful. As a matter of fact, we had to come back for a week at one time during our mission to [our home city] to take care of some things." Most couples, however, as previously mentioned, explained that their missions were less stressful because they were isolated from things like their children and their typical concerns—such as career and house problems.

On the mission, other than those things previously listed that couples did not like about their missions, they felt stressed by the responsibility they felt about being missionaries, and whether or not they were doing what God expected of them. "The stress was can I be worthy of the Spirit today, or can I bring the right spirit into the

temple,” a wife who served a temple mission said. Other stresses included mission responsibilities that were out of the couples’ comfort levels. One couple serving a proselytizing mission explained that they were supposed to memorize scriptures as part of their assignments: “Both of us had a really hard time memorizing. My whole mission, I memorized one scripture.” However, the wife explained that she was able to compensate for this: “...I had to use a little cheat sheet...There were some scriptures listed...to refer to when we were teaching.” Another wife who was serving in small congregations explained that she was asked to speak on the spot, but had a hard time speaking in front of people, but compensated by writing talks in advance and having them ready to go: “...I didn’t like to talk...I prepared talks, and I had about 10 or 12 talks if somebody wanted me to talk, I’d say, “What would you like me to talk on?”

Advice

Couples were asked, “If you could give advice to a senior couple who was about to leave on a mission, what advice would you give them?” The majority of responses could be collapsed into three main responses. One of the top responses that couples gave was just to go on a mission. A couple who was concerned about their son getting married while they were gone gave this advice: “Don’t put off your mission because you’re always going to have things happen in your family that you’re going to miss. So whether you do it this year or the next year, it’s still gonna happen, so you might as well do it now while you’re still healthy.” Couples seemed to feel that too many seniors had apprehensions about serving missions that were best resolved if they put them aside and left.

Another major theme was the advice to be flexible or relax. Couples gave examples of things that occurred on their missions that they were not prepared for, such as illness, robbery, and change of assignments, which necessitated adjusting. Also, couples pointed out a need to be flexible in the way they dealt with other people. As one couple who had returned from serving a visitors' center mission with other couples said, "Just remember everybody's only human, and give everybody leeway."

The third piece of advice was for couples to prepare themselves to leave. Some couples felt like the distractions of home and family could keep them from being focused and enjoying the mission as much as they should. Some couples made the distinction between being physically prepared to leave on a mission, and being spiritually prepared. Physical preparation included taking care of the house and the family, while spiritual preparation included reading scriptures and studying the materials they were asked to study. One husband summarized it when he said, "A mission is like a rollercoaster: there's ups and downs, but in the end, it's a great ride." His wife added, "The ride is worth it."

Comparisons

As themes emerged in coding, a few patterns developed among those couples who gave certain common responses. Of the four couples who reported apprehension at being together the majority of the time, three of them were couples who retired shortly before serving a mission.

While only four of the twelve couples served outside of the United States, eight of them reported cultural adjustments. This suggests that there are cultural adjustments that couples make while serving a mission that are independent of language barriers. Most of

the couples interviewed were educated, and all were financially able to serve missions. Many of their assignments, whether overseas or in the United States, involved reaching out to populations that were uneducated and of a different socioeconomic status. For many of the couples, the places where they served were very different from their homes.

Those couples who did not mention relationships with younger missionaries as one of the enjoyable aspects of their missions tended to be those who did not serve closely with younger missionaries. Those who were serving temple missions tended to have less contact with younger missionaries than those who were serving in visitors' centers or proselyting, because young adults do not work in the temple as missionaries. Those who did not mention relationships with other senior missionaries as an enjoyable part of their missions tended to be those who did not serve closely with other senior missionaries. Half of the couples reported that their interactions with other senior couples were limited, due to the number of other couples in the area or the distance between them and the other couples.

Four of the couples who were interviewed were on either a second or third marriage. Three of those couples had been married 10 years or less. Couples who were in a second or third marriage did not report better or worse overall marital quality than those in first marriages. However, they tended to report less conflict over areas such as childrearing and finances. In addition, couples in a second or third marriage tended to cite blending families as one of their marital stressors.

While all couples reported missing their families, women tended to report missing their families more. Whether or not couples served structured or unstructured missions seemed to have no impact on how they perceived the mission's impact on their

marriage—although those who served unstructured missions seemed to have to work more at dividing labor associated specifically with missionary tasks. The places where couples served, whether it was abroad or in the country, also seemed also to have no impact on their perception of their marriage.

DISCUSSION

This study was a qualitative study of 12 couples who served LDS missions. The study examined the impact that serving a couples' mission had on those couples' marriages, looking at both marital quality and marital processes. In general, couples reported that fewer arguments, more closeness, increased ability to negotiate division of labor, less stress, and increased ability to handle stress. The results of this study suggest that, no matter where and in what capacity couples serve missions, they seem to have fairly similar experiences, particularly as it related to their marital relationships. Couples had factors that affect their decision to serve a mission, such as career and family concerns. Couples tended to have adjustments to housing and culture, whether they were serving in a foreign country or not. Couples tended to enjoy the relationships they build with the people they meet on their missions more than anything else, particularly intergenerational relationships. They also enjoyed being together, despite apprehension about spending all of their time together for possibly the first time in their marriages. They also enjoyed the feeling of being close to God and felt like they were blessed for their service.

The finding that couples enjoyed intergenerational relationships formed while serving is consistent with findings by Jirovek and Hyduk (1998) that volunteerism is

positively related to contentment with life when it is intergenerational in nature. Several of the couples reported interacting with younger missionaries like they would their own children, which is consistent with the findings of Greenfield and Marks (2004) that volunteerism can lessen the negative feelings associated with role-identity absences associated with later-life. Volunteering as missionaries gave senior couples the opportunity to fill a parental role again.

Couples did not enjoy problems that they had with their health, or the feeling that they were not being productive. The conflict over feeling unproductive in volunteer studies is consistent with Erickson's (1950) stages of psychosocial development, which cites a conflict between generativity and stagnation during middle and later life.

As far as their marriages went, the couples reported low levels of conflict to begin with, which tended to decrease with mission service. Couples also reported high levels of closeness, which also tended to increase with mission service. This is consistent with findings by Levenson, Carstensen, and Gottman (1993) that couples in later life (60-70 years old) tend to experience more pleasure and less conflict than mid-life couples and newlyweds. The positive effect that couples perceived their volunteering had on their marriages was consistent with findings by Kulik (2002) that couples who both volunteer tend to feel that their marriages benefit more than couples where only one or neither spouse volunteered. No study on volunteerism in later life has looked at assignments as time-consuming, but for these couples, the amount of time volunteered did not seem to have a negative impact on their life or marital satisfaction.

The couples reported that their major sources of stress before their missions were their children, retirement/career issues, and their finances. This is consistent with

findings by Henry, Miller, and Giarusso (2005) that married people in later-life report finances, relationships with their children, and retirement among the most common problems they disagreed about. The nature of a mission seems to act as a buffer against these problems. Couples who serve missions do so because they are financially able, and they leave behind children and career issues. Couples reported enjoying being isolated from these problems. The most common problem later-life couples reported in the Henry, et. al. (2005) was leisure time. Senior missionary couples rarely reported problems with leisure time—most likely because serving a mission requires that couples agree that they are going to spend their time doing volunteer work.

It was hypothesized that time spent together and close proximity would cause conflict between couples due to an increase in daily hassles. Couples did not report significant stress due to daily hassles of married life during their missions. In fact, couples reported more closeness as a result of time spent together, as well as proximity. Harper, Schaalje and Sandberg (2000) found that intimacy between spouses acted as a mediating variable between daily hassles and marital quality, which seems a plausible explanation for why couples did not report more stress due to daily hassles. Couples expressed more closeness, or intimacy, during their missions, due in part to the time spent together, as well as to being united in a common goal. One husband talked about observing this phenomenon, “...We recognized that in the other couples that we worked with, so when we got together, you feel like you are truly battle-hardened, and I think that’s part of the challenges of mortality is dealing with those types of things, and the uniqueness of the marriage relationship is that you have one another to work together

through those problems.” There was a sense among couples that they were putting trust in God to take care of them.

Intimacy between spouses, as well as the couple’s perceived spirituality, also appears to have acted as a buffer against missing their children. Couples cited examples of their children learning to work things out for themselves, and their children’s life quality improving while they were on their missions. It was interesting to see that the couples perceived that the factors that affected whether or not they chose to serve missions as being either forgotten or taken care of during their missions.

One interesting feature of this study was that one-third of the participants were in a second or third marriage. Three of the couples were widowed on both sides and, when asked, reported that there were things that they did not have to deal because it was a second marriage, such as raising children. In addition, those in second marriages reported that they went into the second marriage knowing what they wanted, which made adjustment to one another easier.

Limitations

One limitation to this study was that interviews were conducted retrospectively. Couples were already home from their missions by the time they were interviewed and may have responded differently than they would have while going through the experience. Rosenblatt and Fisher (1993) point out that, with qualitative interviews, researchers run the risk of “selective memory, self-presentation biases, and inability or unwillingness to articulate some things,” (p. 175). A follow-up study that looks at couples while they are actually going through the experience of a mission might yield a more accurate picture of that experience.

Another limitation to this study was that the nature of serving a couple's mission presupposes that couples have a high level of marital quality. Couples who do not enjoy one another's company would tend not to choose volunteer opportunities that would bring them together 24-hours a day. Another limitation to this study was a lack of diversity. Because couples fund their missions themselves, those who participated in the study were all fairly well-off financially. In addition, all of the participants in this study were Caucasian.

Clinical Implications

This study was an exploratory study designed to find out more about a particular group of people. Further studies could include more empirically based data collection, such as administering a marital quality assessment or a relationship assessment prior to a couple beginning a mission, during service, and then after their service was complete. A similar qualitative study could be done with couples who volunteer in other capacities, particularly those which are not religiously-based, to explore the effects of volunteerism that are unrelated to perceived religious benefits.

The findings about how older couples perceived their marriages are particularly informative for clinicians. Clinicians working with older couples who are contemplating an intense volunteering experience, such as a religious mission, or a humanitarian trip, can report that most couples find that such an experience enhances their relationship. Clinicians may find that such couples may be apprehensive about spending so much time together, but the results of this study are reassuring.

The couples interviewed were eager to talk about the positive things going on in their marriages, but they were reluctant to talk about negative things going on in their

relationships. Miller, Yorgason, Sandberg, and White (2003) observed that older couples (60+) are less likely to present in therapy than newlyweds or midlife couples. The youngest participant in this study was 62. The findings of this study are consistent with the idea that older couples have a harder time talking about their marriages, especially in negative ways. However, this study is also consistent with other findings (Carstensen, et.al., 1993; Levenson, et.al., 1993) that older couples tend to have fewer arguments in later life as it is.

However, clinicians can expect that, if couples in later-life present in therapy, they may be struggling with issues involving their children, retirement, or money. The couples in the study reported these as problems prior to their missions. Isolation from these issues during their missions seemed to have a positive impact on their missions, as well as the extra time couples spent together. A clinician could encourage later-life couples to become more differentiated with their children, and to focus more of their attention on one another—whether or not they are retired. Spirituality seems to act as a buffer against these problems, and clinicians might find that those couples who are involved in religious or spiritual practices are likely to report more closeness and fewer arguments than those who are not. Clinicians may also take a less direct approach to getting couples to talk about the problems in their marriages by focusing on expected problem areas such as children or money, rather than asking later-life clients directly about what is going on in their marriages.

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Appendix A

Demographics

- Where are you from?
- Age
- Number of years married
- Do you have children? How many?
- Are you retired? How many years?
- Describe your daily routines prior to your mission? Did wife work?

Mission Questions

- Type of mission served
- Where did you serve your mission? How did it compare to your home?
- What were some typical tasks for you?
- Walk me through a typical day.
- What made you decide to serve a mission?
- What did you enjoy most about your mission?
- How much time did you spend together as a couple on your mission?

Marriage Questions

- Have you ever been in marital counseling?
- Describe your marriage prior to your mission. Highs and lows/strengths and weaknesses.
- How is it now that you're home?
- What were some ways in which the mission impacted your marriage?
- Did you experience more or fewer arguments while on your mission?
- How would you describe your closeness as a couple before, after, and during your mission?
- What were some of the things you argued about before the mission? Were they different from things you argued about during the mission?
- What were the hardest things in regards to your relationship about serving a mission?
- What do you think your strengths were as a couple on the mission? Weaknesses?
- Were there some rough times on your relationship during your mission? Why? How did you deal with it? Was this different from the way you dealt with rough times prior to the mission?
- If you had to give advice to a senior couple about to leave on their mission, what would it be?

Consent to be a Research Subject

Introduction

This is a research study conducted by Megan Oka, Brigham Young University master's student in marriage and family therapy, to explore the experience of LDS senior missionary couples. You were selected because you have returned from serving a couple's mission in the last 12 months.

Procedures

You will be asked to complete a form about yourselves and your mission. You will then be interviewed as a couple for approximately one hour. Questions will be asked about your life before, during, and after your mission. Topics will include daily routines, challenges, and marital stresses. You will also be asked one additional question individually. You may be contacted after the interview and asked additional questions. The interview will be recorded with a digital recorder and transcribed using Microsoft Word.

Risks/Discomforts

Risks to you will be minimal. However, some of the questions may cause emotional discomfort, as they will require you to talk about memories that may be linked to strong positive or negative emotions.

Benefits

There will be no direct benefits to you. However, it is hoped that this research project will help other researchers understand the experience of senior missionary couples. In addition, it is hoped that recalling experiences from your mission will be pleasant for both you and the researcher.

Confidentiality

All information provided will be confidential. Your name and personal information will be kept separate from the interview and transcripts. All material will be locked in a file cabinet, and the only person who will have access to it will be the primary researcher. The audio files will be destroyed following transcription. Transcripts will be kept until the project is finished, and will be destroyed at the conclusion (August 2007).

Participation

Participation in this research study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at anytime, to decline to answer any question, or to refuse to participate entirely.

Questions about the Research

If you have any questions about this study, you may contact the primary researcher, Megan Oka, at (801)597-3001, mo47@byu.edu.

Questions about your rights as research participants

If you have questions you do not feel comfortable asking the researcher, you may contact Dr. Renea Beckstrand, IRB Chair, (801)422-3873, 422 SWKT, renea_beckstrand@byu.edu.

I have read, understood, and received a copy of the above consent and desire of my own free will to participate in this study.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix C

Information Form

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone Number: _____

E-mail: _____

Age: ____

Race: White Black Hispanic Asian Other

Number of years married: ____

Do you have children: Yes/No

 If yes, how many?

 Are any of them living at home? Yes/No

What is your highest level of education? (Circle one)

High school Some college Associate's Degree

Bachelor's Degree Graduate or Professional Degree

What is/was your career? _____

Are you retired? _____

 If yes, how many years?

Do you have health problems? Please list them.
