Experiencing Religious Change:

Latter-day Saint Women's Perceptions of Church Policy Changes and their Impact

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Defended April 3, 2020

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABSTRACT

This honors thesis examines how women in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints understand and experience policy changes occurring in the Church, specifically in how they relate to their position as members of a traditionalist religious institution. Past research on traditionalist women has relied upon the victim/empowerment paradigm, which tends to ignore the complex theological worldviews women engage in when navigating their religious and social lives. This thesis used qualitative interviews with seventeen current and former female members of the Church to analyze their ideas and experiences in a non-reductionist way. The results showed that women tended to be satisfied with the gender-segregated roles in the Church due to an acceptance of doctrine that preaches essentialized differences between men and women, as well as conceptualizing their religious duties as service, rather than status symbols. These women understood religious change through four rational frameworks: the "living church," "global church," "women-focused," and "critical" explanations. Participants reported using two main strategies to cope with inconsistencies in the doctrine, called the "separation strategy" and the "eternal perspective." Overall, these women were generally appreciative of the changes happening in the Church, which they saw as evidence of the patriarchal hierarchy acknowledging their experiences. Women's positionality was not a factor that caused many to struggle with their faith; however, for some the LGBTQ+ policy changes were a tipping point that led them to disassociate from the Church. This project seeks to amplify Latter-day Saint women's voices and to better understand their experiences in the context of change within traditionalist religions.

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INTRODUCTION

Religious traditionalism—also known as religious conservatism—is defined as religious doctrine that emphasizes traditional practices (Dagger 2018). Traditionalist religions tend to align with conservative political ideologies regarding abortion and homosexuality and are often slower to assimilate to mainstream culture (Roberts and Yamane 2016). Examples of traditionalist religions include evangelical Christianity, Jehovah's Witnesses, Southern Baptists, and Latter-day Saints (Roberts and Yamane 2016). Past research has looked at the ways these religions adapt in response to an ever-progressing society (Cragun et al. 2016; Finnigan and Ross 2013; Iannaccone and Miles 1990; Mauss and Barlow 1991; O'Dea 1957; Riess 2019c; Roberts and Yamane 2016). Much of the literature has focused on The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as a site of social progress and assimilation.

In recent years, the Church has undergone a phase of rapid policy changes which could be viewed as "progressive," opening up more opportunities for its female and LGBTQ+ members. Thus, due to the Church's designation as a traditionalist Christian sect, and the timeliness of these policy changes, it serves as a unique focal point to examine how changes made by a patriarchal hierarchy affect the lives of women in the Church.

Research on traditionalist women has typically relied on a dichotomous framework of analysis which positions women as either victims or empowered (Hoyt 2007). There is a need for a body of literature that understands traditionalist women as individual actors engaged in complex theological worldviews (Hoyt 2007). Therefore, this study is important because it aims to create a complex space through which traditionalist women can be better understood.

This study will focus on The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints[1]—colloquially known as "Mormons" or "LDS"[2]— looking specifically at how policy adaptations affect its female members. This thesis aims to contribute to the sociological study of women in traditionalist religions in a non-reductionist way through qualitative analysis of interviews with typical[3] Latter-day Saint women. In order to create a "complex space," this study relied on *grounded theory* methods (Charmaz 1996) to analyze and interpret the ideas and experiences reported by current and former Latter-day Saint women.

This thesis project is rooted in social constructionist theory, which "focuses on the processes by which individuals create and internalize the cultural worlds they inhabit" (Roberts and Yamane 2016:99). In other words, social constructionism posits that individuals create their "cultural worlds" through their interactions with others and institutions. This paper will explore

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[1] The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was founded in 1830 by Joseph Smith Jr. in Fayette, New York ("History of the Church" 2011). Today, members of the Church make up about 2% of the U.S. population (Pew Research Center).

[2] During the 2018 Annual General Conference, the current Church President, Russell Nelson, urged members to refrain from calling the Church by nicknames, such as "Mormons" or the abbreviation "LDS," and instead stressed using the Church's full name (Gardiner 2019). For this reason, this paper refers to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints by its full name, or by approved abbreviations such as "the Church" or "Church of Jesus Christ," and to its members as "Latter-day Saints" as specified in their style guide ("Name of the Church" 2010).

[3] In this paper, "typical" refers to members of the Church who do not occupy high-level leadership positions, such as General Young Women's or Relief Society presidencies, who fall within typical Latter-day Saint demographics, and who do not belong to any Church-centered activist groups.

Latter-day Saint women's meaning-making processes and how their ways of understanding gender are influenced Church doctrine and leaders. Two guiding research questions are:

1. How do Latter-day Saint women conceptualize their gendered roles, power status, and agency in the Church, specifically within the context of a progressing society?

2. How do they understand religious change, and how does it affect their experiences as women in the Church?

In the following pages, I will begin by reviewing the existing literature on traditionalist women and change within traditionalist institutions, specifically The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The next section will describe the methods used in this study and the process of analyzing interviews with Latter-day Saint women. Following that will be an analysis of the results of those interviews and a discussion on the implication of those findings. I will conclude with my final thoughts on this study and review the limitations and possible future directions of the research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study aims to build upon and contribute to the vast body of literature on traditionalist women and religious change. This section will begin by reviewing the existing work on traditionalist women, followed by some brief context establishing The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as a traditionalist Christian sect. Afterwards, I will review the existing literature on change within traditionalism, specifically how the Church's sectarian retrenchment influences the way it navigates change. Finally, this section will conclude by demonstrating the need for this research and explain the purpose of this study in the context of the existing body of work.

Women in Traditionalism

Existing research on women in traditionalist religions has grappled with the paradigm of victimization versus empowerment. According to Hoyt, the victim/empowerment paradigm refers to a way of understanding traditionalist women as being either victims of an oppressive system or empowered through their traditional roles (2007:92). She argues for the creation of "complex spaces" where these women can be better understood by scholars (Hoyt 2007:90). In other words, there is a need for a body of scholarship on religious women which is non-reductionist and avoids dichotomous analysis. An example of this reductionist thinking is the commonly-held belief that women are unwilling victims of traditionalist religions and that they are either powerless or ignorant; alternatively, the belief that women participate in traditionalist religions with the goal of inciting internal resistance, or because they feel personally-empowered performing traditional feminine roles. Both viewpoints are overly simplistic and reinforce sexist gender norms. Hoyt argues that relying on the victim/empowerment paradigm ignores the complex theological worldviews traditionalist women are engaged in and "obscures the theological motivations that guide their lives" (Hoyt 2007:93). Thus, researchers must move beyond simplistic explanations in order to understand religious women as subjects, rather than objects, of their belief systems.

Nevertheless, much of the existing research on traditionalist women still reproduces the dichotomous belief system of victimization versus empowerment. For example, Sumerau and Cragun looked at the ways which religious leaders construct "sacred gender norms" and the consequences they may have on reproducing inequality (2015:50). They argue that women's disempowered position within religious institutions and the construction of femininity as "sacred" and "inherently moral" works as a deceptive form of marginalization known as *benevolent sexism* (Sumerau and Cragun 2015). According to Toscano, benevolent sexism "seems to privilege women on one level as spiritually superior creatures… [yet] it deprives women of full moral agency by assuming their nature is mostly good" (2007:22). Other research assumes that the constrictive expectations placed on traditionalist women thwarts their personal ambitions, sometimes leading to dissatisfaction and depression (Lawless 1984). By focusing only on the ways women can be marginalized, researchers ignore the many facets of religious traditions that uplift females. This kind of one-way analysis frames Latter-day Saints and other traditionalist women as victims, even though many of them would not consider themselves to be so (Hoyt 2007).

Studies have looked at the methods used by Latter-day Saint women to reconcile their conservative beliefs within a more progressive environment. Some women demonstrate

gendered resistance[4] in their everyday lives by subverting traditional gender performances (Leamaster and Einwohner 2018:165). For example, many women choose to work outside the home despite religious pressures to stay home to raise their children. Others reinterpret the husband's traditional role as the "head of household" as a shared responsibility of both parents (Beaman 2001). Some also interpret priesthood as a shared power, rather than belonging to men alone (Beaman 2001). Lastly, many women have de-conflated their spirituality from the patriarchal system as a way to "reconcile their commitment to their faith and the distaste for church policies… [which] minimize the role of women" (Beaman 2001:83). Beaman writes about the practice of *cognitive restructuring* by which women deal with inequalities in the Church through "reinterpreting their environment and adjusting their responses to it… to maintain their self-esteem without abandoning their religious beliefs" (Beaman 2001: 66).

Considering the existing research on traditionalist women, it is clear that the victim/empowerment paradigm informs much of how these women are understood. This study addresses that fallacy by contributing to a body of literature which seeks to better understand traditionalist women and the ways they navigate society through complex worldviews. The following pages will provide context on The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as a focal point for examining this broader issue.

The Church

As a conservative faith, the Church of Jesus Christ values traditional family structures and encourages the nuclear family, as is outlined in the Church's 1995 *The Family: A Proclamation to the World*. According to the Proclamation, "gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose" ("The Family" 1995). Latter-day Saints' belief in the Church's "plan of salvation", or God's plan for the afterlife, entails a gospel of eternal families in which couples who are married and "sealed"[5] in the temple with their children, will ultimately be reunited as a family unit after death (Sumerau and Cragun 2015). The Church espouses essentialist ideas about the "natural" differences between men and women, who are expected to perform their divine roles in order to obtain salvation (Sumerau and Cragun 2015). The Proclamation states that women are primarily responsible for the care of children, while men are expected to be the breadwinners for their families ("The Family" 1995). Historically, the Church officially encouraged women to be stay-at-home mothers with many children and without employment outside the home; however, as the Church has evolved it no longer officially endorses that preference (Iannaccone and Miles 1990, Leamaster and Einwohner 2018).

The Church of Jesus Christ is led by a male prophet who is believed to receive direct revelation from God (Cragun, Merino, Nielsen, Beal, Stearner, and Jones 2016). The Church is structured as a patriarchal hierarchy with the prophet as acting president at the head of the Church, followed by his counselors and apostles (Cragun et al. 2016). At the local level, wards

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[4] It should be noted that gendered resistance can take on many different forms. For instance, the "Mormon Feminist" movement has taken a more overt approach through several activist campaigns, such as the Wear Pants to Church Day event and the Ordain Women movement organized by feminist Kate Kelly (Finnigan and Ross 2014). These forms of peaceful protest among Latter-day Saint women are considered extreme, as evidenced by Kelly's excommunication in 2014. The women in this study did not endorse these more extreme forms of gendered resistance.

[5] "Sealing" is a central part of Latter-day Saints' marriage endowment ceremony and is an essential part of Church members' belief in the afterlife. (*The Family, 1995).*

(congregations) are structured similarly, and all of the leadership positions are filled by men. Women occupy subordinate leadership positions in General Auxiliary presidencies, consisting of the Relief Society (adult women's group), the Primary (children's group), and the Young Women's group. The reason for this structure is because only men are bestowed the priesthood (God's power given to men on earth), which gives them the authority to act on God's will, assign callings[6] to ward members, perform healings, and make decisions on behalf of the Church (Cragun et al. 2016). Female members do not receive the priesthood; however, they have access to blessings given through male priesthood holders. Women's ability to bear children is often regarded as the female equivalent to priesthood power (Hoyt 2007). The Church's gender-segregated, patriarchal structure is contrary in many ways to the ideals of broader Western society. The following paragraphs will discuss the ways in which the Church is beginning to move away from such rigid gender systems, and why the Church deemed such changes necessary.

Change

The Church's designation within Troeltsch and Weber's church-sect typology[7] is somewhat controversial. Many Latter-day Saints would argue that the Church should be considered its own denomination; however, scholars argue that the Church has evolved into an entrenched sect due to "sectarian stagnation," or the slowed progression down the path to becoming a church (Roberts and Yamane 2016:182, Mauss and Barlow 1991:400). Sects are considered a kind of *closed system,* characterized by the rejection of secular society and upholding substantial commitment mechanisms (Roberts and Yamane 2016:174). O'Dea noted these peculiar characteristics in *The Mormons*, saying "separateness encouraged innovation, innovation in return increased separateness by providing a creedal basis for evolving peculiarity" (1957:54). This tendency to withdraw from society is a key feature of sects that serves to retain membership (Iannaccone and Miles 1990). Mauss and Barlow acknowledge that the Church has done a lot to assimilate into mainstream American culture within the past century; however, they argue that in recent years it has followed a pattern of retrenchment, or a reemphasis of fundamentalist teachings which set them apart from mainstream Christianity. In doing so, the Church of Jesus Christ has resisted assimilation by increasing sectarian tension and slowing their progress towards churchdom, making them a unique outlier to Troeltsch and Weber's church-sect model (Mauss and Barlow 1991:402).

In an entrenched sect, changes to essential doctrine can create cognitive dissonance within individual members (Dunford and Kunz 1973). The desire to stand out has led the Church to stand by its values and resist change. Mauss and Barlow theorize that change can create cognitive dissonance because many policies are understood to come directly from God, who is believed to be omnipotent. Changes that bring the Church in line with broader society erode the commitment mechanisms that appeal to so many members. In other words, "the one true church is beginning to look like a lot of other true churches" (Mauss and Barlow 1991:404). This suggests that the Church's sect-like structure makes it difficult to change doctrines that have been declared "eternal truths." A 1990 article by Iannaccone and Miles studied change within The Church of Jesus Christ in response to first- and second-wave feminist movements, and

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[6] Voluntary job positions in the Church
[7] The church-sect typology refers to a process theorized by Troeltsch and Weber to explain the transition of new religious movements into established churches (Roberts and Yamane 2016).

demonstrated how the Church has shown increased acceptance of changes in women's roles over time, resulting in increased membership rates (Iannaccone and Miles 1990:1245). Thus, the authors argue that "[exercising] flexibility in practice while maintaining purity of doctrine… gives the individual member a means of reconciling the conflict between the religious ideals and the behaviors rewarded by society" (Iannaccone and Miles 1990:1245). The Church is caught in a balance between *accommodation* and *intransigence*, an "inevitable dilemma," in which it must remain distinctive in order to retain its membership and credibility as a divinely-guided organization, while, at the same time, responding to members' changing needs so as to avoid membership alienation (Iannaccone and Miles 1990:1232).

Over the past two years, Church leaders announced many changes to policy and practice. At the start of 2019 they released a statement on temple practices, saying that there would be changes to the language and conduct of the endowment ceremony (Gardiner 2019), the Church's ultimate sacrament.[8] While the statement did not detail the changes, other sources reported that the ceremony would include more gender-inclusive language and a shortened overall duration (Riess 2019b; Stack and Noyce 2019). In fall of 2019, Nelson announced a change that would allow all baptized members of the Church—including women and children as young as eight years old—to serve as witnesses for baptisms and temple sealings[9], a position previously reserved for priesthood holders (Weaver 2019b). The General Young Women's President also announced that there would be changes made to the Young Women's theme (mission statement) to take on a more personal affirmative tone (Walker 2019). There have been many other changes to Church policy and practice, but these examples are of primary focus because they deal directly with gender-related issues.

According to official Church outlets, the rationale for the policy changes is to help in the process of restoring the gospel ("How Did the Church Change" 2018). Church leaders have said there will be many more changes ahead and have likened these changes to "a snowflake in a snowstorm" of what is to come (Arkell 2019, Pugmire 2018). Non-church affiliated outlets have speculated that these changes are more methodical than randomly-inspired revelation. According to some, these changes occurred in response to a broader cultural shift (Riess 2019a; Hale 2019; Lesley 2019). For example, in 2015, an LGBTQ+ exclusion policy was implemented in response to the Supreme Court *Obergefell* ruling which legalized gay marriage. The 2015 policy made it so children of same-sex parents would not be allowed to be baptized or receive blessings given to infants, on the presumed basis that the Church leadership did not want what the children learned at church to conflict with their parents' lifestyle (Weaver 2019a). This change was met with strong public backlash and was reversed four years later, along with a change that declared that homosexuality, in and of itself, would no longer be considered apostasy (Weaver 2019a; Riess 2019a). These examples suggest that is the Church of Jesus Christ is slowly assimilating itself to become more in line with secular society. This pattern of changes demonstrates an ever-increasing emphasis on women's empowerment and LGBTQ+ rights. The fact that the temple endowment ceremony—a central sacrament and prerequisite to Latter-day Saints' ascension in the afterlife—now positions women as equals to men in relation to God suggests an evolution in the ways women's roles have changed. The wording changes to the Young Women's theme and

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[8] The endowment ceremony is a sacred ordinance that takes place in Latter-day Saint temples, as well as sealings and marriage sacraments (Riess 2019b).

[9] Eight-year old children can bear witness to baptisms; however, only currently-endowed members can witness temple sealings, which are usually adults (Weaver 2019b).

the change allowing women to serve as baptismal witnesses demonstrates that the Church's leadership has actively searched for ways to expand women's participation and recognition. Lastly, though the intention behind the initial 2015 LGBTQ+ policy changes is a bit harder to discern and indicated a step away from society, the policy reversal in 2019 indicates a growing acceptance of queer members and supports the overall assimilation to societal norms.

Religious and sociological scholars have analyzed these changes within the context of broader socio-cultural shifts. In *The Next Mormons,* Riess reiterates Mauss and Barlow's theory that Church members "exist in a state of tension between desire to accommodate their host culture and a simultaneous need to stand apart as a peculiar people" (Riess 2019c:234). The Church must decide how far they will assimilate in order to retain younger members, whose views on social issues have evolved substantially from previous generations (Riess 2019c). Non-affiliated news outlets also speculate that these progressive changes, like shortened Sunday meetings and allowing female missionaries to wear pants instead of requiring skirts or dresses, are an attempt to appeal to Millennial and Generation Z members and to retain their affiliation (Hale 2019; Lesley 2019; Riess 2019a; Stack 2019). By loosening restrictive commitment mechanisms, the Church may be trying to stop an outflux of younger members.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is currently in a unique position of modernization. Its sectarian qualities make navigating change theologically challenging as Church leaders face pressures to both progress along with broader society and, at the same time, remain true to the Church's traditional orthopraxy. The Church has already begun to change in interesting ways, particularly regarding its gender dynamics. A question that remains for analysis: just how much further is it likely to go?

Purpose

Religious change is a common topic in Latter-day Saint academic literature; however, there is lack of qualitative data regarding this most recent set of changes—specifically their impact on individual members. This is due, in part, to the recentness of this current wave of policy changes. There have been new announcements made throughout the course of this thesis project – such as the change allowing women to serve as baptismal witnesses, which was announced in October 2019. Not enough time has passed for there to be substantial theoretical work on the impact of these specific changes. Another reason for the lack of research can be attributed to the Church's sectarian nature, which still holds much privacy around the details, motivations, and processes that led to these changes. Therefore, this work relies heavily on research done on the history of changes in the Church. This thesis intends to serve as a foundation for future longitudinal studies to follow the long-term impact of changes happening now. This study offers the valuable perspective of the present tense when reflecting on changes that occurred during the data collection period, where many women were able to give their firsthand reactions to recent announcements.

Due to the patriarchal structure of the Church, there are few official outlets for typical female members to voice their experiences. Therefore, there is a lack of formal writing by and about women in the Church. As discussed earlier, much of the literature on Latter-day Saint women utilizes a victim/empowerment model, which reduces and oversimplifies women's actual experiences. This study aims to give an accurate account of the objective experiences faced by women in the Church, to serve as a "complex space" in which Latter-day Saint women can be understood, and to analyze the implications of these changes on the future of the Church.

Through qualitative interviews with current and former Latter-day Saint women, this study will build upon the existing scholarship and contribute new insights and analyses to the body of work. The following section will explain the study procedures and methods of analysis used in this study.

METHODS

This study used qualitative interviews to collect ideas from typical Latter-day Saint women whose lives may be the most impacted by changes to recent Church policy and practice. Interviews were analyzed using grounded theory methods in order to understand the worldviews and experiences these women were facing. The following section describes the sample of women who were interviewed, how the interviews were conducted, and what the analysis process looked like.

Sample

I, Kathryn Halverson, conducted seventeen open-ended interviews with women who were current and former members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Interviewees were between the ages 23 to 70, residing in the United States. Almost all of the interviewees were born and raised in the Church, although two had converted during their early adulthood/late adolescence. Fifteen were current active members of the Church and the remaining two were former members, one of whom had been disaffiliated for ten years, the other for five. Of the fifteen active members, three were categorized as "dissident" because they expressed attitudes that were more critical of the Church than other active respondents.

This interview sample is not representative of the overall Latter-day Saint and former member populations. Most were middle-class, many were college-educated, and all but one were White. Participants were all residing in the American West, located in Colorado, Utah, Texas, and Arizona. The purpose of this research was to give a glimpse into a typical Latter-day Saint woman's perspective, and I have avoided drawing conclusions about the Latter-day Saint population in general. This brings up an interesting question for future research to examine whether the results of this study are similar to attitudes of the broader Latter-day Saint population, and what new ideas might come about from a more diverse sample.

Recruitment

Most interview subjects were people I knew personally or individuals from whom I had one degree of separation. Referrals were obtained using snowball sampling. At the end of each interview, I asked participants to refer other women they knew who would also be willing to be interviewed. Several of the original participants were able to provide a list of women who were later contacted. Interviewees were contacted via email or text message with some general background information about the study and, if they were interested, sent more clear instructions via email.

Format

Fourteen interviews were conducted in-person, two were over the phone, and one via FaceTime video call. In-person interviews took place at participants' homes or in another agreed-upon location, such as a café or library. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes to two hours, at an average of about one hour. I obtained IRB approval to record interviews after obtaining participants' written consent. The consent form template can be found in Appendix 1. Interviews were recorded using an audio recording software, *Audacity*, and then transcribed manually using

a computer program called *Transcriber*. Transcripts were de-identified and assigned a label based on the individual's location, age, convert status, and activity. To maintain confidentiality, all quotes are cited anonymously in this paper. Interview numbers are provided to connect individual ideas expressed. Of the seventeen participants, ten are quoted in this paper. Quotes were chosen based on clarity and the extent to which they were able to express common themes among all of the interviews.

Interviews were open-ended, covering subjects such as gender roles, callings, and religious change. Example interview questions include: *What do you believe is the purpose of religious change?* and *What is your role as a woman in the Church?* A full interview guide can be found in Appendix 2.

The interview template changed slightly as time went on and certain subjects revealed themselves to be more pertinent to the research. A separate guide was used in interviews with former members, with questions phrased in the past tense in order to reflect on their experiences as members in comparison to the present. I often deviated somewhat from the question order on the guide based on the direction of conversation; however, I aimed to solicit an answer to each question in every discussion. Because the intent of this research was not to draw conclusions about the broader Latter-day Saint population, I did not ask demographic questions about race, occupation, or socioeconomic status. This kind of information was considered only if it came up in conversation, and through observations made during in-person interviews. Participants were asked to provide their age in case there was any clear differences among age cohorts; however, no such trends were found (likely because of the narrow distribution of ages and lack of representativeness).

Analysis

Interviews were coded based on a set of overarching themes that emerged throughout the data collection process and identified during the analysis phase. First, a set of general themes were identified based off of the topics that came up in each of the interviews, loosely related to the types of questions that were asked. These four themes—gender roles, gender identity, change, and challenges—served as broad categories for deeper analysis. I wanted to understand how women conceived of their gender identity, if they felt that aligned with their prescribed roles in the Church, and any challenges they dealt with regarding these roles. I also wanted to see what changes they felt were most influential in their lives, and if there were any major challenges associated with them. Breaking up interview transcripts into these four categories helped to organize the different topics covered in the interviews and to contextualize these topics in relation to broader theoretical ideas.

Within each category were a set of 3-10 different sub-themes, which were identified based on specific topics that came up in interview discussions. Sub-themes referred to concrete objects or subjects with specific meanings, such as "motherhood," "victimization," "priesthood," and "callings." For example, certain sub-themes like "callings" and "motherhood" were found under the "gender roles" category, while "motherhood" and "victimization" could also be found under "gender identity." Given that motherhood was a common topic across interviews, this breakdown was helpful in distinguishing the different ways women thought about it.

These sub-themes were then coded for individual attitudes or ideas expressed by the interviewees. This is where the data became specific to individual participants. Often women would express contrasting opinions about something, thus both opinions were noted for comparison. Instances of similarities or agreements were also noted across all of the interviews, and then synthesized to draw conclusions from these comparisons. Overlapping themes were then combined and reorganized into two clear categories—*Gender* and *Change*—for clarity. This was to help keep my writing concise and to demonstrate women's complex thoughts without separating related ideas. Table 1 gives an example of this organization strategy.

Table 1: Gender				
Theme	Sub-Themes	Ideas	Quotes	Conclusions
Gender Identity	Motherhood	The role of motherhood is desirable to many, but not necessarily an expectation of all women.	"I believe that as a woman I have a role to play, and for me that's primarily a wife and a mother. That's what I choose. But I don't feel that I'm expected to play a role, because I enjoy what I do as a wife and a mom." (Interviewee 7)	Women feel that motherhood is a choice, not an expectation.

This method of analysis is drawn from *grounded theory* methods, which "provide systematic procedures for shaping and handling rich qualitative methods" (Charmaz 1996: 28). Grounded theory methods subsist of concurrent data collection and analysis, development of codes and categories for reviewing data, abstaining from predetermined hypotheses, theoretical sampling (as opposed to representative sampling), and a postponed literature review (Charmaz 1996:28). This methodology was deemed by its creators, Glaser and Strauss, to be adequate for the study of "individual processes, interpersonal relations and the reciprocal effects between individuals and larger social processes" (Charmaz 1996: 28). In other words, this method of deep analysis through a process of categorization is highly effective for studying meaning-making within a group setting. It relies on knowledge from within the group to understand their lived experiences (Charmaz 1996: 30). This method of coding helps avoid the tendency to project one's assumptions onto the data, and instead takes the information at face value to draw evidence-based conclusions (Charmaz 2014). Grounded theory methods were deemed to be the most effective means of analyzing the interviews in order to best understand the meanings and ideas women expressed, and to contextualize those meanings within their religious institution.

The procedure for this study did deviate in some ways from traditional grounded theory methods. For instance, the literature review began early and informed the creation of interview questions. Reading took place concurrently with data collection as new ideas were brought up that required more background research. The literature review writing stage came after data collection was complete to determine which topics were necessary for review and which turned out to be irrelevant. Secondly, my analysis process did not follow the same line-by-line coding procedure that is typical for grounded theory methods. The primary reason for this was time restraints given that the quantity of interviews did not allow for such a thorough reading. I determined that individual line coding was not necessary, as the systematic categorization method was sufficient for reviewing the data. It was clear from the interview transcripts which

topics were talked about most frequently and which were the most coherent themes for analysis coalesced naturally. Precautions were taken to avoid projecting existing assumptions onto the data by refraining from making hypotheses and by drawing evidence-based conclusions from the data.

RESULTS

　　　This study sought to answer two questions: How do Latter-day Saint women conceptualize their gendered roles, power status, and freedom of choice in the Church, specifically within the context of a progressing society? How do they understand religious change, and how do these changes affect their experiences as women in the Church? The purpose of this study is to examine how policy changes made by the patriarchal hierarchy of the Church affect the individual lives of typical Latter-day Saint women. This section will review the findings from each of the major themes of analysis, beginning with gender dynamics within the Church. Following that will be a discussion on policy change in the Church, interviewees' reactions to those changes, and the implications these changes have on the Church.

Gender

　　　The interviews revealed important insight into how Latter-day Saint women conceptualize their gendered roles and identity in a religious and social context, as well as gendered power dynamics within the patriarchal hierarchy of Church governance. These dimensions of gender are explored below, followed by some general impressions regarding the positionality of traditionalist women.

　　　Roles

　　　When asked about roles of women in the Church, interviewees named motherhood, callings, supporting priesthood holders, service, and leadership within auxiliary committees as the primary duties they perform. Men and women tend to serve in different capacities, with men in top general leadership positions and women in subordinate leadership positions, presiding over the children's and women's organizations. Overall, women reported satisfaction with their assigned roles, despite the subordinated nature of their work. As one put it:

> *I guess it's not really 'fair,' you know, it's just part of the design. So I can appreciate that it very well may be that God just said there were some things He did different. It has no bearing on importance, it's just how it was set up. Especially in my home, I don't really see my husband as our 'patriarch.' We are very much on equal footing. I see we are co-presiding.* (Interviewee 13)

However, a few women did voice discontent with the perceived gendered limitations. Of motherhood, one said:

> *We're seen as the nurturers and the mothers and I feel like that's great, but we can be more too.* (Interviewee 6)

Another replied:

> *I have felt sometimes very fulfilled and I find the joy in it and I love it so much. And there are sometimes where I'm like, this sucks! Why do I have to do this? Is this really what every righteous woman should be doing?... As a mom I'm staying at home and I'm like, is this all I am? Is this all my life is?* (Interviewee 12)

While the Church no longer endorses the preference that mothers stay at home with their children, many of the women I spoke to still felt a cultural pressure to be stay-at-home mothers. Regardless of whether women were fully content with stay-at-home motherhood, nearly

everyone I spoke to considered motherhood in general to be a central aspect of her identity and life's purpose.

Some women dismissed the idea of unequal gendered assignments in the Church, saying that it misses the point. They argued that the purpose of Church membership is not to serve in a role, but to progress in one's own spiritual journey. According to one woman:

> *The Church is not a place for me to have a job and be a cog in a wheel. It's more for me to use it as an instrument to fulfill my eternal purpose.* (Interviewee 5)

Most women see their duties in the Church as a service, not as a status symbol—thus they are not bothered by the gendered division of roles. In fact, many expressed gratitude for callings that required much less time commitment and were not envious of the time-intensive leadership positions held by male ward leaders.

Women's satisfaction with their roles in the Church certainly demonstrates the influence of the institution in shaping individual gender identities. Indeed, women's identities were closely informed by doctrinal teachings about gender.

Identity

There was a general acceptance of essentialized notions of gender, which is common for traditionalist faiths (Hoyt 2007, Sumerau and Cragun 2015). The Church preaches about the role of "divine gender" in God's plan of salvation, in which individuals exist as gendered beings before they are born, and that men and women must fulfill their gendered responsibilities while on earth in order to obtain salvation in the afterlife. The respondents tended to embrace these naturalized gender differences, saying that women are biologically more nurturing, thus motherhood is a natural role for them to play. Gender differences are also cited as the reason for men and women's segregated roles. As one woman put it:

> *I feel like men work in a very linear hierarchy. You see it in the military, lots of different ways. I feel like the Church is the same, it has this hierarchy, whereas women are so much more organic… Our influence is in the little things, whereas men need a motivation and a duty to be motivated… It's really good that men have this. They need to lead the Church; they need to get things done. If women were in charge completely it would be done in a very different way.* (Interviewee 12)

This response demonstrates a common sentiment among the respondents which attributes the Church's structure to men's natural inclination to assume positions of power. This attitude could be interpreted as condescension or acquiescence to the idea of "men being men,"—an acceptance of the way things are, even though they could conceive of a way to do things differently.

Whether or not the Church still expects women to become mothers was a highly contested subject. Some say that it *is* an expectation of all women who are able to become mothers, citing *The Family: A Proclamation to the World*, which states that marriage and motherhood are essential to ensure one's salvation, and that God commands all to "multiply and replenish the earth" (1995). According to some women, motherhood is an essential part of the plan of salvation. Others acknowledge that motherhood may not be for everyone, but in a Church that is so family-focused it is highly encouraged. One woman stated:

> *My [religion] does believe women should be stay-at-home moms. I did that, and I loved it, but I feel like having a career and a business is one of the most rewarding things I've ever done along with raising my kids. I wish more young moms could think about that. I feel like sometimes the Church doesn't really allow for that kind of dialogue."*
> (Interviewee 6)

A former member acknowledged that her decision to be a stay-at-home mom was a result of socialization, however she does not resent that following her exit from the Church:

> *I think that the idea that I would stay home with my kids was definitely ingrained in me from a very young age by the Church. So it came from that but looking back I don't resent that it was socialized upon me. I really value the years I stayed at home with my kids.* (Interviewee 16)

Others argued that motherhood is *not* an expectation of women and that the Church supports every woman's choice, whether she wants to have children or not. Both sides, whether they feel motherhood was expected of them or not, still believed that the decision to become mothers was ultimately up to them.

> *I believe that as a woman I have a role to play, and for me that's primarily a wife and a mother. And that's what I choose. But I don't feel that I'm expected to play a role because I enjoy what I do as a wife and a mom… I like the word 'choice' or 'choose' because for me I have chosen this role and I do feel like the Church supports me.*
> (Interviewee 7)

For most interviewees, the desire to have children was attributed to essentialized 'natural' characteristics of women and supported by their religion which emphasizes nuclear families. While a few would acknowledge that culture and socialization likely had some influence on that decision, many asserted that it was ultimately their choice and one they would have made regardless of their faith.

Power

Within the Church's governance as a patriarchal hierarchy, there is a prevailing belief in "separate but equal" spheres, where men and women have different roles but equal responsibilities. One of these central differences is the priesthood, which is typically bestowed upon the lay male membership and not offered to Latter-day Saint women. No woman I spoke to—including former and dissident members—said that they personally wished they held the priesthood. To some, the ability to bear children is regarded as the female equivalent to men's priesthood power. Others said they already had access to its power through priesthood blessings given by men, so they did not need the official title. Still others saw it as too big of a responsibility and that they had no desire to be a church leader anyway. While no interviewees explicitly advocated for women's ordination, many said they would be supportive if the male leadership were to, one day, decide that women could be priesthood holders. However, most thought that would be unlikely to happen.

Many women reported feeling empowered in their spirituality and their personal relationship with God, not by their position in the Church hierarchy. One woman explained:

> *I'm part of the institution not because I'm looking for power or status, I go to be uplifted… I know a lot of women take issue with the fact that the Church is a patriarchal hierarchy, but it's just never bothered me. Do I understand why it's that way? No. Does it bother me? No.* (Interviewee 1)

Another agreed:

> *I feel that I have a relationship with [God] and that empowers me to do things in my own capacity. In that regard, I do feel very empowered by my religion but not necessarily having a role in the Church.* (Interviewee 10)

This idea of viewing the Church as a tool for personal spiritual growth, rather than a social institution in which one plays a part, was a consistent theme across interviews. While not necessarily an idea promoted by the doctrine, it was a common interpretation among the women I spoke to. The act of separating spirituality from religiosity is known as the "separation strategy," and will be discussed in more detail later on.

As one might expect, active women did not view themselves as victims of an oppressive system. However, dissident and former members had differing opinions on whether Latter-day Saint women are oppressed. Some pointed to the Church's traditionalist values, more prevalently taught in the past, that emphasize childbearing over having a career as inherently oppressive. When asked if she thought traditionalist women were oppressed, one former member stated:

> *When you relegate women to second-class citizens and that their worth is tied to their husbands, their virginity, their worthiness as a mother and a wife—whether they have children or not—I do.* (Interviewee 15)

Others argued that victimization is not something to be determined from the outside:

> *You're oppressed if you wish for your experience to be different. If you accept the experience you're in then I don't call that oppressed. So religions that give men more power than women—if women openly accept that role, if they feel taken care of or comforted by the fact that they aren't expected to have an equal role, then in my mind that's not oppression if they choose it… I think most [Latter-day Saint] women would not call themselves oppressed. If they don't feel oppressed, then I don't think they're oppressed.* (Interviewee 16)

Clearly there is not a simple black-and-white answer of whether or not traditionalist women are victims of their religious institutions. On the one hand, women reported engaging in similar *gendered resistance* behaviors as observed in Leamaster and Einwohner's (2018) and Beaman's (2001) studies, including prioritizing their careers, positioning themselves as equals with their husbands, and viewing the priesthood as a shared responsibility. These acts of *gendered resistance* suggest some level of dissatisfaction with the typical ways of doing things, which required some personal adjustment. On the other hand, the women did not identify themselves as victims; even former and dissident members did not view themselves as oppressed by their religious institution. This is a representation of the kind of "intricate, highly gendered theological worldviews" Hoyt (2007) described in her article which counter the dichotomous thinking of the victim/empowerment paradigm.

Women's perceptions of their permitted volunteer positions and relative leadership opportunities in the Church were incredibly complex and diverse. All of the respondents reported feeling individually empowered, however discussions around structural power dynamics were more controversial. There was a common dialogue among respondents regarding the separation of spirituality and religiosity to explain their empowerment. This attitude was not necessarily encouraged by the doctrine, nevertheless it was consistent across several interviews. The following section will discuss some of the ways the Church has begun to address these structural inequalities and how female members are responding to their efforts.

Change

When discussing policy and procedural change, respondents revealed a variety of theories for why such changes in the Church have taken place. Most regarded these changes positively, though there were some that reported feelings of confusion or dissonance around change in general, as well as the specific changes themselves. Many active members shared strategies for dealing with these challenges, while former and dissident members shed light on the potential implications of unresolved dissonance.

Reasons

There were four major frameworks which respondents used to explain why the Church has changed policies and procedures so much recently. The first was the concept of a "living church," in which prophets receive ongoing divine revelation as the Church continuously evolves. This position suggests that, because God is omnipotent, changes do not occur in response to social factors but rather in accordance with his eternal plan. According to the "living church" argument, changes are inevitable and are taking place during this time because God intended it to be so. As one woman put it:

> *[The Church is] very specific to this day and age because obviously the world we live in is very different from the world Joseph Smith lived in. So I think, as President Nelson has said, it's constantly being restored, 'line upon line, precept upon precept,' in the Lord's timing, when He feels this stuff needs to come forth and it's all pertinent to our day and age… Heavenly Father knows everything. He has a plan; He knows when everything will be restored and what will be restored. So I think change is inevitable, so far as the restoration of the gospel in that sense.* (Interviewee 7)

Another shared this sentiment:

> *I think that changes all originate from God… There's obviously a need for modern day revelation because we're not living the same lives they lived in the Bible and the Book of Mormon. … So I think change comes from God and is made manifest through prophets. We believe in the second coming of Christ and that these are the last days and we're preparing the way for Him. So I think there will be a lot of changes to help us prepare for that. I think there is a greater and greater gap between the Church and the rest of society as a whole. I think there are going to be more changes that differentiate us and that help us prepare for Christ's coming.* (Interviewee 10)

This framework posits that the timing of these changes to policy and practice is due to member readiness—in other words, members of the Church had to demonstrate their faithfulness in order to receive new revelation. For example, the Church was not yet ready during the mid-1900's to

declare homosexuality no longer an apostacy *per se* because of the prevailing social climate at the time. The "living church" argument would suggest that God chose to save that revelation for when members of the Church were prepared to receive it.

The second framework is the concept of a "global church," wherein Church policies are simplified and made more efficient as it grows to accommodate a diverse worldwide membership. This position suggests that changes *are* made in response to social factors, and that revelation is often less innovative than responsive. Individuals with this worldview acknowledge that prophets are influenced by their own life experiences and feedback from members. As described by one interviewee:

> *I think it is natural that [change] is happening because society is changing. I honestly have one hundred percent faith in the Church and God and Jesus Christ leading the Church, but I also completely understand that these are mortals, regular people that are just doing what they think is best. It's okay to be like, yeah, that was probably not the best way to do things, let's change it. I'm totally comfortable with them saying this is a different world.* (Interviewee 13)

The "global church" framework also argues that the procedural changes are merely administrative decisions to make the gospel more accessible to larger numbers of people, but the central core doctrines have not changed. In other words, Church policies may change but the "eternal truths" remain unchanged. This relates back to the idea of *accommodation* versus *intransigence,* in which the Church must compromise on certain issues in order to retain membership while maintaining its credibility (Iannaccone and Miles 1990). The Church will change what is necessary to gain converts while holding true to its core beliefs to retain existing adherents.

Some women say that the purpose of religious change is for the direct benefit of female members. One woman said:

> *I do know that the Church has sensitivity about women and understands and recognizes that this needs to be more inclusive. They need to try and find ways to make sure that women are being more involved. I don't ever think it's going to be where women have the priesthood. I don't think that's going to happen, and I'm personally okay with that.* (Interviewee 13)

Another replied:

> *The Church is continually moving towards more equality for men and women. There are big obstacles to that, but the Church nowadays isn't as strict about a woman's place is in the home. There isn't that doctrinal idea that you're supposed to have as many kids as you can and be a stay at home mother. I do think the Church has abandoned that, so I think women today are actually really satisfied by their experience in the Church. They don't feel as judged as I think maybe the generation before them did.* (Interviewee 16)

This framework argues that the policy changes occurring in the Church mirror the changes happening in the workforce, politics, media, and other social institutions where women are fighting for more representation. According to this view, changes are happening for equality's sake and to improve the experiences of female members.

> *To me, the world is evolving a lot. What's happening in the Church is similar to what I see in the workplace. I do feel like there's this evolution that is coming about that diversity is a really good thing, and we actually do a lot better overall in our society when there's a lot of diversity. We make better decisions. I feel there's a parallel I see at work and I see it in the Church where everyone is evolving in their mindset that it's really good when everybody has a voice at the table. The thing is that change is just slow. Stuff doesn't happen overnight, and I don't expect it to because change is hard for people to digest. For the most part our human nature is to resist it because it makes us a little uncomfortable, it's a little out of what we're used to. So I don't expect rapid change. But I think this gradual change, let's keep it going and appreciating that change is a good thing.* (Interviewee 13)

None of these three frameworks ("living church," "global church," and "women-focused") are mutually exclusive. Many women expressed sentiments that could fall into any of the three paradigms. These categories serve to give a general explanation for how women were able to reconcile these changes within their belief system. As previously mentioned, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints claims that it is the "one true Church," thus any fundamental changes to the doctrine could be perceived as contradictory to that belief (Iannaccone and Miles 1990). These three frameworks present different ways of understanding change that help reconcile such contradictions.

The final explanation was one expressed only by former and dissident members and takes a more critical position than the other three. This "critical" framework argues that the Church is modernizing in response to social changes as a measure of damage control in order to retain its current adherents. Similar to the "global church" framework, this argument suggests that changes happen in response to society. However, it claims that the Church is at risk of losing its membership due to outdated practices and beliefs that put it at odds with broader society. Thus, the Church is forced to change in order to salvage its remaining membership. As one dissident member put it:

> *I think the Church is realizing they're very patriarchal, very subversive to women. I think it always has been. I think they're finally catching up with where everyone else has been for a really long time. I feel like these changes are the tip of the iceberg, there's going to be a lot more stuff that comes because they want to be a global church. I think they're great changes, I'm thrilled. I think it's twenty years too late, let's keep them coming.* (Interviewee 6)

A former member argued:

> *In my opinion the Church is doing it just to remain relevant. They are losing membership and they've always been this really quirky, archaic institution. I think they're now realizing, especially with the Internet and anybody being able to access information about them, they're realizing they have to modernize. So my opinion is these changes are happening because they are scared of becoming obsolete and dying if they don't maintain some semblance of modern policies. They always have been and probably always will be well beyond society's changes, but I do think that these inspirations that they have to make these changes are clearly just because they recognize if they don't they're going to lose their members and they won't get converts and they'll go away. So they make changes when they feel like they have to, to remain relevant to people.* (Interviewee 16)

Due to the Church's sectarian nature, its leadership and members must carefully frame changes to remain consistent with its claim of being the "one true church." Some are able to reconcile their beliefs within a broader social context—others, however, struggle with perceived inconsistencies in Church policy.

Attitudes

Overall, women were appreciative of the Church's recent policy changes. They expressed gratitude with the Church's ability to change in general. One woman said:

> *It's constantly changing, and I like that. To me it shows that it's a living church. It's evolving, it's not stagnant. We don't just do things to do them. It's adaptable, and I really like that.* (Interviewee 5)

They were also thankful for the Church recognizing women and making changes to address their experiences.

> *I'm glad that it's on their minds and they're concerned about it. That's good. Even these smaller changes like in the temple and witnesses and stuff. It's good, awesome, I love it. It makes me feel happy and it makes me glad to think that they're embracing that we don't have to live in the past. It's really okay to be a little progressive. I love it all the more because of that, they can say we've got to change this. I'm like, "thank you, thank you for understanding!" I just feel like they're like we've got to make sure we're doing stuff so that women feel valued because the result is they'll lose them. Especially younger women as they move into adulthood, if they don't feel like they're on equal footing they're going to be like, "this is not going to work for me". Whatever the motivation is, I'm glad. It's totally great to evolve and change.* (Interviewee 13)

Interviewees also expressed some confusion and cognitive dissonance, specifically around the LGBTQ+ policy changes and the fact that the 2015 policy was reversed so abruptly in 2019. Several active members were upset at the initial 2015 change, as they felt that it was hurtful towards LGBTQ+ members; however many others also expressed that while the policy could theoretically be viewed as harmful, they did not think it actually affected that many people. Dissident and former members tended to hold stronger feelings about the policy changes— several of them knew people who were personally affected and were more aware of the policies' negative consequences. This was the only instance where most women expressed conflicting emotions: relief that the controversy was resolved but doubt over why such a change could have happened in the first place. One interviewee said:

> *That's the one that's got me kind of baffled… when it happened in 2015 I thought it was so interesting because I understood it. It made sense to me. Because the whole point behind it was because they didn't want the children being taught what the Church was teaching them conflicting with how their parents were living. That made sense to me, you didn't want to put this wedge between parents and kids, so I get that. So when they changed in in 2019 I was like wait a minute! It's not bad, but I don't know why it would flip-flop like that. How come God didn't just take care of it four years ago? I think it could be timing, it could be because the members weren't ready.* (Interviewee 1)

Another remarked:

That was the first time where I was like, is that right? But I just don't let it bother me…
Then, what like two years later they changed it. So I'm like, okay that's interesting.
Because normally it takes years, you know? So I don't know what the purpose of that
was. That's one that I don't fully have my head wrapped around. It doesn't make sense.
(Interviewee 3)

For active members, the LGBTQ+ policy changes were a source of some confusion but
ultimately did not have a severe impact on their faith. For dissident and former members,
however, this issue was much more impactful, as will be discussed later on.

Challenges

The women I spoke to listed two main strategies they used to address inconsistencies or
challenges regarding religious change and gender dynamics in the Church. Some women adopted
an "eternal perspective," in which they coped with uncertainty by trusting that it was all in
accordance with God's plan and would be revealed eventually. A common phrase among women
with this mindset was "I'm okay with not understanding because one day I will." This strategy
allowed women to acknowledge the ideas that didn't fully make sense to them while trusting that
things would resolve in the future. One woman said:

I think just because it isn't explainable to me yet doesn't mean it's not explainable. I may
not get it now, I might see it in twenty years, I might not know until I'm dead. Because
you know, there's an afterlife. I'm going to know everything eventually. I choose to have
faith it's going to be okay, and I'm at peace with that. But it doesn't mean I stop asking
questions and that's okay. I don't think questions in the Church are bad, it's how you
grow spiritually. You wouldn't progress if you didn't ask questions. (Interviewee 1)

Another strategy is the "separation strategy," or the conceptualization of one's spirituality
as separate from one's religious practice in order to reconcile perceived theological
inconsistencies.[10] Women using this strategy can recognize leadership fallibility, using the
common phrase: "the gospel is perfect, the people aren't." This view attributes the Church's
perceived flaws to the imperfection of mortals who are in charge of the day-to-day management
of the Church, as opposed to flaws in the core doctrines. Women tended to identify more closely
with their spirituality and personal relationship with God, while viewing their church activity as
a tool for developing their spiritual connection.

There are a lot of people involved and a lot of room for error. But I trust that people have
good intentions and that they're doing their best. Overall I'm happy with my experience
in the Church. I think there's a difference between my experience in the gospel and my
experience in the Church because it's my own personal spirituality and my relationship
with God, and then how I experience that relationship with other people is my experience
in the Church. But overall it's very positive all around. (Interviewee 10)

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[10] By conceptually separating "spirituality" (spiritual feelings and connection to higher power) and religiosity
(referring to the institutional practice of religion), these women are lending more legitimacy to the personal
experience than to the institutional body. Scholars have critiqued the separation of "spirituality" from religiousness
as creating a false dichotomy, when they are actually very much intertwined (Roberts and Yamane 2016). These
women are not necessarily de-identifying themselves from their religion, rather demonstrating which "parts" they
feel most connected to.

The "eternal perspective" and the "separation strategy" were two mindsets that helped women resolve challenges to their faith. However, for those who failed to rationalize their concerns, these inconsistencies proved to be potentially detrimental to their faith.

Implications

For most women, the Church's recent policy changes did not dramatically influence their faith. For dissident and former members, however, changes had significant impact on their attitudes toward the Church in general. Several women I spoke to cited the original 2015 LGBTQ+ policy change—which prohibited children of gay parents from being baptized—as the primary reason they or someone they knew disassociated from the Church. For some, the policy reversal in 2019 was "too little, too late." As for the temple ceremony language and the change allowing women to be baptismal witnesses, they were not enough to stop former members from leaving or to consider returning to the Church. For individuals who are secure in their faith, changes to Church policy were unlikely to influence their relationship to the Church. However, it is clear that they had much larger implications for those who were already struggling with their faith and served as the final straw for those questioning their allegiance to the faith. The next section will further analyze the impact of these changes and what they could mean for the future of the Church.

DISCUSSION

        Previous research on women in traditionalist faiths has relied on a paradigm of victimization versus empowerment, in which traditionalist women are conceptualized either as inherent victims or as individually empowered objects of their religious institution (Hoyt 2007). As a relatively young Christian sect, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is of particular interest because it is currently undergoing a phase of rapid change in which many of its conservative policies—particularly those concerning women—are becoming more in line with notions of gender that exist in the broader progressive society. This study used qualitative interviews with Latter-day Saint women to examine how these changes affect the lives of typical female members of the Church. Overall, the data revealed that women in the Church of Jesus Christ are satisfied with their gender roles and power dynamics, and that policy changes—while appreciated—did not strongly influence their attitudes toward the Church in general. There is tension within the Church of Jesus Christ as it is transitioning from one generational ideology to the next and are caught in a balance between *accommodation* and *intransigence* (Iannaccone and Miles 1990). The following sections will analyze the results of the interviews and demonstrate how they fall within the existing literature.

        Gender

        To Latter-day Saints, "womanhood" is generally interpreted in terms of biology (female sex and reproductive characteristics) and familial roles, specifically motherhood. The Church's doctrine espouses essentialized beliefs about innate, binary gender characteristics. These "divine gender" characteristics are heavily ingrained within the belief system, meaning there is little contention around gender-segregated work and expectations because this belief system is so widely accepted and unquestioned. This could be a reason why there is so little dissatisfaction surrounding the different roles for men and women, as one might expect there to be in a social context where it is a much more contested issue. In other words, most women do not question why they are held to a different standard from men because they believe that, at the core, men and women are naturally different by design. This belief demonstrates the institution's influence in shaping gender identity, as discussed by Sumerau and Cragun (2015). Another reason for the relatively high satisfaction with gender role division was the conception of religious duties as a service, rather than a status symbol. Women were not concerned with the segregated nature of their roles within the Church because they saw their roles as doing their part, not as a reflection of their power within the system. The few women I spoke to who were concerned about gender inequality in the Church stated that ultimately it was a small issue that did not influence their decision to stay or leave the faith. Former Church members acknowledged that gender inequalities existed, but that it was not a major reason in their decision to leave the Church. Gender is such an influential force in the institutional Church that it works almost as a silent backdrop—ever-present, yet seldom recognized.

        The most defining characteristic separating men from women in the Church is the ordination of men and the exclusion of women from the priesthood. One might perceive this as a structural inequality which devalues women and gives men all the governing power (Sumerau and Cragun 2015). However, the women in this study did not see it that way. The priesthood was not conceived as a status symbol or a power to be used for personal gain. Similar to the women in Beaman's study, interviewees conceptualized it as a shared power even though it is officially only held by male members. Many agreed that it was unlikely that women would ever be

ordained, even in light of recent changes being made. Most were content with that, which suggests that members tend to be more accepting of a religion's "eternal truths," even when changes are made that could suggest the Church is moving in that direction (Iannaccone and Miles 1990). In other words, even though the Church has changed to allow women to be baptismal witnesses—a duty formally reserved for priesthood bearers—members do not think the doctrine will ever allow women to have the priesthood because that has been declared an "eternal truth" as opposed to an administrative policy.

The roles of women in the Church have changed drastically over the past few generations. Participants talked about the ways in which doctrine has shifted to be more accepting of nontraditional families, and how leaders now emphasize women's personal agency to choose whether they choose to be stay-at-home mothers. The Church is still a family-focused organization, but it appears to be more accepting of nontraditional families to avoid alienating those who choose not to have children. What was once perceived as a rigid expectation of all women is now understood as being a more personal choice. This attitudinal shift is reflected in more recent changes, as will be discussed in the next section.

Changes

Due to the sectarian nature of the Church of Jesus Christ, members often need to rationalize policy change in order to maintain consistency with their religious beliefs (Dunford and Kunz 1973). Changes to "eternal truths" can be the cause of cognitive dissonance. The Church has long set itself apart from secular society, proclaiming itself to be God's "one true church." However, it is easy to see similarities between the changes in the Church and the issues going on in broader Western society in terms of recent feminist and LGBTQ+ rights movements. Clearly, leaders' revelations have a complex relationship with society, and women in the Church have various ways to understand and perceive that relationship. Ultimately, the reasons for the changes and their timeliness are up to individual interpretation—something openly encouraged by the Church, as a means of "[exercising] flexibility…while maintaining purity of doctrine" (Iannaccone and Miles 1990). Questions about the position of religious doctrine amidst broader society are not unique to members of the Church of Jesus Christ. It is interesting to see how members of this religion rationalize change in comparison to people from different eras and faiths.[11]

The Church of Jesus Christ has thus far been arguably successful in navigating social pressures by changing its policies to be more in-line with progressive social norms, while staying true to its core doctrine. Does this mean that the Church is on a path leading out of sectarian retrenchment, toward denomination status? Not likely. According to Mauss and Barlow, to transition from a sect into a church requires an "deemphasis of the exclusivist, millenarian, and eschatological themes that were once so prominent" (1991). Loosening of the commitment mechanisms that appeal to so many members would allow the Church to assimilate, but at the risk of forming yet another sectarian schism of those who reject sweeping change. The Church has indicated it is comfortable with its status as a "peculiar people" and remaining true to its traditionalist, counter-cultural policies.

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[11] For more information on change in other religious contexts, see: Seidler, John. 1986. "Contested Accommodation: The Catholic Church as a Special Case of Social Change." Pp. 847-874 in Social Forces, 64(4). University of North Carolina Press.

What does this mean for typical Latter-day Saint women? Based on interview responses and previous literature on the subject, Latter-day Saint women are not in need of liberation. They are comfortable with their assigned roles and the gender dynamics of their institution. Gender dynamics do not seem to be a major factor that causes women to dissociate from the Church. However, these women do see a need for evolution in the doctrine to broaden the roles of women and to make them feel more involved. Changes for women are welcomed and interpreted as confirmation that the patriarchal hierarchy sees and receives revelation on their behalf.

Generally, Latter-day Saint women's attitudes towards religious change were positive. Many said they improved their overall experience and made them feel more visible as members of the Church. Given this welcome reception it is fair to predict that the Church will continue to evolve in similar ways. The only change that evoked controversial opinions was the policy change in 2015 that made it so children of gay parents could not be baptized or given baby blessings, and which was later reversed in 2019. Understandably with the trend of Western society becoming more and more accepting of homosexuality, the 2015 change touched a nerve with many individuals who saw it as a step backwards in the progress of the Church. There were many others who perceived it as the Church standing by its word and not changing its doctrine at the whim of society. Ultimately, the fact that the policy was eventually undone after public outcry reveals that the Church is not immune to social pressures any more than other religions.

As for the future of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, it is likely that this current phase of evolution will follow similar patterns as it has undergone before, and that many other religions have experienced as well. It is impossible to separate one social institution from the influence of the society in which it is located, but interesting to observe their relationship to one another. It is obvious that to some extent, the Church is responding to broader questions taking place in society regarding gender, sexuality, power, and the ways they intersect. It is also navigating the same social trends observed in other religions with the youngest generations' changing views on religion and spirituality (Riess 2019a). The fact that the Church is undergoing a minor upheaval of the "old ways" to make way for the new does not necessarily indicate the start of its downfall, as some have predicted (Riess 2019a, 2019c). Rather it is demonstrating, yet again, its ability to evolve with the changing times and culture according to the needs of its members. That being said, with the younger generations being more conscious of gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights than previous generations, the Church will likely continue to evolve in ways that demonstrate acceptance and prioritize equality. This brings up the question of whether younger generations of Latter-day Saint women currently feel differently towards the Church's progress than their parents' generation does, and what their hopes for the Church's future are. Future research might look at other conservative religions as they navigate this period of change, and how they are influenced by the youngest generations as they are coming of age.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this honors thesis was to understand the experiences of women in traditionalist religions. This study focused on women in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as a site of particular interest due to the Church currently undergoing a phase of rapid policy change. Through qualitative interviews with seventeen current and former Latter-day Saint women, this study found that women were generally pleased with the roles available to them and were appreciative of the changes which they perceived as beneficial. In contrast with the victim/empowerment paradigm, this study found that women did not necessarily view their traditional roles as inherently empowering. Rather, they felt empowered through their religion's emphasis on agency and their ability to choose these roles for themselves. In accordance with findings by Iannaccone and Miles (1990) and Mauss and Barlow (1991), women were engaged in complex worldviews through which they rationalized doctrinal changes in order to resolve perceived inconsistencies. The greatest source of tension for participants was related to the policy changes regarding children of LGBTQ+ parents. Women coped with challenges to their faith using two strategies named the "separation strategy" and the "eternal perspective." For former members the LGBTQ+ policy changes were cited as a "final straw" which catalyzed their exit from the Church.

One limitation of this study was its lack of representativeness, due to available resources and time constraints which prohibited obtaining a larger sample. Were I to repeat this study I would like to put forth more effort into reaching a more diverse sample, particularly across age cohorts. The majority of respondents were women between ages 30-50, which was advantageous in formulating generalizations within that age group but limiting in what conclusions could be drawn of younger and older generations. Future research ought to examine the effect on different demographic factors, such as race, age, sexuality, convert status, or geographic location, on members' perceptions of change. A larger sample of former members should also be studied to have a clearer picture of the differences between them and active members. Another question for future research might look at how change in the Church of Jesus Christ compares to change in other traditionalist religions, such as Catholicism. While this study acknowledged that the Church's position is not unique, there was not much time devoted to studying how other religions have navigated similar issues.

The goal of this project was to aid in the creation of complex academic spaces through which traditionalist women can be better understood. It is my hope that this kind of research can help deconstruct simplistic explanations, such as the victim/empowerment paradigm, and offer a better platform for discussing women's experiences. My hope is that this project could help amplify the voices of these Latter-day Saint women and contribute to a body of literature that seeks to understand their experiences. This is just one step towards better representation for traditionalist women in academic writing. Furthermore, I hope this research can serve as the foundation for future longitudinal studies to see how these current changes impact the Church years from now.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Consent Form Template

Title of research study: *Experiences of religious change: Latter-Day Saint women's perceptions of Church policy changes*

IRB Protocol Number: 19-0437

Investigator: Kathryn A Halverson

Purpose of the Study

This study is being conducted by an undergraduate student of the University of Colorado Boulder as part of a research project within the department of sociology honors program. The purpose of this study is to understand how women in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints experience and perceive changes to Church policy and practices that have occurred in the past 10 years.
While these announcements have been reported on extensively by both Church authorities and non-members, there has been less formal public expression of how these changes impact typical members of the Church—particularly women. Because some of these changes may have a direct impact on women's roles within the Church, we are curious to learn how LDS women understand, interpret, enact, and feel towards these changes.
We believe that this research will advance the knowledge within the field of sociology by focusing on the short-term impacts of institutional change within a religious organization. We have chosen to focus on a population within the Church (women) that may be perceived to be overlooked due to its patriarchal hierarchy of authority. As a result of this study, we hope that future research will consider the perspective of women in traditionalist religions, especially within modern Christianity.

Explanation of Procedures

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview to describe your experiences of church policy changes and announcements that have occurred within the past 10 years. You will be asked questions about your beliefs, feelings, opinions, interpretations, and thoughts on these changes. You may be asked to defend, explain, or further elaborate on these ideas; however, you do not have to answer any question if you choose not to. Here is an example of a question you may be asked: "Describe your background within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints."
Interviews will take place in one of three ways: in-person, over the telephone, or via online video chat (e.g. Skype or Facetime). We will do our best to schedule the interview for a time and place that is most convenient to you. Interviews will be recorded to ensure accuracy of analysis. Upon completion of the project, all interview recordings are erased or otherwise destroyed. If you do not wish to be audio taped, do not participate in this study.
We expect that you will be in this research study for one hour. We expect about 30 people will be in this research study.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal

Whether or not you take part in this research is your choice. You can leave the research at any time and it will not be held against you.

If you are a CU Boulder student or employee, taking part in this research is not part of your class work or duties. You can refuse to enroll, or withdraw after enrolling at any time, with no effect on your class standing, grades, or job at CU Boulder. You will not be offered or receive any special consideration if you take part in this research.

Risks and Discomforts

The only foreseeable risk to you if you take part in this study is that some of the questions may cause you to feel uncomfortable. You may choose not to respond to any question(s) you do not want to answer.

It is important that you tell the Principal Investigator, Kathryn Halverson, if you think you have been harmed as a result of taking part in this study. You can call her at (720) 534-8881.

Potential Benefits
We do not anticipate any direct benefit to you.

Confidentiality
Information obtained about you for this study will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law. Research information that identifies you may be shared with the University of Colorado Boulder Institutional Review Board (IRB) and others who are responsible for ensuring compliance with laws and regulations related to research, including people on behalf of the Office for Human Research Protections. The information from this research may be published for scientific purposes; however, your identity will not be given out.

We will make every effort to maintain the privacy of your data. Upon completion of the project, all interview recordings are erased or otherwise destroyed. All interview data will be kept in a secure location. Code names will be given to tapes and other information connected to you and your participation to aid in maintaining your anonymity. All results from this project will be reported in aggregate form, and any quotations cited will be used only so long as the participants remain anonymous.

There are some things that you might tell us that we CANNOT promise to keep confidential, as we are required to report information like:
- *Child abuse or neglect*
- *A crime you or others plan to commit*
- *Harm that may come to you or others*
- *Any report of sexual harassment*

As University of Colorado researchers, we are bound by law to report any such claim to the appropriate personnel for further investigation.

Cost of Participation
There is no cost to you for participation in this study.

Payment for Participation
You will not be paid to be in this study.

Questions
If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has harmed you, talk to the research team at (720) 534-8881 or email kathryn.halverson@colorado.edu.

This research has been reviewed and approved by an IRB. You may talk to them at (303) 735-3702 or irbadmin@colorado.edu if:
- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You have questions about your rights as a research subject.
- You want to get information or provide input about this research.

Signatures

Your signature documents your permission to take part in this research.

_____

Signature of subject   Date

_____

Printed name of subject

_____

Signature of person obtaining consent   Date

_____

Printed name of person obtaining consent

Appendix 2: Interview Guides

Questions for Active Members

1. Describe your background in the Church

    a. Converts: How long have you been a member?
    b. Born Members: A lot of women talk about a gradual personal conversion to the gospel. Does this describe your experience?
    c. Do you agree that the church is a "traditionalist" institution? What does that mean to you?
2. Are there contradictions between your religious beliefs and your place as a woman in broader Western society?
    a. Do you believe women should be ordained? If they were, what would it look like?
        i. Would you be in support of women being ordained if it were decided by the prophet?
    b. There is a common conception that women in traditionalist faiths are seen as "oppressed." How would you respond to that?
        i. Present the victimization/empowerment paradigm
    c. Do you believe there is a place for feminism in the church?
3. What is the purpose of religious change? Where does change originate from? Prompt with specifics about recent changes in the church.
    a. Church's name (no longer using "Mormon")
    b. LGBT policy change (no longer apostasy, reversal on kids being baptized)
        i. Did the LGBT change create a sense of cognitive dissonance?
    c. Language in the temple and Young Women's theme
    d. Women as witnesses
    e. Any other notable changes you think of that I didn't mention?
4. Do you believe the church is changing in response to a progressing society?
    a. What do you think is the perception of Mormon women by those outside the church?
    b. Do you feel you have been affected by these changes? (Depends on the change)
5. What changes do you anticipate the church will undergo in coming years?
6. For Younger Women
    a. Do you feel the values of the church are outdated in relation to Western society?
    b. Do you feel the church has further to go, or are you content with where it stands now?

Questions for Former Members

1. Describe your background in the church.
   a. Converts: When did you convert? What made you leave?
   b. Born Members: Discuss your "personal conversion." When did you know you were "in?" When did you know you were "out?"
2. As a woman, did you ever feel there was a contradiction between your beliefs and the expectations of broader society?
3. Now that you are no longer a member, what are your perceptions of women in the church?
4. As a member did you at any point wish you had the priesthood?
   a. If women had the priesthood, would you still be a member?
   b. Do you believe women in the church should have the priesthood? If they did, what would it look like?
   c. Do you think women will ever have the priesthood?
5. There is a common conception that women in traditionalist faiths, such as Mormonism, Islam, and Catholicism are seen as oppressed. Do you agree with that?
   a. Do you believe there is a place for feminism in the church?
6. Are you aware of recent changes to church policy? (Prompt with specific examples, ask for reaction)
   a. LGBT policy change
   b. Language in the temple and Young Women's theme
   c. Women as witnesses
7. What is the purpose of these changes, in your opinion? Where do you think they originate from?
   a. Had these changes occurred when you were a member, would you still be a member?
8. Do you think the church is changing in response to a progressing society?
9. Do you think these changes are significant?

******

Have you retained anything from your experience as a member? In other words, what has stuck with you?

Is there anything that would have to change about the church for you to return?

How have you changed since leaving the church?

Do you have any sort of connection to ex-Mormon communities? What has that been like?

Has anything in your life come to take the place of your old religion? What do you still believe? Do you have any new beliefs? Would you consider joining a new religion?

Would you describe yourself as a spiritual person, outside of organized religion?

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