

RUNNING HEAD: Childlessness in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

CHILDLESSNESS IN THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS

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ABSTRACT

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints provides an instructive lens through which to examine the stigma management of involuntarily childless women and men. Church teachings emphasize motherhood as a necessary component of women's piety and salvation. For men, Church teachings connect the full expression of masculinity to a man's ability to produce and preside over his children. For members of the Church who are childless, there is disconnect between their religious beliefs about what is expected of their sex and their lived experience. Through interviews with thirty involuntarily childless Latter-day Saint women and men, this study explores the stigma management practices they use to counter negative views of themselves, make sense of stigmatizing church teachings, and to manage uncomfortable interactions with others. Participants engage in self-directed and interactive methods to counter negative views of themselves. They manage stigmatizing church teachings by discontinuing church attendance, reframing church teachings, or attributing their deviance from church norms to God's individual plan for them. In order to manage discomfort in social interactions participants use rehearsed answers or avoid such interactions altogether by withdrawing socially. This study contributes to the existing literature on stigma management practices and childlessness by illuminating the negotiation strategies of individuals who are doubly stigmatized through their deviance from gender and religious norms. It provides additional insight into the connection between "doing gender" and "doing religion" and how the intertwining of gender and religious identity influences the stigma management of childless Latter-day Saints.

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The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints¹ is a global religion with over 16 million members around the world. It continues to grow through active proselytizing by over 65,000 missionaries worldwide (Mormon News Room 2019). It is a Christian denomination that emphasizes traditional families and gender roles through its teachings and policies (Sumerau and Cragun 2015). According to the Pew Research Center (Lipka 2015), 66 percent of adult Latter-day Saints are married, compared to 52 percent of other Christians and 48 percent of adults in the United States overall. Further, Latter-day Saints had an average of 3.4 children as opposed to the national average of 2.1 children. Latter-day Saints had more children than any other religious group. Although childlessness has recently declined in the United States, it has generally been on the rise since the 1970's (Livingston 2015). While Latter-day Saint birth rates mostly follow these same national trends as far as increases and decreases, they remain well above the average (Heaton 1998).

The Church's "The Family: A Proclamation to the World" (1995) states that "Gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose." This official Church document establishes women's God-given role as that of a "nurturer" of children. For Latter-day Saint women, personal piety is strongly linked to their status as "nurturers," specifically in their capacity as mothers (Hoyt 2009). Church doctrine also teaches that women should strive to become like Heavenly Mother, the female counterpart to Heavenly Father or God. She is held up as the ideal of womanhood, which is defined by her role as a bearer and nurturer of children (Heeren, Lindsey, and Mason 1984; Chen 2014). The doctrine of Heavenly Mother, along with the Church's emphasis on the inherent nurturing capacity of women, reinforces the idea that women are spiritually transformed through the bodily practices of motherhood (Hoyt 2009). Latter-day Saint

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women's religious beliefs combined with the "motherhood mandate" (Russo 1976) within general societal norms, create strong spiritual and social incentives for motherhood.

Fatherhood is also considered a rite of passage for men in society at large, although not to the extent that motherhood is for women and not for the same reasons. Scholars have found that fatherhood is an important expression of manhood because it reflects a man's sexual capacity (Mason 1993; Edelman et al. 1994). Thus, infertility carries more stigma for men than women because society associates a man's fertility with his potency, which is linked to his masculinity (Gannon, Glover, and Abel 2004). For Latter-day Saint men, fatherhood is also an important part of one's spiritual progression in order to become like Heavenly Father; however, their status as "priesthood holders," is more strongly emphasized than their status as fathers (Chen 2014). The priesthood is what qualifies an individual for leadership within the Church. Sumerau, Cragun, and Smith (2017) found that church leaders create a tie between manhood and control through church rhetoric, emphasizing control of self, control of others, and independence from others' control. In contrast to the established role for women, the Church's "The Family: A Proclamation to the World" (1995) emphasizes the male responsibility to preside over, protect, and provide for his family. For Latter-day Saint men, a full expression of their masculinity is tied to their ability to produce children and then to preside over and provide for them.

Goffman's (1963) stigma theory is often used as a framework to examine how individuals negotiate childlessness in pronatalist societies (Miall 1986; Riessman 2000; Remennick 2000). The possession of a discrediting trait reduces the individual in the minds of others "from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one" (Goffman 1963:3). Childless women's deviance from society's "motherhood mandate" (Russo 1979), and

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childless men's deviance from traditional acts of masculinity (Edelman, Humphrey, and Owen 1994), make them ideal candidates for stigmatization. Involuntarily childless Latter-day Saint women and men are further stigmatized as their ability to perform gendered acts related to parenthood is tied to their personal worthiness before God and their religious community.

Past research highlights the difficulties faced by involuntary childless individuals in pronatalist societies (Miall 1986; Webb and Daniluk 1999; Remmenick 2000; Riessman 2000; Birenbaum-Carmeli and Inhorn 2009). Between the general social stigma of childlessness, and the medicalization of childlessness (Whiteford and Gonzalez 1995), childless individuals not only face social sanctions, but they also face mental, emotional, and physical hardships. Studies show that involuntarily childless individuals participate in various stigma management practices as they negotiate their deviance from social gender norms. Many of the same stigma management practices are shared by women and men, such as selective disclosure and social withdrawal (Miall 1986; Webb and Daniluk 1999; Remmenick 2000; Riessman 2000; Birenbaum-Carmeli and Inhorn 2009); however, some practices vary according to the different challenges faced by women and men. The motivations behind the social expectations for bearing children are different for women than they are for men, and their stigma management practices vary accordingly. These differences in stigma management practices are likely to be present among involuntarily childless Latter-day Saint women and men, since the religious expectation to bear children is also tied to different aspects of their gender identities.

This study offers an exploration of stigma management among childless individuals not only in a pronatalist society, but one in which motherhood and fatherhood have a deeply

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rooted religious significance. With its emphasis on traditional family and gender roles, the Church provides an instructive lens through which to view the negotiation practices of individuals who are stigmatized by their deviance from social gender norms within a community. For involuntarily childless Latter-day Saint women and men, the stigma they experience is likely magnified by the fact that their deviance not only opposes societal norms, but also opposes their deeply-held religious beliefs regarding their personal worthiness and divine purpose to become like their Heavenly Mother and Heavenly Father. Drawing from interviews with 15 involuntarily childless Latter-day Saint women and 15 involuntarily childless Latter-day Saint men, I examine their experiences surrounding their childlessness, and the stigma management practices they employ as they negotiate the contradictions between their lived experience and the pronatalist teachings of the Church. Further, I highlight how the stigma management practices of involuntarily childless Latter-day Saint women vary from those of men as they each participate in the maintenance of their gender identity by “doing gender” and “doing religion” (West and Zimmerman 1987; Avishai 2008).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Childlessness in Pronatalist Societies

Stigma. Scholars have often used Goffman’s (1963) stigma theory as a framework to examine how individuals negotiate childlessness in pronatalist societies (Miall 1986; Riessman 2000; Remennick 2000). Goffman’s concept of stigma encompasses individuals who have discrediting traits that place them outside of what is considered acceptable for their kind. The possession of a discrediting trait reduces the individual in the minds of others “from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (Goffman 1963:3). Childless

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women's deviance from society's "motherhood mandate" (Russo 1979)— or the social expectation for women to bear and rear children —makes them ideal candidates for stigmatization. Just as motherhood often becomes a master status for women who have children, childlessness becomes a master status for women who are unable to have children, with any of their other attributes or accomplishments being overshadowed by their deviance (Miall 1986; Remennick 2000). For childless men, the stigmatization stems from the conflation of their fertility with their virility (Webb and Daniluk 1999; Wischmann and Thorn 2013). When a man is unable to impregnate a female, his masculinity is called into question. For many men, this puts them on the defensive and motivates them to engage in "compensatory manhood acts," such as having an affair, becoming a "super jock," or immersing oneself in work, in order to prove their masculinity (Webb and Daniluk 1999:22; Ezzel 2012).

Miall (1985) and Remennick (2000) found that perceptions regarding causes of involuntary childlessness were broken down into three main areas: medical problems, psychological problems, and sexual dysfunction. Another common perception among religious individuals is that infertility is a punishment from God (Remennick 2000; Birenbaum-Carmeli and Inhorn 2009). Scholars have found that infertility is perceived as being a "woman's problem" even when the medical cause is male factor infertility. Many women in past studies prefer to take the blame on themselves rather than disclose their male partner's infertility, because they feel that male infertility is more stigmatized because of its association with masculinity and virility (Miall 1985, 1986; Riessman 2000; Remennick 2000). While some men are forthcoming about their own infertility in order to protect their wives from gossip (Birenbaum-Carmeli and Inhorn 2009), other men either remain silent

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when people assume it is the woman's problem, or they will even directly blame her (Throsby and Gill 2004). Overall, women bear the brunt of the social sanctioning that takes place as a result of the stigmatization of childlessness, regardless of the actual cause. Latter-day Saint women bear the stigma that comes from childlessness as deviance from the gender norms of society in general, as well as the stigma of deviance from religious expectations. In this way, they are punished for "doing gendered religion" incorrectly (Darwin 2018). The social sanctions experienced by childless individuals have far-reaching effects. These sanctions, combined with the hardships of infertility treatments, often create mental and emotional health issues for childless individuals.

Mental and emotional health. Scholars argue that infertility has profound consequences for the identity of the individual experiencing it (Miall 1986; Webb and Daniluk 1999; Wischmann and Thorn 2013). Both men and women speak of feeling like they are failures and that they are inferior to others who are able to bear children (Miall 1986; Webb and Daniluk 1999; Remennick 2000; Wischmann and Thorn 2013). They isolate themselves in order to avoid social situations that are emotionally distressing or that may lead to disclosure of their discrediting attribute (Miall 1986; Webb and Daniluk 1999; Riessman 2000; Remennick 2000).

Many men and women also report that the quality of their marital relationships deteriorates as a result of the stress from the stigma they experience as well as infertility treatments (Edelmann et al. 1994; Remennick 2000.) The stress of becoming pregnant makes sex an obligation as opposed to a strengthening bond in the marriage. Edelmann et al. (1994) also found that the individuals who felt a stronger association between their ability to reproduce and their gender identity had increased marital discord as a result of infertility.

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With all of the mental and emotional strain that derives from involuntary childlessness, depression is also a common side effect (Wischmann and Thorn 2013; Suna and Ilay 2016.) For women, the added physical and emotional strain that comes with medical interventions makes depression even more likely (Suna and Ilay 2016). These stressors that result from the stigma of childlessness and the emotional trauma of infertility are further compounded by the physical trauma associated with fertility treatments.

Medical interventions. The medicalization of childlessness has turned what used to be a private matter that was determined by Nature into a “prolonged public crisis” that has no clear end because of the multitude of medical interventions available to potentially solve the problem of childlessness (Whiteford and Gonzalez 1995). Women’s physical and mental health is compromised as they are subjected to invasive procedures and high doses of hormones in an effort to increase their chances of becoming pregnant (Remennick 2000; Suna and Ilay 2016). Remennick (2000) found that because of the time and energy required for doctor’s visits, and the deterioration of health as a result of fertility treatments, many of the women she interviewed had to stop working. This influenced their finances in a negative way and had a major impact on the women’s ability to advance their careers in the long run. It is also possible that the removal of the distraction of work could contribute to the intense focus on childlessness as a woman’s primary identity. Other pieces of her identity fall away and “childless” takes over as her master status, which increases her perception of herself as stigmatized.

Men have far less physically required of them when it comes to medical interventions for fertility. Many express sorrow at the suffering of their wives in this process, and are the ones who eventually put the brakes on the process as they feel it becomes too much for them

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and their wives (Throsby and Gill 2004). For men who are required to provide repeated semen samples, the process is often awkward and humiliating. They report feeling like “dirty old men” as they are required to masturbate in rooms with pornography, or even in public restrooms in order to provide semen samples for implantation (Webb and Daniluk 1999; Throsby and Gill 2004:341). Medical interventions for fertility may also be viewed as immoral by people who see it as interfering with god’s will, which would only increase the stress and stigma experienced by individuals undergoing fertility treatments (Birenbaum-Carmeli and Inhorn 2009).

The deleterious effects of infertility on the physical and mental health of men, and especially women, in combination with the social stigma of childlessness in pronatalist societies places involuntary childless individuals in a vulnerable position. For childless individuals who adhere to a religion that emphasizes family and traditional gender roles as divinely appointed, that stress and stigma may be magnified. These individuals not only fail to meet the norms and expectations of society, but also fall short of the gender expectations that communicate their devotion to God within their personal belief system.

Doing Gender and Doing Religion

“Doing gender” and “doing religion” are important theoretical frameworks to consider when looking at the agency of involuntarily childless men and women. The central claim in the “doing gender” theoretical framework is that gender is not an innate part of what an individual is or has, but is something that an individual achieves through daily actions and interactions with others. An individual’s gender is constructed based on the interpretations of that individual’s actions as fitting into societal gender norms, and is then reinforced through

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social sanctions that can be enacted by other people, institutions, or by the individual (West and Zimmerman 1987).

Avishai (2008) developed a theoretical model that draws from West and Zimmerman's (1987) "doing gender," which she calls "doing religion." According to Avishai (2008), in the same way that gender is something that is constructed through "doing" rather than simply "being," religious identity is also something that people construct through "doing." Avishai (2008) argues that even when viewed as a strategic action, religion is not always done for extra-religious purposes, but can be done to achieve religious ends or specifically with "the goal of becoming an authentic religious subject against an image of the secular Other" (2008:413). For example, although the women in Avishai's study held differing opinions about whether *niddah* (a set of Jewish laws requiring certain rituals and rules about sexual intimacy surrounding menstruation) was beneficial or harmful to them, most of them agreed that ultimately they participate in *niddah* because they view it as an important aspect of their orthodox Jewish identities. Avishai calls for scholars to avoid the false dichotomy of agency and complicity, and to consider that people can also "do religion" for religious ends.

Based on the theoretical frameworks of "doing gender" and "doing religion," in conjunction with the literature discussed below concerning the importance of gender in the Church of Jesus Christ, it is clear that for Latter-day Saints "doing gender" *is* "doing religion." In a religion where church leaders preach specific gendered expectations as the word of God as they do in the Church of Jesus Christ, "doing gender" and "doing religion" are inseparably intertwined (Sumerau 2015; Darwin 2018).

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Gender as Divinely Ordained

Official doctrine within the Church teaches that each person's individual spirit is given a gender—male or female—prior to birth within a physical body, and that each gender comes with certain innate abilities, characteristics, and duties (Busquait 2001). This divinely ordained gender cannot be changed and is eternal (Sumerau 2015). Sumerau (2015) notes that the qualities that Church leaders promote as being desirable for women go hand-in-hand with the “emphasized femininity” (Connell 1987) that supports the mechanisms that preserve the status quo of gender inequality. Sumerau (2015) also notes the contradiction that “despite the essential, God-given nature of femininity, LDS leaders still recognized that women and men could act, look, and be very similar”(60), and they have devoted a great deal of energy to teaching Latter-day Saint women how to develop feminine attributes that are supposedly inherent. Latter-day Saint leaders emphasize the importance of “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987) through the use of language that “link[s] efforts to do femininity in nontraditional ways with immorality” (Sumerau 2015:65).

The Motherhood Mandate in the Church

Although the expectations for women's behavior have changed throughout the history of the Church (Vance 2002), its modern interpretation falls in line with traditional ideals of women as nurturers and men as providers and protectors. The Church's “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” (1995) states that “gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose.” Chen (2014) notes that the Church's leaders and publications generally use the terms “sex” and “gender” interchangeably, which supports their belief that biological sex is determined by the gender of one's premortal spirit, which is unchangeable. This essentialist view of gender shows up in

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much of the scholarship on involuntarily childless women as they grapple with their identity as women who cannot fulfill their primary purpose of bearing children (Miall 1985, 1986; Riessman 2000; Remennick 2000). It is likely that the Latter-day Saint beliefs that gender is divinely ordained and that “doing gender” provides evidence of one’s moral character would intensify the stigma felt by Latter-day Saints who are childless.

Heavenly Mother. The Church’s doctrine on Heavenly Mother may also contribute to the stigma felt by childless Latter-day Saint women. The Church teaches that human spirits are created by both a Heavenly Father and a Heavenly Mother, and that individuals should emulate this example of family while living on Earth with the hope of achieving godhood and having eternal posterity in the afterlife.² Thus, marriage, childbearing and childrearing are central elements of salvation and exaltation for Latter-day Saints (Hoyt 2009). While the idea of a female deity has the potential to be liberating for women, it is not so in the case of Heavenly Mother. Worship of Heavenly Mother is strictly forbidden, and she is rarely discussed in official church settings (Heeren, Lindsey, and Mason 1984). On the rare occasions when she is discussed, she is held up as the ideal of womanhood, which is defined by her role as a bearer and nurturer of children (Heeren et al. 1984; Chen 2014). Ultimately, “patriarchy and belief in a goddess go hand-in-hand” as Heavenly Mother is used as a tool to reinforce patriarchal gender norms (Heeren et al. 1984:409). As the only female role model for Latter-day Saint women, Heavenly Mother provides significant incentive for women to become mothers in an effort to achieve godhood. In this way, the doctrine of Heavenly Mother may contribute to the burden of childless Latter-day Saint women.

Spiritual transformation through the bodily practice of motherhood. The teachings of the Church reinforce and intensify the motherhood mandate (Russo 1979) by tying

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motherhood to women's righteousness and religious piety (Hoyt 2009). In interviews with Latter-day Saint women, Hoyt found that "fecundity or fertility is highly influential in self-formation. These LDS women met their potential, in part, by practicing piety vis-à-vis the body. One of the ways to receive a righteous disposition is to bear children" (Hoyt 2009:311). The Church's portrayals of women emphasize bodily practices of motherhood as the primary path for women to achieve godhood. Based on Hoyt's (2009) study, Latter-day Saint women generally subscribe to this belief, and place motherhood as their highest priority in life next to marriage. For the women in Hoyt's study who did not have children, they found comfort in their abilities to "mother in other ways," for example through nurturing interactions with other people's children (Hoyt 2009:312). The idea of proxy motherhood is prevalent in Latter-day Saint cultural narratives concerning childless women, and is often used as a way to console them until they can bear their own children in the afterlife (Dew 2001; Beck 2004). Despite these efforts to present proxy motherhood as a consolation, the connecting of a woman's righteousness to her status as a mother likely contributes to the feelings of failure and being "not good enough" commonly experienced by involuntary childless women (Miall 1985; Riessman 2000; Remennick 2000).

Priesthood and motherhood. Church members often describe motherhood as the counterpart to the priesthood, which may contribute to the stigma felt by childless Latter-day Saint women (Cornwall 1994). This rhetoric is used by leaders to demonstrate that although men and women have different God-given roles, they are equal in authority and importance (Chen 2014). Male Latter-day Saints hold the priesthood, which is the power to act in God's name by performing religious ordinances³ and presiding over the administration of the Church (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2019). Men must maintain a certain

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standard of worthiness in order to exercise the priesthood to its fullest extent. For women, then, the likening of priesthood to motherhood creates a tie between motherhood and worthiness. A woman can only reach her fullest potential as a righteous and worthy individual by fulfilling her role as a mother.

This pairing of priesthood and motherhood also links women's social status and social power in the Church with their achieved status as mothers. If childless women are excluded from the administrative and spiritual power of the priesthood because of their sex, and they do not have the social power that is derived from motherhood, then their potential for influence within the Church's social hierarchy is limited at best. This is just one more challenge faced by childless Latter-day Saint women.

Within the context of the Church of Jesus Christ, Russo's (1979) Motherhood Mandate becomes a quadruple imperative. It is not only a social expectation for a woman's identity to revolve around motherhood, but it is also connected to her spiritual worthiness, her potential for godhood, and her personal authority and power within the church hierarchy. Given the social and spiritual significance of motherhood within the Church, what does this mean for Latter-day Saint women who are involuntarily childless? How do they negotiate their childlessness with their identity as Latter-day Saint women? How do Latter-day Saint women's experiences of childlessness differ from those of men?

Fatherhood in the Church

Scholarship on fatherhood in the Church is limited in comparison to motherhood in the Church. This may be because of the higher emphasis on motherhood for women than on fatherhood for men (Hoyt 2009). When church leaders address male members of the Church they tend to emphasize their role as priesthood holders as opposed to their role as fathers.

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Church leaders' expectations for priesthood holders, which includes the vast majority of male church members over the age of 11, very much falls in line with traditional ideals of masculinity. Societal standards for manhood emphasize the ability to control others while avoiding being controlled by others (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). Through a content analysis of archival material from The Church, Sumerau, Cragun, and Smith (2017) find that the ability for men to exercise control is also a major theme in Latter-day Saint leaders' rhetoric. Church leaders focus on the importance of men exercising self-control in regards to their emotional and sexual expression, and on men exercising control over others by presiding over their families and other members of the Church (Sumerau et al. 2017).

When church leaders *do* discuss the role of men as fathers, they cast the role through the lens of priesthood leadership (Hemming 2016). One Latter-day Saint father describes feeling as if Church leaders view fathers as being “visiting Church authorities in their own homes” (Hemming 2016:252) in that the primary responsibilities mentioned are to provide and preside. Similarly, Chen's (2014) content analysis of video advertisements created by the Church is consistent with this “father-as-visiting-authority” model (Hemming 2016). She notes that ads that featured women overwhelmingly focused on their roles as mothers in the home, whereas ads that featured men emphasized their occupations outside of the home over their role as fathers. Although “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” (1995) states that husbands and wives should help each other as equal partners, it also outlines a divinely ordained gendered division of labor, as previously discussed. The emphasis remains on authority for men, and on the nurturing of children for women.

Based on current representations of manhood and womanhood in the Church, it can be surmised that childlessness is likely to have a larger negative impact on women than on

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men. However, in the early days of the Church, more emphasis was placed on the importance of fathering children for men. Worthy male members of the Church were expected to take more than one wife in the interest of increasing their own posterity. Having more children was seen as evidence of their righteousness before God and community, and increased their personal eternal glory (Hoyt 2011). While the Church officially discontinued the practice of polygamy in 1890 (Hoyt 2011), and the idea of connecting men's righteousness with the number of children they father is no longer part of the rhetoric employed by Church leaders, the residual effects of these ideas may still influence men in the Church today. Especially since childbearing is still such an important part of righteous womanhood in the Church, this could potentially influence the way that childless Latter-day Saint men feel about their inability to father children. The Church's emphasis on men's priesthood duty to preside over their families also presents a challenge for involuntarily childless Latter-day Saint men, since they would be unable to fully engage in that role without children over whom they can preside.

With the expectations for Latter-day Saint women and men being so different from each other, it is likely that the experiences among involuntarily childless Latter-day Saint women and men also differ. While there is not literature specifically addressing the involuntarily childless Latter-day Saint population, past literature on childless individuals in other pronatalist societies can be used to guide sociologists toward an understanding of involuntary childlessness within the Church.

Stigma Management

Resistance and Coping. In her study on childless women in South India, Riessman (2000) questions some of the underlying assumptions of Goffman's stigma theory. She

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argues that stigma theory takes a Westernized approach to stigma, which assumes that stigmatized individuals have enough individuality and privacy to allow for selective disclosure of non-visible discrediting traits. Riessman argues that such privacy is not realistic in collectivistic Asian societies. She also states that past literature on childlessness focuses on gender expectations as the primary stigmatizing force, and does not consider the impact of race, age, and social class on individuals who are childless. Another of Riessman's criticisms, which is shared by other scholars (Gussow and Tracy 1968), is that Goffman's stigma theory presupposes that stigmatized individuals agree with society's interpretation of them as deviant, and thus does not allow for stigmatized individuals to resist their stigmatization. Riessman's study provides examples of women who reject society's interpretation of their childlessness as discrediting, and who engage in everyday acts of resistance. The type and effectiveness of the resistance varied from woman to woman depending on social class and age, with the affluent and older women having more resources for resistance at their disposal (Riessman 2000). The actions that Riessman defined as resistance included resistant thinking, selective disclosure, faulting the offender, avoiding difficult social situations, leaving or talking back to harsh family members, and using humor. She also discusses voluntary childless women, and how their choice not to have children in a pronatalist society is resistance in and of itself.

Remennick (2000) challenges Riessman's definition of "resistance" and argues that the strategic acts in which childless women engage should be viewed as coping strategies as opposed to resistance. In her own study on childless Israeli women, Remennick (2000) argues that the ability for childless women to engage in acts of resistance was not possible when they agreed with society's narrative about the deviant nature of their childlessness. The

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women's level of commitment to the pronatalist narrative was tied to their perceptions of themselves as stigmatized individuals, and their perception of themselves as rightfully stigmatized halted any chance for true resistance. Remennick argues that the Israeli women in her study "reinforce the stigma of infertility as incompatible with normal life and self-respect" through their "frantic attempts to bear children with the aid of technology" (2000:825-826). Remennick's (2000) conclusion combined with Riessman's (2000) intersectional approach provides a frame that allows for agency and acknowledges that acts of resistance may look different depending on an individual's social location, but does not ignore the way that individuals' actions can reinforce the social structures that oppress them. In this way, whether an individual is engaging in acts that amount to resistance or coping, they may still be doing it in such a way that they are "doing gender" and "doing religion" (West and Zimmerman 1987; Avishai 2008.)

Gendered Stigma Management. Past literature on childlessness shows many similarities regarding the emotional effects of infertility on women and men; however, the strategies used to offset the stigma of childlessness varies between sexes. Van den Broeck et al. (2010) describe women's management strategies as "loss-oriented" wherein they focus on understanding and sharing their emotions. Men, on the other hand, take a "restoration-oriented" approach as they seek pragmatic solutions that will allow them to move on to the next step in the process, whatever it might be. Both men and women practice selective disclosure, revealing their infertility only in situations where they feel safe doing so (Miall 1986; Webb and Daniluk 1999; Remmenick 2000; Riessman 2000; Birenbaum-Carmeli and Inhorn 2009). In couples, the woman often wishes to discuss her emotions with her spouse, but men feel that they have to be the "strong one" and often refrain from discussing difficult

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emotions on the subject. Men do this as a way to maintain their masculine identity, and because they think it is a good way to support their grieving wives (Webb and Daniluk 1999). While men tend to withdraw emotionally, women withdraw socially in order to avoid unwelcome questions and painful conversations (Remmenick 2000; Riessman 2000). Women also engage in resistant thinking, faulting the offender, talking back, and using humor (Remmenick 2000; Riessman 2000) as ways to offset the stigma they experience as women who do not live up to society's motherhood mandate (Russo 1976). As previously discussed, the primary source of stigma for infertile men is the association of fertility with virility or masculinity (Webb and Daniluk 1999; Wischmann and Thorn 2013). As such, men often reframe what it means to be a man, or will engage in compensatory manhood acts in order to prove their masculinity to themselves and others (Webb and Daniluk 1999; Ezzel 2012). Latter-day Saint women and men face the same gendered expectations regarding childbearing as the individuals in the above studies; however, with the link between gender and religious expectations within the Church, they must find coping and resistance strategies that manage their deviance within their faith tradition in addition to managing their deviance from general social norms.

Latter-day Saints' Resistance and Coping

In order to examine coping and resistance methods in regard to childless Latter-day Saints, scholars can draw from research on Latter-day Saints who deviate from the Church's gender expectations in ways other than childlessness. Leamaster and Bautista (2018) interviewed 30 Latter-day Saint women and found that the women from their sample who did not fit the gender ideal of stay-at-home motherhood were not critical of the Church's teachings regarding the divinely given role of women, and that they employed various

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strategies to justify their own deviance. One such strategy was to claim “personal revelation,” or personal direction from God obtained through prayer, which allowed women to justify their personal deviance while simultaneously condemning others’ deviance (Leamaster and Bautista 2018:11). In other words, they viewed themselves as a special exception to God’s rules.

Another stigma management strategy employed by Latter-day Saint women is the reinterpretation of the Church’s teachings. Kane (2018) interviewed 18 women concerning Latter-day Saint temple rituals, and found that many of her subjects felt distress concerning a Latter-day Saint temple ritual that requires women to covenant to obey their husbands.⁴ Although many women in Kane’s (2018) study expressed negative feelings about this covenant, they continued to engage in the temple ritual practices. Some of the women simply engaged in resistant thinking by disagreeing with the covenant in their minds, while others made an effort to reinterpret the covenant to appear more egalitarian. Kane (2018) found that Latter-day Saint women regularly reinterpreted the teachings of the Church in order to make sense of any conflict between their personal beliefs and the Church’s doctrine.

While these studies do not specifically address the coping and resistance of childless Latter-day Saint women and men, they provide examples of ways that other Latter-day Saints who deviate from religious gender norms have negotiated the contradictions between the teachings of the Church and their lived experiences. Given that involuntarily childless Latter-day Saints inhabit the same religious framework as the above examples, it is probable that they will engage in similar negotiation strategies such as claiming personal revelation that excuses their deviance from divinely ordained gender norms, and reinterpreting church teachings that exclude them from the norm.

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The Motherhood Mandate (Russo 1976) creates a social expectation for women to bear and rear children in society in general. For men, society conflates their masculine identities with their ability to impregnate women. Through its teachings and culture, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints intensifies these connections between womanhood and motherhood, and manhood and fatherhood, making the bearing and rearing of children an even more urgent necessity for its members. Past studies regarding childlessness in pronatalist societies provide insight into the social stigma and other hardships that involuntarily childless individuals endure, as well as the stigma management practices they employ as strategies for resistance and coping. These examples from pronatalist societies in general give a glimpse of the struggles that involuntarily childless Latter-day Saints likely face in addition to the pressure they receive from religious teachings. Finally, studies regarding the resistance and coping of Latter-day Saint women who deviate from church-sanctioned gender norms provide a glimpse of how childless Latter-day Saints may use personal revelation and the reinterpretation of beliefs to negotiate their childlessness with their religious beliefs and community. In my study, I seek to uncover the stigma management strategies used specifically by involuntarily childless Latter-day Saints. Further, I examine the differences between stigma management strategies used by Latter-day Saint women and men. For Latter-day Saints, “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987) and “doing religion” (Avishai 2008) are inseparably connected. In light of their failure to “do gender” and “do religion” correctly, involuntarily childless Latter-day Saints’ must create stigma management practices that address the disconnect between their own experiences and society’s expectations, as well as the gendered expectations embedded in their religious beliefs. My research contributes to the existing literature on stigma management practices

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and childlessness by illuminating the negotiation strategies of individuals who are doubly stigmatized through their deviance of gender and religious norms.

METHODS

Past sociological studies dealing with the stigma management practices of childless individuals have had success in exploring the topic through a qualitative approach (Remmenick 2000, Riessman 2000; Gannon, Glover, and Abel 2004; Birenbaum and Inhorn 2009). I also used a qualitative approach in order to uncover the stigma management practices of involuntarily childless Latter-day Saint women and men. A qualitative approach is ideal for the nature of this study as it is meant to be exploratory, and the data is most effective if it is informed by the thoughts, feelings, and opinions of participants. I conducted 30 semi-structured interviews, which included 15 Latter-day Saint women and 15 Latter-day Saint men.

Recruitment and Data Collection

I began locating study participants through an online support group for involuntarily childless Latter-day Saint women. The group administrators agreed to post information about my study and request that group members contact me if they were interested in participating. I also located participants through snowball sampling. I asked participants to share the information with others and I asked people in my own network to share the information about my study with people they know who fit the study criteria. Some subjects recruited their own spouses to participate, and so there are several couples who both participated in the study; however, most subjects participated on their own, and all of the interviews were done separately in a one-on-one Zoom meeting. The interviews lasted approximately 1 hour. Prior to the interview, all participants were informed about the nature of the study and any risks

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associated with their participation. I obtained written informed consent from the participants and use pseudonyms in place of participants' names in order to ensure confidentiality.

I recognize that conducting interviews online sometimes presents complications as far as reading body language that is not visible on camera and other cues from the participant's environment; however, the study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which made meeting in person a health and safety issue. The cost of conducting in-person interviews for this study was also prohibitive, and I believe that online interviews may actually hold advantages for this particular study. First, involuntary childlessness is a sensitive topic for many individuals, and it may be difficult to talk about experiences, thoughts, and feelings that could make one vulnerable in day-to-day social situations. In this case, the screen between myself and the participant may have provided a buffer that emphasized the fact that I am not a part of their day-to-day life, and therefore not a threat to their emotional safety. In other words, participants may have been more willing to share truthful personal experiences and information, knowing that they will likely never see me again. A second potential benefit of conducting the interviews online concerns Latter-day Saint cultural norms that put limits on the types of interactions that are considered appropriate for married men with women who are not their wives. The nature of the subject matter required a certain level of vulnerability on the part of the participant, and a certain level of intimacy with me as a young, female interviewer. The screen between us may have helped to offset any discomfort experienced by male participants, and improve the quality of data I was able to collect. Female interviewers are generally seen as more empathetic and sociable, making it more likely that male and female participants will be comfortable sharing

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true experiences (Warren and Hackney 2000). I believe this generality held true in this particular study, especially since I also share the faith tradition of the participants.

Sample Characteristics

Study participants are married and range in age from 32 to 68. All but one of the participants were involuntarily childless at the time of the interview. One male participant tried to conceive a child with his wife for over ten years before adopting four children. All but four of the study participants were active members of the Church at the time of the interview, and the majority of them reported that their social networks mostly consisted of other Latter-day Saints. Three men and one woman were inactive members, and they reported having more non-members than members in their social networks. The majority of participants live in the United States, with two participants living in Canada. Thirteen of the participants from the United States reside in Utah, with the other fifteen residing in a variety of other states. All of the participants are white, which is consistent with the Latter-day Saint demographic in the United States (Lipka 2015). (See “Table 1. Participant Characteristics” in Appendix A).

Among the twenty-five participants who reported their income, all but two are in the middle to upper class income brackets. According to the Pew Research Center (Masci 2016), 53 percent of Latter-day Saints make \$50,000 or more. The large majority of the participants in this study represent this higher income group, with the 47 percent of Latter-day Saints making less than \$50,000 not being fully represented in this study. It is possible that the reason my sample is skewed towards higher income individuals is that the stigma surrounding childlessness for lower income individuals is compounded by their inability to pursue alternative paths to parenthood such as fertility treatments and adoption. Although

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fertility treatments and adoption are prohibitively expensive for many couples, others expect infertile couples to at least attempt to pursue these options as a means to achieve parenthood. It is possible that the inability to conceive a child combined with the inability to pay for other paths to parenthood would create a more intense stigma, making people in this category less willing to participate in a study where they would have to disclose this information about themselves. It is also possible that my recruitment methods did not reach the social networks that contain people from this group. Snowball sampling may have limited the social networks that I was able to reach, since people are likely to know others that are similar to themselves (in this case, people who are middle to upper class) (Bahns et al. 2017).

Among the female participants the most common reason for their childlessness was female factor infertility, although in about one-third of the cases it was either combined with or solely male factor infertility. Among the male participants there were no cases where male factor infertility was the primary cause of childlessness. There was only one man that had fertility issues himself, but his wife also had fertility issues. There were also two men who decided not to be tested, and so they never found out if their childlessness stemmed from them or their wives. Given that statistics show that there is a roughly equal chance for male factor infertility and female factor infertility for couples that have trouble conceiving (Hull et al. 1985), it is interesting that none of the male participants were the sole reason for not conceiving. Based on evidence from past research, it is possible that men who fall into this category did not volunteer to participate in this study because of the higher level of stigma attached to male infertility and the connection of a man's potency with his perceived masculinity (Gannon, Glover, and Abel 2004). It is also possible that the men in this study who did not want to be tested made that choice in an effort to avoid learning anything that

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might cause them or others to question their masculinity. Another possibility is that the nature of my recruiting methods created this skew in the sample. It is possible that since I started by recruiting women first, these women were more likely to know other women who had fertility issues rather than men with fertility issues. Thus, some of the men that I recruited from snowball sampling may have been the husbands of women with female factor infertility, meaning they were not the primary cause of infertility. It was already quite difficult to recruit men for this study, and I do not think there was a better method to find men with male factor infertility. Given the fact that none of the men I interviewed (including the men that volunteered without having a connection through their wives, who comprise the majority) were the primary factor of infertility, I am inclined to believe that such men are simply less willing to disclose their deviant status.

My positionality as an active Latter-day Saint woman may have affected the data collection and interpretation process, which could affect the validity of this study. For example, there may be certain jargon or experiences within the Latter-day Saint culture that I take for granted, but that would be important to the study. While I have a deep respect for the Church and its members, I also have somewhat unorthodox beliefs compared to the average Latter-day Saint. Although I am still an active participant in weekly church meetings and activities, I am deeply uncomfortable with the gender inequality within the structure of the Church. This could influence the way that I read the experiences that participants share with me during interviews. I have tried to be aware of my bias as a researcher, and have sought direction from other scholars, both in and outside of the Church. Ultimately, I think that my status as a Latter-day Saint woman is an asset for the purposes of this study since I understand and respect Latter-day Saint culture and beliefs.

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RESULTS

Life Unexpected

Until recently, the Church had a program for teenage girls called the Young Women's Personal Progress program. It was designed for girls age 12 to 18, and placed a major emphasis on preparing girls for their future as mothers⁵. Most of the women that I interviewed grew up in the Church and participated in the Young Women's Personal Progress program. The majority of the women mentioned that their expectations and hopes for their life mirrored the teachings they received in the program. They expected to grow up, get married, and have children, with the understanding that motherhood was the most valuable role they could aspire to. The Church also emphasized education, but only through the "lens of motherhood," as one woman put it. It was seen as something that women could fall back on in case their husband dies or cannot otherwise provide for the family, but not as a way for women to find fulfillment or contribute to society.

Most of the women in this study transitioned into adulthood having fully internalized the teachings about motherhood from the Young Women program along with the general "motherhood mandate" from society (Russo 1976). As such, their worlds were turned upside down when they realized that they may never become mothers, and they had to rebuild their sense of self around a life and reality that was completely unexpected, and for which they had not been prepared. The word "devastating" was used by multiple different women to describe their feelings upon learning that they may not have children. For example, Fiona, age 46, became emotional as she described her feelings, and said it was "Hell. It was the worst thing that could ever happen." As Gena, age 43, put it: "As a woman raised in a faith like ours... It's like, it's like having your future ripped out of you. It's um having your sense of

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being, being taken away. Your reason for being on earth, gone. And I mean, it's just, and it's still hard. I mean, I don't think that there's any getting over it or getting past it. You just learn to live each day with it. Um, (whispers) yeah.”

In contrast, the Latter-day Saint men that I interviewed generally recognized that their status as fathers was not tied to their sense of identity as strongly as motherhood is for Latter-day Saint women. As Greg, age 48, described it:

Well, they don't say fatherhood is the most important thing you can do in your life. I've never heard that. Fatherhood has always been kind of one of those things of, you have to be a good father and be nice to your wife, but you're supposed to uphold the priesthood and do your callings . . . Where, you know, [my wife] would tell me how they would say in Young Women or Relief Society . . . things like the most important thing you can do on Earth is be a mother. . . . Or, if you're not a good mother you're a failure.

Another man, Sam, described the general lack of emphasis on fatherhood in the church:

We never really got that either in Young Men or Elder's Quorum it was usually about being a good Priesthood holder and that everyone should strive for that. Fatherhood tended to show up as a topic of conversation during specific lessons for Father's Day every year but it didn't come up as a constant topic in any of those lessons.

Only two of the men in this study spoke of parenthood as having been something that they strongly desired from the time they were children, whereas it was a common theme for the women. That is not to say that it was an easy realization when the men learned that they may not have children. One man described how he went through “bouts of depression” off and on throughout the process of trying to have children. Another described the emotional ups and downs of infertility treatments as “gut wrenching” and “devastating.” Some men also mentioned the disappointment they felt at knowing that their branch of the family tree would end, which is reminiscent of the early Church's teaching regarding men's continuing posterity being important for their salvation (Hoyt 2011).

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The difficulties surrounding childlessness that were spoken of most frequently by the study participants generally fit into three categories: view of self, messages from church, and interactions with others. The participants, especially the women, believed that being childless had a negative impact on the way that they view themselves. While some participants found peace in the messages they received from the Church regarding childlessness, most expressed frustration that the Church's teachings and norms did not line up with their lived experience as childless Latter-day Saints. In addition, study participants expressed gratitude for the emotional support they received from others who are close to them, but often had uncomfortable encounters with other church members when they revealed their childlessness.

View of self. In addition to confronting the unexpected reality that one will not ever have children, childless Latter-day Saints must deal with the way that it affects their sense of self. While most men did express a sense of personal loss at not being able to have children, they said that much of their sorrow stemmed from the compassion they felt as they watched their wives struggle. The male participants did not experience any kind of an identity crisis comparable to that of the women. As Greg put it:

For me life just went on. I mean it wasn't any different than it was before. I think it wasn't like in my big scope of life of I'm gonna have kids...so it was more of like, okay, well I guess I don't have to sell my motorcycleThe only real thing that changed was when people would ask, "Are you going to have kids?" That required a little bit more explanation. But other than that it didn't really bother me. Probably bothered me more because I knew it bothered [my wife]. Like, just me aside, it didn't really change anything, honestly.

Many of the men enjoyed the freedom of a life without children. None of the men felt that their life purpose had been taken from them like so many of the women expressed; however, a small number of them did express concern that they were missing out on personal development opportunities that stem from the challenges of fatherhood. Sean, age 41,

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worried that there was something wrong with him when he was not more upset about not being able to have children. He worried that his lack of concern about his childlessness was indicative of his underdeveloped capacity for love, caring, and empathy. He felt that it might be more difficult to overcome what he considered to be character flaws without the experience of parenthood. This is consistent with the Latter-day Saint teaching that parenthood is integral to the process of becoming like God, which is the ultimate goal in Latter-day Saint theology.

While some men felt that they might have fewer opportunities to develop godly qualities than men with children, the women in my study took a more general hit to their sense of self. The women felt that their purpose for existing was taken away, and that they were “less than” women with children in a more general sense. Rhonda, age 61, believed that her childlessness made it so that she does not “really know what life is all about.” She felt “incomplete” and less knowledgeable because she has not had the same experiences as “mature people” who are parents. Other women felt that childlessness overwhelmed the very core of their identity. Fiona, who has been dealing with infertility for about 10 years, described her feelings: “I've been working with my therapist through this, but for so long I just considered myself not on the same level as women with children, And that I was less than, not good enough, that my life didn't matter. (voice cracks, laughs it off). Um, but I'm starting to see that that's not true, so...” For many women in this study, being childless did not just limit their capacity to develop godly qualities, but they believed it denied them the opportunity to fulfill women’s purpose on the Earth, rendering their existence useless.

Not all of the women I interviewed had an equally difficult time adjusting to their circumstances. A couple of the women already knew that they might have trouble becoming

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pregnant due to health issues that were uncovered during early adolescence, which allowed them to plan their life ahead of time with the possibility of childlessness in mind. A few of the women who had married at an older age for Latter-day Saints (in their thirties) had already experienced a clash of expectations and reality while living their lives as single women in the Church. They mentioned how they had already had to rebuild their sense of self around a reality that did not fit the Latter-day Saint ideal. As Penelope put it:

In the LDS church . . . we're taught, you graduate from high school, you get married, you have babies, this is your life. And so when I graduated from high school, I started looking for a husband and I didn't find one for 14 years. So in that decade and a half, I had to learn how to define myself. I was a complete human being without a husband. And I have that kind of practice and that understanding of knowing who I am by myself. And I've been able to apply that to not having children because I understand that we are a complete and whole family even without children.

Of course, it is important to recognize that the pain of childlessness does not only stem from the outsider status one might feel as a result of social stigma, but that it can also stem from the loss of deeply held personal desires. Despite feeling confident in her ability to be happy and complete on her own, Penelope still mourned the children she did not have. Later in the interview, she became emotional as she described her experience of packing up the room that she had planned on being a future nursery. For those who desire children, the experience of infertility and childlessness is likely emotionally difficult on some level, regardless of their religious background or prior emotional preparation; however, the Latter-day Saints' linking of motherhood to womanhood certainly intensifies the emotions experience by Latter-day Saint women who are childless.

Messages from church. The Church's "The Family: A Proclamation to the World" (1995) emphasizes the importance of families for Latter-day Saints and provides guidelines for how a modern-day family should look and function based on gender roles that are

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believed to be God-given. The document presents a man and woman with children as the ideal kind of family in God's eyes. When Latter-day Saints do not fit the standard set forth by the proclamation, the Church and its members must provide a counter-narrative that allows for those who deviate to still squeeze into the Latter-day Saint box. Two of the common methods used to bring childless Latter-day Saints into compliance with Latter-day Saint norms and thus alleviate their burden are to emphasize the teaching that worthy individuals can have children in the afterlife, and to use the phrase "all women are mothers" when discussing the value of motherhood. While these two ideas are often used with the intention to comfort church members who are childless, I found that the majority of the individuals I interviewed did not find them helpful.

About one-third of the participants felt a great deal of comfort in the teaching that they can bear children in the afterlife. For these individuals, the teaching worked as others intended, and helped to alleviate (but not erase) the suffering they felt as childless Latter-day Saints. Most of the remaining participants thought that it was a nice idea, but did not find it helpful in the present. Both women and men said that it bothered them when people used this teaching to comfort them because it felt like a "Band-Aid." It was an easy way for others to put an end to the conversation and avoid facing an uncomfortable topic. Most participants believed that others were genuinely trying to help by referencing the afterlife, but that it ultimately worked to minimize their current suffering. Despite others' attempts to help them feel that they belong, they still felt that they were seen as "less than" church members who have children. Suri, who has contemplated suicide in the past, expressed her frustration with being told that she can have children in the afterlife: "I do not want to hear that. And let me tell you why. Because when you are wildly depressed, because it's not happening, what that

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sounds like is ‘You'll be happy when you're dead’, so you might as well be dead.” Suri and several other women told me how they wished that others would focus on the ways that they can contribute and find fulfillment outside of motherhood rather than trying to maintain their individual worth through the lens of motherhood.

Every person that I interviewed mentioned the difficult emotions they experienced at church on Mother’s Day and Father’s Day. There was a range of feelings expressed, from annoyance to discomfort to deep sorrow. A phrase that is commonly used on Mother’s Day for the benefit of involuntarily childless women is that “all women are mothers,” or that they can “still” be mothers to other people’s children. The majority of the women that I interviewed objected to this idea, feeling that it was dismissive of their experience, and that it painted their lives as a “consolation prize” next to the lives of women with their own biological children. Most of the men also recognized this phrase as being problematic for their wives and other involuntarily childless women in the Church.

In keeping with this phrase, most congregations have developed the tradition of giving gifts to all the women (and sometimes female children or “future mothers”) on Mother’s Day while having them stand up to be recognized by the congregation. While a couple of the women I interviewed appreciated this gesture, the majority found it awkward or upsetting. Melody, age 44, became emotional as she described her feelings about Mother’s Day and the idea that all women are mothers:

Mother's Day is the most awful day ever to attend church. It has gotten better over the years. But probably the worst comment is “all women are mothers.” That is not true. [voice cracks]. It is not. I have not spoken to anyone that does not have children that accepts that comment. We're not mothers. Yes, we can nurture. Yes, I can love children, but we are not mothers. A mother is someone that has a child that is solely responsible for that child. [holding back tears]. And has that charge upon them to raise that child. I don't have that charge.

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Scarlett, age 32, does not see the idea that “all women are mothers” only as a flawed effort to be inclusive of childless women, but also as a way for the Church to maintain the status quo surrounding traditional gender roles:

It's like, we can do things other than motherhood. . . . It is important to take care of your kids if you have kids, but it's not a blanket – “the most important role of all women is to be a mother.” Which is what the Church teaches . . . versus if you're a mother it's an important role, but if you're not a mother it's okay, you're still great. You're still awesome, you have a worthy place in society, and we love you and you're important, too. You know? . . . I feel like if they ever say that it's okay to not be a mother, I think they're afraid that maybe women will choose not to be a mother or have less kids.

Scarlett believes that if the Church’s narrative changed to one that framed alternatives to motherhood as valuable, it would diminish the urgency that women feel to “multiply and replenish the earth” and chip away at the power of the Church’s patriarchal hierarchy. By telling childless women that they can be okay because they are “still mothers” rather than celebrating their contributions outside of motherhood, church leaders and members reinforce the idea that motherhood is the only way that women can have worth and find fulfillment. Even though some participants did find joy in mentoring children, the phrase “all women are mothers” still did not sit well with the majority of the women (and men) in my study. They used the words “demeaning” or “patronizing” to describe the phrase. While not all of the women who were bothered by it were able to articulate exactly why they did not like it, they knew that it did not make them feel better and sometimes made them feel worse.

While a few men received comments from individuals regarding their opportunity to father other people’s children and felt glad to have that opportunity, this was not a common message that they received from leaders or from the general membership. They were often reminded of their responsibility to be faithful priesthood holders, but fatherhood was not a

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regular topic in the men’s church meetings, which means childlessness was not discussed at all. Brian, age 33, said, “Men are men. We just don't mention it.” Brian was a counselor to the bishop of his congregation, and told me about how they had given something to each of the women in the congregation on Mother’s Day, but decided that it was not necessary for Father’s Day. “. . . for Father's Day we started to realize, like the Friday before, oh, we haven't done anything. We looked at each other, like, great, that's the way it should be. We just don't care as much. The ward⁶ doesn't need to do anything for Father's Day.” Although it was not verbalized directly, these men seemed to recognize that Latter-day Saint women needed to be recognized for their efforts as mothers since motherhood is seen as the primary contribution that women make to society and the Church. Men, however, did not need to be recognized for their roles as fathers because they are regularly recognized at church for their important role as priesthood leaders. Men preside over church meetings by sitting on the stand, they conduct the meetings, they perform ordinances, and make all the decisions regarding who will do what jobs within the congregation. Even eleven to eighteen-year-old boys are recognized as they bless and pass the sacrament⁷ each Sunday. For some women, Mother’s Day may be the only day that they are noticed and appreciated. For men, Father’s Day is seen as a “side note” to the many other things they do in their lives.

While many men openly recognized how the Church’s lack of focus on fatherhood made the burden of childlessness lighter for them than for their wives, a few of them expressed frustration at the Church’s emphasis on priesthood over fatherhood because of how it affected them as children. As Royce, age 48, explained:

I was just listening to a podcast the other day where this woman's father was a leader in the Church and was always gone. My dad was the same. And then you hear other people say how wonderful your dad is. Well, he is giving all

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his love and attention to others and they get to feel it, but then I don't get to feel it.

Royce and his wife ended up adopting a sibling group of four children after going through ten years of infertility. Prior to the adoption of his children, Royce described his exhaustive efforts to be a father figure to the children of his home teaching⁸ families. However, he felt that his priesthood duties, including home teaching, overwhelmed him to the point that he was unable to provide the same kind of attention to his own children. In his words:

You have these kids, but you still have home teaching and a calling and all these other things. When all this time I was putting in for that, I don't have that time to put in for my kids because I was doing all these other things. I succeeded more as a surrogate father than I did as a father when my kids were little.

Similarly, Sean, age 41, felt insecure about his ability to be a good father, and he attributed part of those insecurities to a difficult relationship with his father whose already limited free time was filled with priesthood responsibilities. In his words:

Growing up watching my dad- he was grumpy and ornery and kind of mean. Who wouldn't be if they work 60-80 hours a week and then came home and went to the church office and was a bishop for four hours, came home, slept three hours and did it again for 20 years to life? Right? Kind of hard to enjoy being around someone like that. So . . . as a teenager growing up, there's part of me that's like, you say you're like kind of the ideal person or leader in the ward, but you're kind of a jerk. Hmm. This doesn't line up for me.

While not all of the study participants shared this experience, Sean's and Royce's stories further illustrate that the messages men receive from the Church about their roles and responsibilities emphasize priesthood over fatherhood. While this can have a negative impact on some families and individuals, it also makes the male experience of childlessness in the Church less damaging to their self-esteem and sense of purpose than it is for women.

Based on the responses of the study participants, the most common tactics used by church leaders and members to include childless Latter-day Saints seem to fall flat for the

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most part. The tactics are focused on bringing individuals who are deviant back into compliance with Latter-day Saint norms rather than creating a place for them as they are—without children. As Sam explains, “Anyone who doesn’t fit that mold: the childless, single, single parent...always feel like they are kind of an afterthought. We encourage everybody to come but that doesn’t necessarily seem to be who [church leaders] are thinking about when they are writing their talks.”

Interactions with others. For the women and men that I interviewed, being in an atmosphere where they do not feel like they belong often created trepidation surrounding social interactions with others. One of the first questions they hear when meeting someone new is “Do you have kids?” or “How many kids do you have?” These questions, though innocently asked, lead to an awkward and sometimes painful situation for people who are involuntarily childless. What follows is usually an uncomfortable exchange where the childless individual must give some kind of explanation for why they do not have kids, or give no explanation and possibly face judgments based on assumptions regarding their deviance from Latter-day Saint norms.

Involuntarily childless Latter-day Saints who make it known to others that they want children but have not been able to have children often get bombarded with platitudes to try to make them feel better, stories about family members or friends who had a similar experience, or well-intended but unsolicited advice about how they should go about trying to conceive a child. Most participants believed that people did not mean any harm by their comments, and some even welcomed the conversation if it was with someone who they sensed was sincere in their desire to understand or help. A few people mentioned how they felt more comfortable talking to church members who live outside of Utah than church members who live in Utah,

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possibly because of the pervasiveness of Latter-day Saint culture in Utah and the way that it influences peoples' worldviews surrounding family and children. Others mentioned how they preferred talking to men about it more than women, because they felt that women place heavier judgments on those without children since it is so closely tied to Latter-day Saint women's identities. Some participants were not interested in talking about their situation with others under any circumstances, no matter how well-intentioned the other party might be. The conversations were painful reminders of their childlessness and left them feeling keenly aware of how they were lacking compared to others with children. They believed that questions regarding their parenthood status were inappropriate and that people should mind their own business. As a result of their silence surrounding their childlessness, other people relied on their own assumptions to provide explanations. They often assumed that the childless individual did not want children because they were selfish, and were more interested in gaining material wealth than in the spiritual rewards of childrearing. Greg told about how a friend and church leader gave a talk in church about the importance of having children:

And he got up and was speaking about the importance of family. He told a story about how he was driving down the freeway behind this Jeep Wrangler that had a middle-aged couple, and instead of having car seats in the back they had a dog. And as he passed them, all he could think about was how they didn't understand the importance of certain things in their life and they were completely lost. And so [my wife] and I were sitting there and started laughing because she drove a Jeep Wrangler, we were in our 30's and we drove around everywhere with our dog. So after sacrament meeting his wife came up and said, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry," because she obviously understood the situation. And he came up afterward and said, "Oh, you know that wasn't about you. You guys are different." They just think that's the way it is. And then if they actually know someone they'll say, "Oh, you guys are different."

Rather than transferring the empathy and understanding that he felt towards Greg and Greg's wife to other couples without children, Greg's friend and church leader assumed that

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selfishness is the root cause of childlessness. Based on other participants' reports of their experiences, this is a common assumption.

Another common assumption was that childless couples must have unresolved sins in their lives that were holding them back from the blessings of parenthood. Only two participants were told directly that they needed to repent if they wanted to have a child, but many others received comments that implied that they were probably doing something wrong in the eyes of God. This is consistent with past research on childlessness in pronatalist societies, and with the many examples of barren women in the Bible who were blessed with children after demonstrating their faith and commitment to God (Remennick 2000; Birenbaum-Carmeli and Inhorn 2009). This attitude extended to people who were going through the adoption process. Sean described an interaction they had with a social worker when they were trying to adopt through LDS Family Services⁹: “We looked into adoption and tried to go through LDS family services. And I don't know, that didn't go too well. You know, when [the social worker] told my wife that she had decided at some point in her life that she probably didn't want to have kids and that's why she wasn't getting pregnant, and she probably needed to repent. That was probably the last time we went back and interacted with them.”

Many participants expressed frustration at others' attitudes and comments about adoption. They would often be told stories about strangers who had trouble conceiving until after they adopted a child, as if adopting a child would solve their infertility. Many were also frustrated that others simply assumed that they would pursue adoption as a means to become a parent. Some participants chose not to pursue adoption for various reasons, and they felt that others believed they were selfish for not trying every possible avenue to achieve

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parenthood. Other participants were frustrated when people would offer the suggestion to “just adopt,” as if it was an easy alternative to having biological children. Those who have gone through the adoption process know that it is anything but easy. Depending on whether you adopt through the foster care system or privately, it can take years of waiting and heartbreak as planned adoptions fall through over and over again, or it can be prohibitively expensive¹⁰. The challenges of the adoption process can be especially daunting for people who have already spent a lot of money and emotional energy on failed fertility treatments¹¹. Fiona and her husband, Ben, were hurt when people would say “Why don’t you just adopt?” as if adopting is as easy as stopping by the “baby store.”

Aside from upsetting comments and awkward conversations, the women and men that I interviewed often felt excluded from social activities with church members and with their families. Many of the women I interviewed talked about feeling excluded when the women in their ward would meet for a playdate with their kids. For Latter-day Saint women with young children at home, this is a primary way of socializing and making friends, and so those who do not have children may miss out on building relationships with others in the ward. Official church sponsored activities are generally focused on people with kids as well, making it less appealing and sometimes awkward for people without children.

Most respondents also felt that their interactions with their families were shaped by their childlessness. The majority said that their families were supportive of them in their difficult circumstances, even if their family members did not always know how best to help comfort them; however, they also noticed that they were often pushed to the sidelines in favor of family members that have children. Family activities were often centered on siblings who had children, with their schedules and preferences taking priority. Melody and her

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husband mostly cut ties with his family because they were tired of always doing children's activities and having their suggestions for adults-only dinners rejected. For them and others that I interviewed their frustration was not just about the nature of the activities, but also because being around children was painful for them as they were struggling to have children of their own.

Many respondents also noted that their parents visited their siblings with children more often, and gave them more gifts. Scarlett, age 32, was worried that her parents would give all of their family heirlooms to her sister who has children and skip over her completely. She explained: "And so I was like please don't give that to [my sister] just because she has kids. I really appreciate this, too. I appreciate all these things. I was definitely afraid she would give it all to my sister because, like, pass it down generation after generation or whatever. It will probably end up with [my sister]'s kids anyway, but don't skip over me." While a few participants felt hostile about situations where they were overlooked because of their childlessness, most participants expressed understanding regarding the way that people with children were prioritized at church and in their families. They gave others the benefit of the doubt in this regard, but still felt hurt about being overlooked so often.

Overall, the experiences of the women and men in this study are similar to those from past studies on involuntary childlessness in pronatalist societies (Miall 1986; Webb and Daniluk 1999; Remmenick 2000; Riessman 2000; Birenbaum-Carmeli and Inhorn 2009). Childlessness permeates many aspects of an individual's life and identity. Participants' primary struggles centered around the way that childlessness affected the way that they view themselves, the disconnect between the messages they get from church versus their lived experience, and the discomfort they experienced during social interactions as stigmatized

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individuals. The study participants developed various strategies to manage these challenges that they faced as a result of their childlessness.

Stigma Management Strategies

Childlessness affects different aspects of participants' lives in different ways, with women generally experiencing those effects more intensely. In order to offset the negative view of themselves that often results from childlessness, participants engaged in self-directed and interactive strategies to increase their self-esteem. Some participants chose to leave the church in response to messages from church leaders and members that stigmatize them in the Latter-day Saint community, but most found ways to make themselves fit back into the narrative by attributing their childlessness to God's plan or by reframing church teachings in a way that makes them feel comfortable. When faced with social interactions that may bring attention to their childlessness, participants used pre-rehearsed answers in order to demonstrate their desire to comply with the Church's narrative or they withdrew socially in order to avoid uncomfortable social interactions altogether.

View of self. Although the experience of childlessness was not easy for the men in this study, based on their own accounts its effect on their self-perception was minimal or non-existent. They did not express any major shifts in the way that they view themselves as individuals or as men because of their childlessness, which precludes any need for them to develop strategies to specifically improve their self-esteem or maintain their masculinity. Past studies demonstrate that the stigma surrounding childlessness for men is primarily tied to masculinity (Gannon, Glover, and Abel 2004). Standards of masculinity include the ability for a man to be able to impregnate a woman. Only one man in this study reported that his childlessness partially stemmed from his own fertility issues, but he also reported that his

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wife had fertility issues as well. The rest of the men either stated that their wife was the supposed cause, or they chose not to get tested and did not know the cause of their childlessness. It is likely that men who are the primary cause of infertility would have a different experience regarding the way that childlessness affects their self-perception. It is also possible that the stigma surrounding male infertility is so high that they are unlikely to disclose that information, which may account for why none of the men in my study are the primary cause of infertility. In keeping with the ideals of masculinity, most of the men mentioned that they focused their efforts on being strong for their wives.

Although some women's self-perception was more affected than others, being childless changed the way that most of the women in this study viewed themselves, and not for the better. They felt that they were less important and less valuable than women who have children. In order to offset negative self-perceptions that stemmed from childlessness some women engaged in self-directed methods. For example, Scarlett found a book that was written to help involuntarily childless women find new meaning and purpose, and it helped her change her perception of herself and the potential for her life. Several women mentioned that they came to a point where they simply decided that they had to love themselves, and used positive self-talk to overcome negative thoughts about themselves. As Kiara said, "It's been a process and you know, there was a point a few years ago where I just had to tell myself that I love myself and that my life was valid."

Other women took a more interactive approach to dealing with their emotions, and participated in online support groups for involuntarily childless women where they discussed with and learned from the experiences of other women in the same situation. Multiple women also met with professional therapists to work through their feelings about themselves

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and childlessness in general. One man, Sean, who was a therapist himself, also reported meeting with a therapist to discuss his emotions surrounding childlessness; however, Sean mentioned that he had other things to work through in therapy, and childlessness was not his primary motivating factor. For the women in this study, childlessness was the primary reason that they sought professional therapy.

These women had a negative view of themselves because they accepted the narrative that stigmatizes them as childless women. Self-help books, positive self-talk, and sharing the burden with others through support groups or therapy all have the potential to help the individual change her perception of herself as possessing a discrediting trait; however, most of the women and men in my study have not arrived at that point and may never do so. Based on Remmennick's (2000) assertion that resistance is only possible when the individual does not agree with the narrative that stigmatizes her, the stigma management practices of most of the individuals in my study, both women and men, should be considered coping and not resistance. Church leaders and members recognize that childless Latter-day Saints are in a difficult position because of their inability to comply with Latter-day Saint norms, and try to help them by providing ways for them to fit the narrative despite their lack of children.

Messages from church. The messages that involuntarily childless Latter-day Saints receive at church typically work to make them feel further marginalized, even when those messages are meant to ease their burden. For some participants, both male and female, the pain of being marginalized in the Church caused them to question church teachings that contradict their lived experience. As a result, seven of the individuals discontinued church attendance, either temporarily or permanently. Some participants explored other faiths or became temporarily inactive in the Church, but eventually settled back into their original

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faith and attendance habits as the pain of their childlessness faded. Other participants stopped attending church permanently. Seth, age 33, told about how he and his wife left Utah hoping to find enough cultural difference in congregations outside of Utah that they could find a place for themselves, but that they were disappointed to find that it was the same no matter where they went.

And as I became part of this marginalized group, all of the sudden it became like, I am not gay in the Church, I am not trans in the Church, I am not an ethnic minority in the Church. But I am part of this slightly marginalized group of people who don't have kids for whatever reason. And there is not a really good place for that person. . . . That really changed my experience in church because it gave me pause to think about what is church all about? What is the Gospel all about? What does God really care about? For a long time I told [my wife] I want to stay in the Church because I don't want to leave the people like me feeling like they are the only one. But after attending church in different places, it was like, gosh, I still feel kind of like the only one, and I still have all these concerns and stuff. It just wasn't worth it and I was ready to be done.

Seth and his wife, Scarlett, ultimately stopped attending church, and now consider themselves to be “child free” instead of childless, meaning they are happy that they do not have children. For Scarlett, her beliefs about the truth of church teachings has changed, but she also grew tired of the social pressure to always feel sad about not having children:

I am not sad anymore. I feel like if I stayed in the Church I'd have to say like, (in a cheesy voice) “We weren't able to have kids, and my heart continues to ache, but I'm still happy.” You know. I would never be able to get up to the podium and speak my truth and say “I'm happy, I'm okay, and I'm grateful to not be a mother.” It would be like blasphemy, they'd be like “Get off the stage!”

Scarlett felt that she would never be allowed to be authentic about her life situation if she remained in the Church. She told me that she was tired of being “happy-sad.” Ultimately, she decided to leave the Church in order to escape constant reminders of her deviance from Latter-day Saint norms, and to truly move on to a life that is happy and complete without

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children. Notably, a few of the male participants who continue to participate in church told me that their wives stopped attending church some time ago. They all said that being childless was a significant factor in their wives' transition away from the Church. Bennet, age 32, understood why his wife needed to leave the Church, and recognized the ways that the Church sometimes hurts people; however, he, like many others in this study, found strength in his faith, and believed that childlessness was part of God's plan for him.

Most participants did not question their faith, and many rooted themselves more deeply in their faith as a way to cope with the challenges of childlessness. These individuals often make sense of their situation by reframing church teachings in a way that includes their deviance from Latter-day Saint norms, and by attributing their childlessness to God's individual plan for them. While some men did mention the role of their faith in bringing comfort during their experience with childlessness, more women than men felt that their experience with childlessness has strengthened their ties to their faith and their reliance on the idea that God has a unique plan for each of His children. In their study of Latter-day Saint women, Leamaster and Bautista (2018) found that their subjects would often claim "personal revelation" that excused their own deviance from Latter-day Saint gender norms. In my study, I found that women used "God's plan" for their lives as a way to assign responsibility for their deviance to an external force, which helped alleviate the pain they were experiencing and brought hope that "the plan" would eventually bring them a child. For instance, Suri, age 35, often spoke about her "gut feelings," which she equated with personal revelation from God concerning her life:

I had a gut feeling that it might take a minute. Yeah, basically I felt like the Lord was telling me like, it's going to take a minute, but don't freak out about it. It's just, there's a lot of stuff that I need you to do. And I was like, okay. And, you know, I had my idea then of what taking a minute was going to look

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like and I thought maybe it would be a year or so. Didn't quite think it would be this long. Um, but when I start to panic, I keep going back to that gut feeling of, nope, it's just taking a minute.

By attributing her childlessness to God's plan for her life, Suri is able to have moments of peace despite her distress concerning her childlessness. She also uses her "gut feelings" or personal revelation to maintain a sense of hope that she will one day bear a child. In a similar manner, Helena, age 38, relies heavily on her belief that God has a personalized plan for her life in an effort to alleviate her emotional pain regarding her childless state:

Even if God's will isn't for me to have children here, even though it's a righteous desire, like really accepting that God knows me personally, loves me and he has a plan for me. And he can see what I can't see. He sees the beginning from the end and then I really have to just trust him and, and be okay with what that is. Even though having children- and that's what's worst, you know- he wants us to have [children] and stuff like that. Maybe he's got a different way for that to happen.

. . . That's the faith. That he knows the desire of my heart. He knows how much I want my own family. (voice cracks, becomes emotional).

Helena feels conflicted because she recognizes that her childlessness does not make sense within the teachings of the Church regarding what God wants women to be doing with their lives. According to Church doctrine, God wants all of His spirit sons and daughters to marry and have children. The fact that Helena has not been able to accomplish this because of circumstances that are outside of her control introduces a challenge to her view of God's plan for His daughters. It is also emotionally distressing for her because it is something she greatly desires. She remedies this and finds comfort through attributing her circumstances to God's individualized plan for her. Rather than questioning the narrative that excludes her, she fights for a place within it by viewing herself as an exception to the rule, and by attributing her deviance from the Latter-day Saint norm to God's will.

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In contrast, men did not seem to feel as much urgency regarding the need to make a place for themselves in the Church, probably because having children is less tied to their identities as Latter-day Saint men than it is for women. It is more common for childless women to encounter church teachings that discount and marginalize them. Thus, the women in this study often found ways to reinterpret those teachings in a way that allowed them to preserve the Church's narrative while at the same time making space for themselves as childless women in the Church. Gillian, age 44, reacted to a recent reminder from church leaders about the commandment to multiply and replenish the Earth by voicing her frustration with the insensitivity of male leaders who have "many children" of their own. She stated that "When things like that come up, you know, I just do my best to offset it and try and explain if it's any different." Gillian and the other women from my study must make an effort to explain the teachings of church leaders in a way that accounts for their lived experience. Gena, age 42, provides an example of the reinterpretation of the idea that "all women are mothers," or that they can "still" be mothers:

sigh. I don't know. Um, I struggle with that, 'cause I don't know how to feel. . . . I guess when I hear something like that, I hear we can all be mother-LY. . . . I think there's a big difference between being a mother and being motherly, and I hear being motherly.

Gena feels uncomfortable with the idea that she is "still a mother" without any children of her own, but rather than explicitly reject an idea that she finds distressing, she reinterprets the message in a way that makes it palatable to her and simultaneously preserves the legitimacy of the Church's narrative.

Nancy, age 38, was asked to teach a lesson about "The Family: A Proclamation to the World" (1995), which is a document created by church leaders that emphasizes traditional,

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heteronormative families and a gendered division of labor within the family. After alluding to her discomfort with this document, Nancy stated:

I told my husband . . . I'm not teaching what everyone expects from this because there is so much more to it. . . . At the time we were in a ward with a lot of single mothers, mostly divorced. And I was like, we're just not going to do that. . . . So instead I picked just one paragraph from it and talked about some of the elements of successful families and we're talking about faith and love and repentance, just like all the good stuff. And that was it.

Nancy's first husband died when she was in her twenties, and by the time she remarried she was in her thirties and working on a PhD. She ultimately chose to forego having children with her second husband, although she still considers herself involuntarily childless since she had originally hoped to become a mother. Nancy is not only childless, but she is also the primary bread-winner in her marriage while her husband stays at home with his child from his first marriage. Nancy reinterpreted the Church's teachings within the document by ignoring the parts that stigmatize her and her family, and focusing on the parts that she can comfortably apply to her life circumstances. According to Remmenick's (2000) position that resistance is only possible when the subject does not agree with the system that stigmatizes her, Nancy's life choices to not have children and be the primary breadwinner would be considered resistance. On the other hand, when Nancy must teach about the principles that stigmatize her and others in the class, she minimizes their importance compared to the "good stuff" rather than openly rejecting those principles. In this way, she is able to maintain her position in her church community as someone who can be trusted, while simultaneously creating space for herself and others who are marginalized by church teachings.

Nancy's strategy is similar to that of "heretical social movement organizations" (HSMOs). Hipsher (2007) explores the difficulties faced by social movement activists who she calls "heretics," or individuals who are challenging core issue positions of their own

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identity group. Hipsher describes the difficulty of making change to an institution when a HSMO is stigmatized as deviant or HSMO members are not seen as authentic members of the larger community because of the way their beliefs differ from the primary identity group (2007). This creates a situation where HSMOs must not only motivate others to action, but also must change what it means to be a member of the community, all while maintaining their own credibility as members of the community (Hipsher 2007). It is a delicate balance that must be achieved. One strategy that HSMOs use to achieve this is value amplification, which involves emphasizing and framing historical community values in a way that supports their cause. For example, a Catholic organization that was trying to gain support for abortion rights focused on the “primacy of conscience” in individual moral decision making even when the individual’s conscience goes against the church. This is an idea that resonates with many Catholics since it is a concept that is important within Catholic teachings (Hipsher 2007). In a way, Nancy engages in value amplification as she focuses on the church values that can support her and others in their deviant family forms, and stands before the community as an example of someone who is happy and committed to God despite the non-traditional gender roles in her family.

Some may argue that Nancy is not fully resisting since she is not openly rejecting the church teachings that stigmatize her and others; however, just like HSMOs, Nancy must maintain credibility at church if she wants to have any influence and make positive changes to the social norms of the institution. Simply by existing in the Church as a woman who chooses to be deviant, and by using the strategy of value amplification, Nancy has the potential to alter the structure of the normalized identity within her community (Hipsher 2007). While loud and public resistance is valuable as a catalyst for change in the Church, I

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argue that Nancy's brand of resistance will be what ultimately creates lasting change because it starts from the inside.

It could be argued that those participants who left the Church are also engaging in resistance since they refuse to participate in the institution that stigmatizes them. Their resistance may not be as effective at changing the institution since their departure casts them as outsiders (Hipsher 2007); however, on a personal level they are resisting. The majority of the study participants, however, engaged in the reframing of church teachings or the attribution of their childlessness to God's plan in order to cope with their situation rather than to resist. Kane's (2018) study of Latter-day Saint women found that the women interviewed continued to attend temple ceremonies despite the discomfort it caused for them, and regularly reinterpreted teachings from temple rituals that promoted gender inequality. According to Kane (2018), their efforts to make space for their personal beliefs and agency ultimately reinforced the patriarchal hegemonic structure of the Church. In an effort to make space for themselves as childless individuals, the subjects from this study participate in a similar practice as they reinterpret rather than challenge the teachings that establish motherhood as the purpose of a woman's life. Study participants, both women and men, also participated in the reinforcement of the ideas that stigmatize them in their interactions with others.

Interactions with others. Many of the men and women who were interviewed for this study described the ways that other church members attempted to get them to fit back into "the box" of what a Latter-day Saint life should look like. It was difficult for others to come to terms with the contradiction of involuntary childlessness within a church that views families as God-ordained, and it often lead to awkward interactions where the childless

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individual felt judged or offended. Some of the participants preferred to speak openly about their situation, often having rehearsed responses that were designed to give people just enough information to end the conversation and avoid negative judgments. Others preferred to avoid conversations about their childlessness altogether, and found ways to withdraw themselves from potentially difficult social interactions.

Conversations that reveal a person's inability to have children are generally uncomfortable for both parties, which can lead to use of patronizing platitudes or unsolicited advice. In order to manage their interactions with others, the study participants often had pre-rehearsed answers for the question "Do you have children?" Their answers were carefully designed to end the conversation quickly while also maintaining their status as righteous Latter-day Saints who desired to keep the commandment to multiply and replenish the Earth. Men seemed to be more likely to use this strategy than women, with more women preferring to avoid the conversation altogether; however, both sexes called upon the strategy when needed. Harrison, age 35, explained, "We do a lot better now when they ask how many kids we have. We say, 'We don't have kids, we have tried for a number of years and tried to adopt and it never worked out.' We now have a little spiel that we say, and it works things out." Most of the participants had a similar "spiel" that signaled to others that they are trying or have tried everything they can to become parents, but to no avail. In this way, they immediately make it clear that they do desire children, and they curtail any judgments that would label them as selfish and materialistic people who are putting off children in order to enjoy an easier life. In Harrison's case, it also works to prevent unsolicited advice, since he mentions that they have already tried everything.

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Having a rehearsed response to questions about children helps the study participants cope with uncomfortable social situations; however, the types of responses they give also act to reinforce the ideas that marginalize them the first place. Their responses are intended to indicate to others that they are “still okay” in the Latter-day Saint community, but only because they have exhausted every possible avenue towards compliance with Latter-day Saint norms. Nevertheless, even after proving their worthiness in this way the childless Latter-day Saints in my study still felt like outsiders to varying extents.

Gillian, age 44, discovered early in her 24 years of marriage that she would likely not be able to bear children, and decided against trying fertility treatments or adoption despite her sorrow at not being able to have children. Throughout her interview, it became clear that Gillian had accepted her childlessness over time and quite enjoyed the freedom of her life without children. In discussing her interactions with others who persistently question her choice to forego medical interventions and adoption, Gillian states:

As soon as it's like, “Well, we can't have kids,” it's like, “Oh, well when are you adopting?” And it's like, “Well, we're not adopting either.” And then you either get a blank stare or you get an, “Oh, of course you are!” And it's like, “No, we're not.” So I learned to say, “We don't have children” and follow it with “God has other plans for us.” And that shut things down usually pretty quickly because what were they going to say? Like, no, he doesn't or God doesn't actually know, or- they couldn't argue with God's plan for us. Right?”

As someone who no longer subscribes to the Church’s teaching that she must have children in order to be happy and fulfilled, Gillian employs “God’s plan” for her life differently than the other women in this study who use it for hope and comfort. She uses “God’s plan” to resist the attempts of others to manipulate her into fitting back into “the box” that makes sense to them.

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Remennick (2000) argues that resistance by stigmatized individuals is only possible when they do not agree with the narrative that stigmatizes them. She states that the unceasing attempts of the women in her study to become pregnant were evidence of their commitment to the pronatalist ideals in Israel, which precluded any ability to truly resist. In Gillian's case, her decision to forego fertility treatments and adoption is evidence of her willful non-compliance with the Church's narrative regarding the necessity of motherhood for women. Thus, her use of the attribution to an external force, or "God's plan," can be seen as a form of resistance. She employs the same narrative that is typically used to marginalize people who do not fit Latter-day Saint norms, and flips it on its head to show others that "God's plan" does not require the same cookie-cutter for every family. She makes a space for herself in the Church not by demonstrating her desire to comply, but by demonstrating that Latter-day Saint norms are not the same thing as "God's plan." On the other hand, those who use rehearsed answers to demonstrate their desire to comply with Latter-day Saint norms cannot be seen as resisting since their stigma management strategy demonstrates their commitment to the pronatalist narrative.

Past studies on involuntary childlessness describe how both the men and women began to withdraw from the social world, which often contributed to their feelings of loneliness and isolation during their struggle with infertility (Miall 1986; Webb and Daniluk 1999; Remmenick 2000; Riessman 2000; Birenbaum-Carmeli and Inhorn 2009). There was a similar theme among the individuals I interviewed, although it was a more common strategy for women than for men. Many of them cut ties with others in order to avoid situations where they might have to talk about their childlessness, endure judgments from others, or interact with other people's children and be reminded of their pain.

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Fiona, age 45, spoke about purposefully isolating herself from others in an effort to avoid painful reminders of her childlessness. While she does have a couple close friends she sometimes sees, she limits her interaction with anyone outside of her approved circle and avoids social media almost entirely. Here, she describes her plan to avoid painful reminders on Mother's Day, which began weeks before the actual day:

. . . I purposely did not look at any media or listen to the radio. I didn't go into stores. . . . I didn't reach out to anyone that day to wish them a Happy Mother's Day unless they contacted me first. I went to a different ward. I sat out in their lobby and took the sacrament and left right after the sacrament ended. Then I came back, um, to my ward just for primary¹², and I taught sharing time¹³ and then I left. I didn't stick around and listen to Mother's Day songs. So yeah, every year in primary when the kids sing Mother's Day songs, I would usually just go walk down the hall and make myself busy. But I just have to proactively, um, not let it be a focus or not let it get to me. So I push it out and isolate myself and just focus on things that bring me happiness. So I don't know if that's right or wrong, but that's what I do.

Fiona went to great lengths to avoid distressing interactions and painful reminders around Mother's Day. In the process of trying to protect herself, she isolates herself from others. While she claims that her actions prevent her childlessness from being a focus, it seems as though her actions function more as a strategy to avoid the possibility of a public display of emotion and uncomfortable social interactions rather than as a way to help her forget about her childlessness.

Latter-day Saint leaders give each member a different "calling" or job that occasionally changes, and Fiona happened to be working with children at the time of our interview. In my own experience as a Latter-day Saint, people take their callings very seriously and rarely reject any calling they are given even if it is extremely difficult for them. "Fulfilling callings" is one way that Latter-day Saints demonstrate their commitment to God, but it also has social implications since others can judge your level of righteousness based on

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how well you fulfill your calling. Rather than just stay home from church and ask someone to cover the primary lesson on Mother's Day, Fiona goes through a complicated procedure to avoid distressing social interactions while still fulfilling her responsibilities at church. In this way, she maintains her status as a righteous and committed member of the ward while ensuring that she can manage her emotions in front of other people.

Another participant, Helena, age 38, also talks about the way that infertility has influenced her social habits:

. . . I've always been pretty social. Like in singles' ward¹⁴, very social, involved, everything. And then when I found out [about the infertility] with this ward, it did change it. It was really going to church to renew my covenants. . . . I didn't need the social aspect when I was going through it. I needed the spiritual aspect of it. Could I have had a friend that could have been there for me when I was, you know, crying? Yeah. But it just didn't happen that way. . . . that's why I like the temple, because there isn't a category that I'm in. I think in my ward I'm in a category. "She's the one that's not able to have kids and we tip-toe through that. I don't want to hurt..." if you know what I mean. . . . But when I work in a temple¹⁵, there isn't that.

Helena brought up her preference for worshipping in the temple over going to church several times during her interview. The temple requires quiet, which limits opportunities for discussion surrounding Helena's childlessness. Temples also usually serve a large region, which means it is unlikely that she will see people that she knows from her own ward. In the temple, Helena can be just another Latter-day Saint woman dressed in white. She does not have to worry about how others view her, because she can hide the stigma that she carries as a childless woman. While Helena genuinely finds comfort through worshipping God in the temple, it also allows her to attribute her social withdrawal at church to her desire to seek the more important spiritual aspects of the Gospel. In this way, Helena proves herself as a pious Latter-day Saint despite her childlessness, and simultaneously protects herself from distressing social encounters.

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Miall (1986) discusses the self-labeling theory in relation to childless women, which explores the idea that individuals who carry discrediting attributes label themselves as stigmatized based on how others like themselves are viewed in society. This self-labeling may cause an individual to withdraw from social interactions where their discrediting attribute may become known. I see this taking place with Helena, who withdraws to the temple to avoid uncomfortable social encounters where her childlessness may become the focus.

CONCLUSION

As a result of the connection between bearing and rearing children, traditional gender roles, and personal piety within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, involuntarily childless Latter-day Saints find themselves at the crossroads of “doing gender” and “doing religion” (West and Zimmerman 1987; Avishai 2008). Involuntarily childless Latter-day Saint women and men experience a double stigma because of religious beliefs that tie their personal worthiness to their ability to do gender correctly. Although both childless women and men are stigmatized in society and within the Latter-day Saint community, the women in this study were more negatively affected by their childlessness because of the strong association that Latter-day Saint teachings and culture have created between motherhood and womanhood.

Although the effects of childlessness are evident in many different facets of the participants’ lives, the most common effects were seen through the way it changed participants’ view of themselves, the way that messages from church leaders and teachings influenced them, and through the way that it shaped their interactions with others. Women were generally more affected than men in every one of these areas; however, all the

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participants engaged in stigma management strategies to offset the negative effects of childlessness in their lives. In dealing with their decreased self-esteem that stemmed from their childlessness, the women in this study engaged in self-directed methods such as positive self-talk, and interactive methods such as joining support groups or seeking professional therapy. In an effort to manage stigmatizing messages from the Church, the participants often attributed their non-conformity to God's will, reframed the messages in ways that made them feel included, or left the Church entirely. In order to protect themselves from uncomfortable social interactions, participants created pre-rehearsed responses to questions about children that were designed to demonstrate their desire to comply with Latter-day Saint norms and end the conversation as quickly as possible. Many participants also chose to withdraw socially to avoid awkward interactions altogether.

Most of the study participants agreed with the Church's narrative that bearing and rearing children was the key to their life purpose and happiness, making resistance to their stigmatization impossible according to Remmenick (2000). Their stigma management practices generally demonstrate their desire to fit into the Latter-day Saint norms from which they deviate, and ultimately reinforce the narrative that stigmatizes them. On the other hand, some participants disagreed with the narrative that they must have children in order to be happy and fulfilled, and they found ways to resist the idea that their childlessness made them less important or worthy than anyone else. Some resisted on a personal level by leaving the Church altogether, while others stayed in the Church and attempted to leverage their influence to show others that they are happy and complete in their childlessness. These individuals found ways to employ the Church's narrative to influence other members' perceptions of what a family should look like.

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This study has several limitations. The biggest limitation of this study is that none of the male participants were the primary cause of childlessness in their marriage, making the stigma surrounding potency and masculinity less salient for them. Past studies show that infertility is more stigmatized for men than women because of its connection to masculinity (Gannon, Glover, and Abel 2004). The men in this study still required some stigma management practices; however, since the vast majority of the men in this study were not stigmatized by their own infertility, they did not need stigma management practices to protect their validity as men to the extent that the women needed to protect their validity as women. Another limitation in this study is the lack of representation from lower income brackets in the sample. This could affect the results of my study since it is possible that socioeconomic status makes a difference in the way that involuntarily childless Latter-day Saints negotiate stigma; however, it also means that the participants in my study are more homogenous, which will improve the specificity of the results for middle to upper class involuntarily childless Latter-day Saints.

This study contributes to the existing literature on stigma management practices and childlessness by illuminating the negotiation strategies of individuals who are doubly stigmatized through their deviance from gender and religious norms. It provides additional insight into connection between “doing gender” and “doing religion” (West and Zimmerman 1987, Avishai 2008), and how the intertwining of gender and religious identity influences the stigma management of childless Latter-day Saints. Future studies could expand on this study by focusing on voluntarily childless (or childfree) individuals in a pronatalist religion since their stigma would stem from a different source. Future studies could also focus on other

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groups within the Church who defy Latter-day Saint norms, such as LGBTQ, single, or divorced individuals.

¹ References in this paper to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its members will follow the recently updated Style Guide put out by the Church in 2018. The Church has requested that the terms “Mormon” and “LDS” no longer be used (Mormon News Room 2018).

² Latter-day Saints believe that all humans will be judged and assigned to a “kingdom of glory” based on where they will be most comfortable. The highest kingdom of glory is called the Celestial Kingdom. People who reside in the Celestial Kingdom will live with their families, and will have eternal posterity as they create worlds in the same way that God created the Earth (The Church of Jesus Christ 2019).

³ “Ordinances” in the Church are religious rites that are seen as necessary for salvation, such as baptism or eternal marriage.

⁴ This covenant was recently changed to obedience to God, and not to husbands. The research cited is still relevant for this literature review since the focus is on the methods of coping and resistance employed by women to negotiate the conflict between the Church’s teachings and their personal feelings, and not on the covenant itself (Riess 2019).

⁵ The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. 2009. “Welcome to Personal Progress.” *Young Women Personal Progress*. <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/manual/young-women-personal-progress/welcome?lang=eng>.

“As you participate in Personal Progress, you join with thousands of other young women who are striving to come unto Christ and “stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places” ([Mosiah 18:9](#)). Counsel with your parents, and prayerfully choose goals that will help you cultivate feminine attributes, strengthen your testimony, and reach your divine potential. Take advantage of your time in Young Women by preparing to receive the sacred ordinances of the temple, to become a faithful wife and mother, and to strengthen your home and family.”

⁶ A “ward” is a local congregation where people are assigned to attend based on their geographic location. Several wards make up a “stake”, which covers a larger area.

⁷ Sacrament” is the ritual of taking bread and water to remember Christ’s Atonement.

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⁸ “Home teaching” was a program in the Church wherein a pair of male members are put together and assigned certain families that they are supposed to look after and help when needed.

⁹ LDS Family Services is a church-run organization that provides various services to families. It used to provide adoption services for Latter-day Saint birth mothers and couples. It was cheaper than other options, and so many Latter-day Saints used this option until LDS Family Services stopped providing adoption services in 2014.

¹⁰ According to the Child Welfare Information Gateway (2016), adoption costs have a wide range depending on whether you adopt through the foster care system or through private agencies. Adoption through the foster care system costs next to nothing, but generally comes with longer wait times and more red tape to wade through. Wait times for a healthy baby can be two to seven years. Private agencies cost from \$15,000 to \$50,000 depending on various factors such as whether the adoption is domestic or international, etc. Approximately 10% to 25% of adoptions are disrupted, meaning they end after the child is placed in the home and before the adoption is finalized (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2012). The numbers for adoptions that fall through before the child was placed in the home was not reported by Child Welfare Information Gateway, but this was spoken of anecdotally by study participants as a fairly common occurrence.

¹¹ Traditional IVF costs around \$12,000. It can cost up to \$25,000 with a donor egg, and up to \$100,000 with a surrogate. IUI costs \$300 to \$800 per round, depending on whether you need donor semen. Women usually also must pay for fertility drugs to prepare for the IUI, which can cost \$700-\$3500 depending on the type of drug (Coleman 2017).

¹² “Primary” is the Children’s class that meets during the last hour of Sunday meetings. The adults meet separately.

¹³ “Sharing time” is part of the lessons that are taught to the children during primary.

¹⁴ “Singles’ ward” is a congregation just for young adults who are not married.

¹⁵ Latter-day Saints say they are “working in the temple” when they volunteer to help temple patrons through the ceremonies.

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APPENDIX A. PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

Table I. Participant Characteristics.					
Participant Name	Age	Infertility	Location	Income	Attend Church
<i>Females</i>					
Barbara	33	Female	UT	\$50-100,000	Yes
Fiona	45	Female	UT	\$101-150,000	Yes
Nancy	38	Unknown	UT		Yes
Penelope	35	Male	UT		Yes
Melody	44	Both	UT	\$101-150,000	Yes
Rhonda	63	Unknown	UT	\$0-50,000	Yes
Sara	35	Male	OH	\$101-150,000	Yes
Scarlett	32	Female	NC	\$51-100,000	No
Gena	42	Female	IL		Yes
Helena	38	Female	CO		Yes
Kiara	38	Female	NV		Yes
Gillian	44	Female	Canada	\$101-150,000	Yes
Karly	52	Unknown	AZ	\$101-150,000	Yes
Faith	53	Both	MO	\$101-150,000	Yes
Stacy	35	Male	TX	\$101-150,000	Yes
<i>Males</i>					
Bennett	32	Female	FL	\$150,000+	Yes
Greg	48	Female	Canada	\$101-150,000	Yes
Fisher	44	Female	UT	\$101-150,000	Yes
Brian		Female	UT	\$50-100,000	Yes
Harrison	35		VA	\$51-100,000	Yes
Royce	48	Female	ID	\$150,000+	Yes
Sam	34	Female	OH	\$101-150,000	Yes
Sean	41	Female	UT	\$101-150,000	No
Seth	32	Female	NC	\$51-100,000	No
Matt	47	Both	UT	\$101-150,000	Yes
Kaleb	40	Female	NY	\$101-150,000	No
Orson	68	Female	UT	\$51-100,000	Yes
Richard	63	Unknown	UT	\$0-50,000	Yes
Kyle	54	Unknown	AZ	\$101-150,000	Yes
Harvey	39	Female	VA	\$51-100,000	Yes

APPENDIX B. RECRUITMENT MATERIALS

Facebook post:

Seeking Involuntarily Childless Latter-day Saints

Hello! I am completing research for my Master's thesis in Sociology and want to interview male Latter-day Saints who are 32+, are married, and who are involuntarily childless. I will ask about your background, how you negotiate childlessness in general, and how you negotiate childlessness as a member of the Church. Interviews should take about 1 hour, and will be completed online through video chat. All information about study participants will be kept confidential. Please PM or email me if you are willing to participate. Thank you!

FB username: Chelsea Cooper, email: uhcooper6@gmail.com

APPENDIX C. INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Please tell me a little bit about yourself – where did you grow up? What was your neighborhood like?

- a. What is your family like? Are they active in the church? Why or why not?
- b. Is there anything you are passionate about? Any favorite hobbies?
- c. Were you born into the church or did you convert later in life? What led you to convert?
- d. Anything else that you think would be helpful for me to know about your background?

2. Please tell me about your current situation. Where do you live now?

- a. Who do you live with?
- b. How long have you been in this living situation?
- c. How do you spend your time? (Work, school, etc.?)
- d. What do you do for work/school, and how did you choose it?
- e. What church callings have you had in the past, and what are you doing now?

3. Can you tell me about your journey of trying to become a parent? Where were you when you first realized that you might not have children? What brought you to that realization?

- a. What was your reaction at that time? What was your spouse's reaction?
- b. What happened to help you decide whether or not you would try medical treatments in order to conceive a child? Was there anyone or anything else that influenced that decision?
- c. Are you still trying to conceive with the aid of fertility treatments? If not, how did you decide when to stop the treatments? If yes, how do you feel about it? Do you have a plan for if/when you will stop the treatments?

Prompt if needed: How do you feel about it now? How does your spouse feel about it now?

- d. Knowing what you know now at this point in your journey, would you change any decisions that you have made in this process?

4. How does not having children influence the way that you see yourself?
 - a. Has it changed your relationship with your body?
 - b. The way that you think and feel about sex?
 - c. The way you see yourself as a woman/man?
 - d. Has it changed your views on what it means to be feminine/masculine?

5. What about other people? Have you told anyone else?
 - a. Why did you choose to tell that person?
 - b. How did they react?
 - c. How did their reaction affect the way you felt at the time?

6. Think about a time when someone has made a comment to you about you having children. Prompt: At baby showers, weddings, at church, family get-togethers? Friends, parents or in-laws, siblings, church members?
 - a. Have you felt judged by others for not having children?
 - b. How do these kinds of interactions normally play out?
 - c. How do you respond? What is that like for you?

7. Think about a time that you felt you were treated differently than people who have children. Prompt: at church, at work, or at a gathering with family or friends, etc.
 - a. How did you react?
 - b. How are you treated differently by church members?
 - c. Family members/Friends?
 - d. Co-workers/Neighbors?

8. How has being childless changed your experience at church?
 - a. Has it impacted your involvement with the church or church members?
 - b. Callings?
 - c. Attendance?

9. Based on your experience, do you feel there is a difference between the way that members and non-members react when they find out that you do not have children? How do individuals from each group typically react?

a. Which reaction has more of an influence on how you perceive yourself?

10. What is the message that you get from church leaders regarding women/men who do not have children?

a. How do you feel when church leaders position motherhood as the primary counterpart to priesthood rather than to fatherhood?

b. How do you feel about the teaching that “all women are mothers” that we sometimes hear from church leaders?

c. What about the teaching that we can have children in the afterlife?

d. Do you find these teachings helpful, not helpful, neutral?

11. Are there any questions that you I didn't ask that you think I should have asked?