

“This is the Path You Go On:”
A Qualitative Study of Mormon Religiosity and Female Member Educational Attainment

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Abstract

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Utah consistently ranks poorly in measures of gender equity in the United States. For example, 30% of women in Utah County, Utah begin a college education, but do not finish their degree. Of interest, Utah County also has a high density of members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the United States (LDS, Mormon). The LDS Church is a conservative, traditional faith which emphasizes traditional gender roles and the importance of motherhood. This high density of members of the LDS Church could indicate a relationship between LDS religiosity and lowered educational attainment. This phenomenological qualitative thesis analyzes how female members of the Church interpret church doctrine regarding education and motherhood and subsequently make decisions about higher education. *Methods:* Using purposive criterion and extreme sampling strategies, the primary researcher conducted in-depth, semi-

structured qualitative interviews with $n=10$ current LDS-member women and $n=10$ previous LDS-member women ($N=20$). *Results:* Thematic, phenomenological analysis resulted in the identification of several themes regarding education, the value of motherhood, the perceived differences between culture and doctrine of the Church, and how ambiguous doctrine generates confusion about decision making. Themes included: 1) Mormon women highly valued education, 2) Motherhood was a higher priority than education, and 3) due to the emphasis placed on the divine role of motherhood within Mormonism, Mormon women felt pressured to choose between education and motherhood. These findings suggest that LDS church doctrine may highly influence female members when making decisions regarding their education and divine role as mothers. To positively impact gender equity amongst members of the Church, focusing on how doctrine emphasizes education and continual learning could encourage female members to pursue (and complete) their higher education.

Key words: Religiosity, Mormonism, LDS, Education, Motherhood, Social Work, Gender Equity

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**“This is the Path You Go On”:
A Qualitative Study of Mormon Religiosity and Female Member Educational Attainment**

Nearly 30.0% of women who begin college in Utah County, Utah do not complete 4-year degrees (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). While more women in Utah complete associate degrees or certificate programs than their peers nationally, it takes them longer to complete these programs (Jeppsen, 2018). Regarding gender equity in education, Utah women between the ages of 25 and 34 are 40% less likely to be enrolled in postsecondary education than their male peers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Furthermore, women in Utah hold only 47% of the state’s bachelor’s degrees, which is the lowest percentage of degrees held by women in the United States (Wood, 2013). Among advanced degree holders, Utah women have the largest educational attainment gap in the US, with fewer Utah women holding graduate degrees compared to any other state (McCann, 2019). Though female educational attainment in Utah has been improving in recent years, overall Utah women achieve less education than their peers nationally (Jeppsen, 2018; Cortez, 2018).

In thinking about sociocultural factors that may influence the educational attainment of women in Utah, it is important to consider that Utah is home to the headquarters of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, a conservative religion with strict traditional family values (The Family: A Proclamation to the World, 1995). In fact, most Utah residents (approximately 55%) self-identify as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Pew Research Center, 2018). In Utah County specifically, over three-quarters (88.6%) of the population self-identify as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Association of Religion Data Archives, 2010). Relatedly, nearly one-half (45.0%) of adults in Utah self-identify as politically conservative (Pew Research Center, 2018) and members of the Church overall lean politically conservative (63.5%; Association of Religion Data Archives, 2014).

Although the Church has stated their preference to not be referred to as LDS or Mormonism (Style Guide - The Name of the Church, 2020), the acronym LDS, for Latter-day Saints, and the name “Mormons,” from the religious text the Book of Mormon, are still the most commonly used names to refer to this religion and are thus the terms that are used throughout this paper. Additionally, throughout the interviews, the participants often referred to themselves as “LDS” and as “Mormon women” which is further reflected in the terminology used throughout the paper. Furthermore, to provide increased clarity around terms related to the Church and its doctrine and customs, a glossary of terms is included in Appendix A.

Regarding the intersection of faith and gender, Mormonism is a religion that places high value on motherhood and traditional gender roles (The Family: A Proclamation to the World, 1995). Women in Mormonism marry at younger ages than their peers, have children at younger ages, and have more children than their peers (Lipka, 2015). Potentially contributing to some of the gendered educational gaps, previous research shows that Utah women are less likely to be enrolled in school when married (28%) or with children under five years of age (51%) (Jeppsen, 2018). Utah women who are married are also less likely than their unmarried peers to have completed their degree. Marriage is related to decreased postsecondary education overall (Jeppsen, 2018). This evidence suggests that the high concentration of Mormonism found in Utah could be related to the lower academic achievement of Utah women, due to factors such as belief in gender essentialism, prioritization of motherhood over education, and insufficient understanding of the benefits of higher education, each of which are described briefly below.

One potential explanation for why Utah women are not completing college at the rates of their peers throughout the United States is the religious and cultural attitudes maintained by this religious group regarding gender essentialism. The LDS Church doctrine teaches that men and

women have divine roles based on their gender. Within the Church “selected representatives . . . construct gendered background expectations that effectively sanctify – or make sacred – gender inequality” (Sumerau & Cragun, 2014, pg. 50). For example, according to “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” a document written by church authorities, women are intended to bear children and be nurturers within the home, while men preside as the patriarch and provide for the financial needs of the family (1995). More recently, in the October 2018 General Conference of the Church, leaders of the Church continued to affirm the necessity of gender essentialism in understanding and fulfilling God’s plan, saying:

Our knowledge of God’s revealed plan . . . requires us to oppose many of the current social and legal pressures . . . to make changes that confuse or alter gender or homogenize the differences between men and women. We know that the relationships, identities, and functions of men and women are essential (Oaks, 2018, para. 22).

Regarding women’s roles and education specifically, the Church endorses multiple, potentially conflicting paths. For example, the Church promotes obtaining an education (for all youth of both genders) through their “For the Strength of Youth Pamphlet” (2011), General Conference of the Church, and scripture related to educating oneself in the Doctrine and Covenants, a religious text written by Joseph Smith. However, the Church also highly encourages women to become mothers, which does not require a college education. Thus, while being encouraged in some spheres, college is often seen as preventing women from fulfilling their divine roles as mothers, by preventing them from having children at a younger age (The Eternal Family Teacher Manual, 2016).

According to Sandstrom and Alper (2016), 58% of Mormons report that an ideal marriage and family structure has a man providing financially for the family and a woman nurturing and caring for the children. Oppositely, 62% of the general public hold the opposite

viewpoint: the belief that an ideal marriage and family has both partners working and equally engaging in childcare (Sandstrom & Alper, 2016). Perhaps due to this cultural view of marriage and family, Mormons have the highest rates of marriage within millennial groups (Lipka, 2015). Beyond Utah, Mormons also tend to marry younger than their peers in other areas throughout the country. Approximately 66% of Mormon adults are married, whereas only 52% of Christians and 48% of the population overall are married (Lipka, 2015). Mormons also have the highest rate of childbirth per couple of any religious groups (Lipka, 2015), though in recent years Mormons have reduced the overall number of children they have from 3.31 children in 1981 to 2.42 children in 2016 (Reiss, 2019). It is possible that these factors of earlier marriage and increased childbirth could be contributing to Mormon women completing fewer college degrees compared to their male peers in Utah.

While views of gender roles and womanhood may influence female educational attainment, the LDS faith may also potentially influence male educational attainment. One tenet of LDS belief is that young men as early as the age of 18 should serve a full-time preaching mission if they have the capacity to do so (Kimball, 1981). Young men are expected to serve full time missions as part of their priesthood duties, whereas young women have no such obligation and may instead choose to go if they feel the desire. These missions last two years for men and 18 months for women (Monson, 2012). This block of time spent in a mission could explain why young men ages 18-24 have earned fewer college degrees than their female peers but then catch up to equate the number of degrees once they have reached the 25-34 age group (U.S. Census Bureau). Thus, it appears that cultural norms within the Mormon Church may impact educational attainment for both genders in different ways.

To date, very little research has been done with this population regarding the influence of gender and religion on educational attainment. Educational attainment is essential in reducing gender inequity and other harmful life outcomes (Global Partnership for Education, 2018). The current study intends to address this gap in research. It is hoped that research on the role of religion and gender on educational attainment of women could contribute toward enhancing gender equity within Mormonism by exploring the differences in how active Mormon and ex-Mormon women view their decisions regarding education and how religious doctrine influenced their educational decisions. By understanding how Mormon women are interpreting and relating to religious doctrine regarding education and gender, strategies to support this population to complete their education can be developed and enacted.

Research Questions

In order to better understand the role of the Mormon Church in shaping attitudes about higher education for active and former church members, this study examined many different facets of the relationship between Mormonism and education. Specifically, this research asked the following questions:

- 1) How do women interpret and make meaning of church doctrine regarding education?
- 2) In what way does the Church's messages about education, motherhood, and womanhood influence the decisions that women are making regarding their education?
- 3) How is religious doctrine being interpreted and applied?

For each of these questions, the perspectives of active members and ex-Mormon women will be examined, and compared, to assess for similarities and differences.

Methods

This study involved qualitative interviews with highly religious or previously highly religious women in the LDS Church. Women were screened using a brief questionnaire (See Appendix B) using procedures outlined below. Upon meeting participation criteria (detailed below), participants completed one semi-structured interview with the primary researcher (See Appendix C and Appendix D for interview guides for ex-Mormon and current member women). Prior to study participation, all participants were provided with an informed consent form which described the purpose of the interview, alternatives to participation, and potential risks of participating, such as emotional distress. The IRB granted a waiver of written consent and permitted participants to verbally agree to participation by reading a subject’s statement indicating their participation agreement. This study was reviewed and approved for Category 2 (exempt status) by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Washington. The University of Washington IRB Study ID is: STUDY00008229.

Sampling Strategy and Recruitment

This qualitative research study used nonprobability purposive sampling techniques to recruit participants (Emmel, 2013). To understand how Mormon religiosity influences educational attainment, the lead researcher intentionally recruited 10 current member and 10 former member participants with high religiosity scores to explore the possible differences between these two groups. Additionally, the religiosity measure used to screen participants was a form of criterion purposive sampling, which further led to the purposive extreme sampling which is used to provide greater insight into the research questions by finding “information rich cases” (Emmel, 2013, p. 5). Because this research was exploring the connection between religiosity with education, only women with high religiosity scores were contacted for participation. The

lead researcher found participants with direct experience regarding education and Mormon religiosity by distributing the survey through various social media networks including Facebook and Instagram. The project was advertised on various Facebook groups that support both current and ex-Mormon members of the Church. The screening questionnaire received 353 responses. Of those responses, 30 were incomplete and could not be contacted for participation in the interviews. Participants were selected from the screening questionnaire based on whether they fulfilled the participation criteria, and then were selected based on the time of submission of their questionnaire, giving priority to those who submitted earliest.

Screening Procedure and Measure of Religiosity

Potential participants responded to a screening questionnaire (Appendix A) which was designed to identify women with high degrees of religiosity either currently or prior to leaving the Church. The screening questionnaire asked demographic questions, questions regarding religiosity including the Religious Commitment Inventory-10 (Worthington, et al., 2012) which has been shown to have a high test-retest reliability and good validity. This instrument has 10 questions with a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “Not at all true of me” to “Totally true of me.” The total point score for this instrument is 50. The mean score for the general population is 26 with an *SD* of 12 points. For the purposes of this study, participants were required to score at least one standard deviation above the mean (38 or higher) to be considered as having “high religiosity.”

Study Inclusion Criteria

To be eligible for study participation, current Mormon women had to be at least 18 years of age, speak English, demonstrate “high religiosity” through a score a 38 or higher on the Religious Commitment Inventory-10 (Worthington, et al. 2012), and hold a current temple

recommend (explained as follows). A temple recommend is required to participate in making covenants with God in the temple, a sacred and religious building. In order to obtain a temple recommend, individuals must meet with the local bishop and undergo an interview. The interview includes questions regarding their sustaining of the prophet, belief in God the Father, obeying the Word of Wisdom (a dietary code), and following the law of chastity amongst other requirements (Church Newsroom, 2019). Additional requirements for obtaining a temple recommend include having been baptized and been a member in good standing for at least one year prior to temple attendance. For the purposes of this study, participants were required to have been active members of the Church for at least 5 years to understand the nuances that exist as a member of the Church.

Similarly, in order to be eligible for study participation, ex-Mormon women had to be at least 18 years of age, speak English, demonstrate previous “high religiosity,” confirm that they had previously held a current temple recommend, and endorse that they had since experienced a “crisis of faith” and had actively decided to change their church affiliation. To determine previous levels of religiosity, ex-Mormon participants were asked to retroactively identify their degree of religiosity during the time of their participation within the Church using the Religious Commitment Inventory-10 (Worthington, et al. 2012). Individuals who scored a 38 or higher in this manner were considered previously “highly religious” and eligible for participation. Participants who belong to the Ex-Mormon group were identified differently than current member participants. Individuals of this population self-identified as Ex-Mormon and they intentionally think and/or behave in ways that indicate they no longer believe the Church to be true. To be considered Ex-Mormon in this study required participants to identify having experienced a crisis of faith and actively deciding to change their church affiliation.

Interview Procedures

Individuals who met participation criteria and were selected for participation in the interview were contacted via email and asked to schedule a time for the interview that was both convenient for the participant and the primary researcher. Individuals who did not meet participation criteria were notified via email. Individuals who met participation criteria but were not interviewed were given the option to remain on the study waiting list or choose not to be on the waiting list.

All interviews were conducted via Zoom, a video conferencing website. However, one call was unable to be completed through Zoom and the primary researcher and participant completed the interview via phone call. Zoom was selected as the primary method of interviewing because of its options to record the audio during the call. Recordings of each interview were made on both Zoom and a manual audio recorder as a backup in case of technical difficulties.

Participants completed a semi-structured interview that was approximately one hour long. The shortest interview time was 38 minutes and the longest interview time was one hour and 43 minutes. At the beginning of the interview, participants completed informed consent, and were then asked some additional demographic questions to supplement information provided in their screening questionnaire. Participants were then asked questions about their educational, religious, and gender experiences. For example, participants were asked about their primary reasons for attending college, their educational and career goals, and their biggest supports and barriers to attending schools. Participants were also asked about how they gained their testimony of the Church and, if applicable, how they lost their testimony. Finally, participants were asked to reflect on their experiences as women within the Church, including: what righteousness means

as a woman in the Church, what motherhood means, and how they were taught to balance their family obligations with their educational and career goals. For a list of interview questions, see Appendices C and D.

Transcription, Transcript Validation, and Member Checking of Transcripts

Following data gathering in the interview process, the primary researcher used Temi, an audio to text automatic transcription service to transcribe 17 of the 20 audio recordings. Following the automatic transcription, the primary researcher quality checked each transcription, to confirm that it matched the audio recording. The other three recordings were transcribed by hand by the primary researcher and quality checked a second time. A modified verbatim format was used for transcriptions wherein filler words (e.g. um, uh) and false starts (e.g. “I... I ... I ... went to the store) were omitted.” Names that were used in the transcript were redacted and all names of participants have been changed to a pseudonym to protect participant confidentiality. Following transcription of the interviews, the primary researcher returned the transcription by email to each of the participants for participants to adjust, clarify, or redact any parts of their interview if they desired. Seven participants responded confirming their transcriptions or making minor additions and clarifications.

Analysis

The quantitative demographic data for the participants was organized using Microsoft Excel 2010. Descriptive statistics including mean, median, and mode of the sample’s age during various life events, the number of children, and the final scores of the Religious Commitment Scale were recorded.

To analyze the qualitative interview data, the primary researcher used the spirit of phenomenological methods (Moustakeas, 1994; Vagle, 2018). The spirit of phenomenology is to

capture the essence of the entire piece of data. To accomplish this, the primary researcher analyzed the data through a whole-parts-whole process. The first step of this process is to complete a holistic reading of the entire data set and identify the fundamental meaning or main significance of the text. Next, the primary researcher read each piece of data to identify general themes and phrases that articulate the experience of each of the research participants. This process also included extracting significant statements from the data and creating theme tables (Table 3-7). Finally, in the discussion, the primary researcher organized the resulting themes with additional literature to inform the resulting codes and themes (Vagle, 2018). Each transcript was coded in Word 2010 according to general themes, shared language and beliefs, and common content.

Demographics of Participants

The primary researcher interviewed 10 current Mormon women and 10 previously Mormon women. Demographic characteristics of each participant can be found in Tables 1 and 2. Participants ranged in age from 23-54, with a mean of 35.45 years old. All participants identified their race as white, which closely reflects the racial demographics of Mormons in the US, with nearly nine-in-ten Mormons in the U.S. (86%) being white (Pew Research Center, 2009). Sixty-five percent of participants reported household incomes of \$70,000 or more.

Eighty percent of current member participants had completed a 4-year degree. The median amount of time it took to complete their 4-year degree was 7 years with a range of 3 to 34 years. Forty percent of current member participants were employed. Sixty percent of ex-member participants had completed a 4-year degree. The median amount of time to complete their 4-year degree was 5.5 years with a range of 4 to 12 years. Seventy percent of ex-member

participants were employed. The most common undergraduate major for all participants was Psychology (15%) and there was no additional overlap among majors.

All current member participants reported being mothers. The median number of children for current member participants was four. The average age at the birth of their first child was 23.2 years. The average religiosity score for current member participants was 43.6/50. Seventy percent of previous member participants reported being mothers. The median number of children for ex-Mormon participants is two. The average age at the birth of their first child was 22.9. The average religiosity score for participants before they left the LDS Church was 43.5/50. Additional demographic information can be found in Tables 1 and 2.

Results

The analysis revealed several themes related to high religiosity in Mormonism and its influence on women’s educational attainment. The analysis worked to answer the research questions of how women interpret church doctrine regarding education and motherhood and how they apply that doctrine while making decisions about their education. Throughout the interviews with participants, the women spoke of a charted “path” (Current Member: 3, 4, 6, 9; Ex-Member: 2, 3, 7, 8) or “plan” (Current Member: 5; Ex-Member: 1, 5) through life that was given to them through messages received at church and in their communities. Women reported that the path they had been given for their lives was finishing high school, beginning to attend college, meeting someone to marry during college, getting married, and then raising children. According to Melissa (Ex-member), “In my head, growing up that was just what you did. You graduate high school, you meet somebody, you get married, and you get pregnant. That’s how life is. That’s the ideal... That was the message I got at church.” Mary (ex-member) said, “If I’m being honest with myself [marriage] was part of my reason for going [to college], cause that was the roadmap that I

had been given . . . you graduate high school, you go to BYU, and get married and start a family. And [if] a career happens, great. But that's not the goal [of college].” Participants reported that to be a righteous woman one must follow the path outlined for them, Nicole (current member) said, “I came home [from my mission] feeling like, okay, the only thing I'm supposed to do if I'm truly going to be righteous is get married and have kids. But I had no desire to do that. It was a lot of inner turmoil for me because I was feeling like, no, I'm being prideful if I'm not choosing that path . . .” Thus, participants specified that “being righteous,” through marriage and family participation, was important in fulfilling their “divine role” (Current Member: 5; Ex-Member: 1) within the plan of God.

To understand the effects of religiosity on Mormon women’s educational attainment, the results were grouped into themes based on the described path for Mormon women throughout their lives. In summary, Mormon women believed that education was important. The first theme that arose was Mormon women recognize and identify a variety of reasons for obtaining a formal education. However, according to the doctrine and culture of Mormonism, motherhood was more important than the reasons to obtain an education. The second theme that arose was the importance of motherhood and the interpretations of church doctrine related to womanhood. If given the choice between education and motherhood, righteous Mormon women chose motherhood (or are otherwise forced to justify their actions through personal revelation or church departure). Righteous Mormon women were willing to make whatever sacrifices are necessary in this life to follow the plan. The following themes tell the story of the path Mormon women reported being instructed to follow throughout their lives.

Varied Reasons for Obtaining a Formal Education

According to the participants, education served several purposes. First, participants spoke about how education represented opportunities for both personal growth (Current Members: 5, 6, 7, 8; Ex-Member: 1, 5, 6, 8) and career advancement (Current Members: 4, 9; Ex-Member: 1, 3, 5, 9, 10). Second, education was spoken of as a “backup” in case their plans of marriage did not work out the way they thought they would (Current Members: 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 8; Ex-Member: 2, 3, 6, 8, 9). Third, many participants spoke about how education was a way to gain knowledge which could be used to benefit other people, including their future husband and children (Current Members: 4, 10; Ex-Member: 6, 8, 9, 10). Additionally, other participants stated that a college education was a natural next step after high school (Ex-Member: 3, 6), an opportunity for dating and marriage (Current Members: 5; Ex-Member: 9, 10), or something to do in the meantime, between high school and the time they got married (Ex-Member: 5).

Many participants identified that education represented career opportunities. The more education that an individual had, the more choices and power they would have over their own lives. Anna stated (current member), “[The] more education you have, the more opportunities you have to choose from . . . If you don't have some sorts of skills, then certain opportunities are never even available to you to turn down or to accept.” Similarly, Nicole (current member) stated that “Education is a form of power. It really does grant you abilities to do whatever it is you're seeking the education in.” Amy (ex-member) echoed this sentiment saying, “Education . . . unlocks doors for people, and I was not interested in staying in the same place my whole life.”

Although several participants identified the utility of education in increased career opportunities, many ex-Mormon participants reported that they did not understand the purpose of education in the context of Mormonism, because they could not capitalize on those increased

opportunities afforded by college *and simultaneously* fulfill their divine purpose of motherhood. To wit, Tiffany (ex-member) said, “A lot of [formal education] seemed very pointless. If my job is just to be at home, is just to do laundry, is just to hang out with little kids, then I don't really need to know about microbiology.” Similarly, Angela (ex-member) said, “I have been a part of some Utah women groups that are focused on leadership and a lot of them push for trying to get women to go to college just to take one class for that knowledge aspect right? And a lot of women won't do it because they say, ‘I'm not going to get a job so why should I do it?’ And that's something that the Church and the Church's culture could do better is to explore the many different reasons for an education.” Thus, for some Mormon women, the purpose of education for the sake of a career did not make sense in the context of full-time stay-at-home motherhood. Summarizing this sentiment, Susan (ex-member) said, “[The Church] wants you to go to college, but they don't want you to actually work and have a career. I think that's two different things . . . They teach the education part of it, but they don't teach the career side of it. It's always stay home and be a mom, and don't have a career.”

In addition to increased career opportunities, participants spoke about how education represented an opportunity for personal growth and development. Many participants brought up that even if a “college degree was [n]ever pushed” (Jessica, current member), consistently learning and growing was an essential part of the Earthly experience. Angela (ex-member) said, “For example the [Church] believe[s] in . . . eternal learning . . . [The Church] could emphasize that college is starting it out right. What you learn here [on Earth] you don't have to learn [in the afterlife].” Exemplifying a similar sentiment, Anna (current member) stated, “I fundamentally believe that there's only a few things we get to take with us when we die. We get to take the relationships that we make and the knowledge that we gained. That's it.” However, despite the

doctrinal belief that education and knowledge are carried into the afterlife, Lisa (current member) observed, “My understanding is, to be an LDS woman is to be a woman of learning and a woman of growth. They're inseparable to the point that I'm always surprised, not that a woman doesn't have a degree, but I've actually met women who almost relish in their ignorance.”

Finally, regarding the meaning of education, some participants reported that education was a “backup” in case the path they intended to follow did not work out. For example, education was a safety net if they remained unmarried, became divorced, or if their husband became unable to support them in some way. Participants stated that having an education was security for the future in case their life did not work out the way they had planned. For example, Hannah (ex-member) stated that her family encouraged her to go to college and be “self-sufficient” in case “I got married and my husband couldn't take care of me.” Brooke discussed how seeing her parent’s marriage end influenced her beliefs about the value of education, saying, “I saw my mom stuck in a lot of situations that she couldn't afford to get herself out of because she didn't have a degree. She didn't think that she could go out and have the same life and lifestyle that she had with my dad.”

A summary of excerpts representing the themes regarding the various purposes of education are located in Table 3.

The Meaning of Womanhood and Motherhood

While many participants endorsed the belief that education was important, they also expressed that women in Mormonism are taught to prioritize motherhood over education or that their education was *only* a priority *until* they became a mother. The women reported that the general messages they received in church through young women leaders, talks in general conference, and the culture of the Church were that the ideal situation for women was to be a

stay-at-home mother of their children. For example, Jessica (current member) said, “I definitely felt that it was always encouraged to have women at home whenever possible. And obviously there are exceptions . . . I was taught that it was important for the mom to be home, but also that education was important. If you're not a mom, [you should] go to school.” When a woman has the opportunity to become a mother, the priority shifts from pursuing education to pursuing motherhood.

Current member and ex-member participants identified what it meant to them to be a righteous woman within the Church. Current member women spoke more broadly about the characteristics of righteous women such as “following Christ” (Jessica), “keeping the covenants” (Brooke), “having a testimony and being truly converted” (Anna), and “having a rock solid relationship with Heavenly Father” (Nicole). For current members, women identified that there was little to no difference between male and female requirements to be considered righteous. However, ex-member participants identified specific daily behaviors they felt were required of them to be considered a righteous woman within the Church. These daily behaviors reflected the traditional beliefs regarding gender in the Church. For example, Melissa said,

A good Mormon woman has children. A good Mormon woman attends her church meetings, never says no to a calling, prays, teaches her children to pray, probably does some sort of music, plays an instrument, she tries to have many children . . . She doesn't work unless her husband is disabled or dead . . . She's good at homemaking. Her house is clean even though she's got these 10 kids running around. It's magically clean when the home teachers show up.

In addition to these specific behaviors, Ex-Mormon women named several characteristics they believed were required of them as members of the Church, such as, “being married and having children,” (Angela), being “caretakers” (Hannah), being “incubators for eternity” (Lauren), and being “submissive” (Mary). Of note, the tone in which these women responded to this question was different than current member women, and included more frustration, anger,

and sarcasm. A few participants identified characteristics they felt they could not hold as a righteous woman. Hannah (ex-member) stated “Women . . . can’t be mad the way that a man can have righteous anger.” Kimberly said,

There's some message that why would you let someone else raise your kids? . . . it's just not the ideal of a Mormon woman that I've been taught to enter in this path of ambition. It's okay if you want to be a schoolteacher, but if you want to be a CEO or a doctor, you're dreaming too big, like get back at home. If you want a cute little side hobby job as a crossing guard, that's okay. . . [but] the act of having ambition or wanting something for yourself goes against the feminine mold that people have.

When women were asked about how they were taught to balance their family and educational goals, the women often responded that they were not taught by anyone how to balance these two priorities. Kaitlyn (ex-member) stated, “I was taught that there isn't a balance. You should be focused on your family, and your career is not important.” Similarly, Elizabeth (current member) said, “I've never been taught [how to balance my educational goals and being a mother] through church or religion. It wasn't until [President] Hinckley came around and encouraged women to actually go ahead and get their education. That was the first time I had heard it.” Elizabeth went on to say that she learned how to balance her own education and family obligations through the example of other women who shared their personal experiences and their knowledge.

Participants also described the ways they felt required and were asked to make sacrifices of their education for their family responsibilities. Lisa (current member) discussed how when she returned from an internship in Washington D.C. to her small town, traditional community, her children’s doctors and therapists said “it would be in [her children’s] best interest” for her to not work outside the home and to stay at home instead. Amanda (current member) remembered, “for a period of time when my kids were young . . . their needs [came] before mine.” Amanda clarified that while she believed the Church taught her this value, she was “born with” this

feeling. A common theme echoed among participants was that women sacrificed themselves for their family and the benefit of others. When asked about their educational experiences, many women endorsed the belief that they were responsible for sacrificing their educational dreams and aspirations on behalf of their husbands, children, and communities. Tiffany (ex-member) recalled a young women lesson where a case example was given discussing how the young women’s job was to be “self-sacrificing . . . It was your job is to self-sacrifice, to stay at home mothering and you help the mothers around you.” Brooke (current member) discussed the prioritization of her husband’s education and stated, “I don't know if I would have stopped, but [my education] would not have been as high of a priority as my husband's... Without a child [we] both could go to school at the same time.”

Value of Women (Beyond Motherhood?)

On a similar note, participants discussed that they often felt as though their value was reduced to what they provided in relationships. Ex-Mormon women discussed how during their time in the Church they felt as though they were only important in so much as they were married, and they were raising children. Lauren (ex-member) said, “I think that's what a lot of this comes down to. There was never anything about the value of women . . . extrinsic to men.” Amanda (current member) spoke of how in her personal view, “[women are more than] just whether they’re married . . . or have children.” Many ex-Mormon women also spoke about how, as members of the Church, they often felt as though their value was solely *in relation* to the people within their lives, instead of being *intrinsic* to their personhood.

In contrast, some current member women spoke about how the Church is becoming more progressive and discussing options beyond motherhood for women. When Mormon women were given the opportunity to fully invest in their interests via formal and informal methods of

education, they discovered an identity outside of motherhood. Elizabeth (current member) talked about how she was learning more about her value beyond motherhood through education and how recently the Church was discussing roles in addition to motherhood for women. She explained, “I'm grateful that the message is being shared about how you can have more than one role . . . Motherhood is a beautiful and divine role and I'm very grateful for it. But My gosh . . . there's more to me than just being a mom.” However, others held the opposite viewpoint. For example, Amanda (current member) said, “I think that the leadership is afraid of emphasizing education and setting up career goals.” Nicole (current member) advocated for more conversations about the value of women outside of relationships and summarized her thoughts, saying:

We need to have conversations about what does being a whole and complete woman look like, not just the woman that's constantly serving, because I can tell you there was a huge vacuum for me as a youth when I was looking at all of the women in the ward. I could see nobody that I wanted to be like them.

A summary of excerpts representing the themes around the characteristics of righteous women and the importance and prioritization of motherhood are listed in Table 4.

Culture versus Doctrine of the Church

Throughout the interviews, many participants drew a distinction between the *culture* of the Church and the *doctrine* of the Church. Participants specifically stated that “comparison and perfectionism” (Erica, current member), a lack of support for higher education (Elizabeth, current member), and black-and-white thinking (Brooke, current member) were highly prevalent in church communities and culture, though not explicitly taught through church doctrine. Brooke talked about her experience dealing with the culture of the Church by dealing with an Honor Code infraction she had while attending a church school, Brigham Young University – Idaho. When speaking of the room mates who made the report to the Honor Code Office, she

summarized their thinking saying, “Oh, if we can just point the finger and put the spotlight on her then nobody will look at us.”

In examining this difference between church culture and doctrine, many current members specified that the doctrine of the Church does not place the same weight on motherhood as the culture of the Church. Current members tended to believe that prioritizing motherhood over education came from within the *culture* of the Church versus the *doctrine*. Several women specified that “it was never actually the Church saying that [women need to stay home]. It was people's interpretation” (Nicole, current member). Similarly, Lauren (ex-member) said, “it's not explicit in the doctrine.” However, many participants reported feeling immense pressure from their wards, communities, and families to get married and to begin having children as soon as possible. Kimberly (current member) said, “There were a lot of messages about [how] you're selfish if you pursue a career or if you do anything besides stay at home and be a mom. That's all God wants you to be, stay at home and be a mom.” She went on to talk about how her education was affected by how people's perception of her changed once she married. Some people in Brooke's ward would ask, “Now you're a married couple, when are you going to have kids?” Now school's just something cute you're doing while you wait to have kids.”

A few participants tended to be more critical of the Church and stated that the Church *did teach* doctrine about the importance of motherhood and the importance of staying home. Although they discussed the culture of the Church, they also believed that the doctrine of the Church influenced the culture. They cited examples from prophets including Spencer W. Kimball, Ezra Taft Benson, Dallin H. Oaks, and Gordon B. Hinckley. A few participants (Current Members: 5, 9 Previous Members: 8, 10) specifically mentioned a General Conference talk given by President Oaks in October 2018, which discussed the declining birthrate and the

increase in age at which women are having their first child. They discussed how hearing this talk made them feel as though their worth was reduced to whether they had children and that their priority ought to be focused on raising children as quickly as possible.

A summary of excerpts representing the themes describing the differences between culture and doctrine are listed in Table 5.

Culture of Judgement

Within the discussion of the culture of the Church, participants also discussed the culture of judgement that is present within their wards and communities. This culture of judgement made many women feel as though their communities were judging them based on the decisions they made about their education and motherhood. For example, if a participant had chosen to put off motherhood in favor of finishing their degree, they received many inquisitive questions from their neighbors regarding the time that they might begin having children. Kimberly (current member) talked about how she stopped speaking with the women in her ward about her plans to begin a graduate program because “it was really discouraging to have so many negative reactions from women that I told.” Many of the participants wished for a culture in Mormonism that was less judgmental and harsh regarding the decisions of women in their wards and neighborhoods. Several of the women interviewed stated they felt they “couldn’t win” (Kimberly, current member). They described extreme pressure to be perfect and complete all the tasks required of women including prayer, scripture study, cooking delicious meals, and keeping a clean house, and raising multiple children. Summarizing this, Mary said, “No one is doing all the things, but everyone feels they need to do all the things.” Angela said,

From some women I have felt that they were superior because they could stay at home... I think I justified that time [I spent working on my education] . . . I’m thinking now that I had an issue with it. In at least justifying it to myself that [what] I was doing wasn’t taking too much time away from the home and the family.

What Is Encouraged versus What is Discouraged in Church Culture

Throughout the interviews, the participants brought up the theme of what was *encouraged* and what is *not encouraged* within their church and communities. According to participants, the Church did not discourage formal education, but it did very little to encourage women in earning their degrees. Although some women discussed how college was encouraged by their parents and some community members, especially teachers, the “automatic” assumption was always that they would *go* to college (Stephanie, current member), but not necessarily that they would *finish* college.

However, all agreed that the Church does rigorously encourage women to stay at home and raise children. Overall, participants reported that women in Mormonism were encouraged to get married quickly and have children as soon as possible. Many women reported that the culture of Mormonism “glorified” women who are “self-sacrificing” and prioritized marriage and motherhood. Summarizing this, Melissa (ex-member) said,

I did feel like there were kind of competing pressures there. On the one hand they would verbally praise education, but they would also tear down people who prioritized that instead of families. And in the lesson books . . . they [would] show an example of somebody not making the most righteous decision and it would be a woman who has gone to college and is super professional.

The participants also described that though education was not discouraged, according to the Church, being a mother was most important. Therefore, most of the time that they were given counsel about their lives, it was regarding their predestined and sacred role of motherhood. One participant stated that education was “inadvertently un-emphasized” and therefore education was not the highest priority for women in their lives. Melissa (ex-member) said of her experiences that,

Traditional gender roles were really emphasized in my home. So even though my parents would tell me . . . it’s a good idea to get an education, I was still receiving

this message that the most, the best you could be was to be a mother. And to take care of your children. Meaning at home. That was the message I got at church.

Similarly, Kimberly (current member) discussed how she was able to find literature about early Mormon women who had careers and pursued professional development, but that this information required some searching. She talked about how she had to search for information that supported her educational goals, “I think the messages [of seeking education] are out there if you look for them.”

A summary of excerpts representing the themes around what is encouraged versus discouraged are listed in Table 6.

Ambiguous Doctrine and Justification

Throughout the interviews, women consistently cited various religious doctrine that supported their personal beliefs and desires for education or motherhood. Many current member women (2, 3, 4 5, 6, 9) reported that they were strengthened in their resolve to gain an education by talks given by President Gordon B. Hinckley about the importance of education. A talk given by President Hinckley in 2007 was one of the first times Elizabeth (current member) remembers hearing about the benefit of education for women and feeling encouraged her educational goals.

Similarly, Kimberly (current member) talked about how she sought out confirmation that her educational desires were within the framework of the Church. She discussed how oftentimes support for education and pursuing goals was available, however, because the culture of the Church was focused on women being stay-at-home mothers, these other stories were not shared. She said, “Early pioneer women were empowered . . . they were doctors and lawyers and senators. Learning that makes me feel more comfortable that it's not the doctrine that I have to stay home forever, because it didn't use to be that way.”

Conversely, several participants identified feeling as though they had to justify their desires to pursue their education and careers. Angela (ex-member) shared how she justified working outside of the home by saying “[I’m only working] . . . 10 hours a week. Some women have hobbies. Or they go with their girlfriends or they go on a date. I don’t go on dates anymore with my husband.’ . . . Justifying it to myself that what I was doing wasn’t taking too much time away from the home and the family.” Mary (ex-member) stated that when she left Mormonism, she “didn’t have to justify [my master’s degree] by my husband having a hard time with work. Increased education became not only an option, but a priority and something our family worked around so that I could accomplish that goal.”

Barriers to Pursuing Education

When asked about specific barriers to their education, participants stated that financial capacity and family responsibilities were the biggest obstacles to pursuing their education. Participants who had access to financial resources such as scholarships were grateful that finances were not a barrier to pursuing their education. Others, like Nicole (current member), talked about how she could only shower every three days due to not having enough time with working and going to school full time due to needing the financial resources. She said, “One of the biggest barriers there is in order to survive, just physically pay the rent, have food, eat, pay gas, and make sure the car can be maintained and still be able to pay for books and clothes. That takes so much work and time.”

Many women also specified that they felt “mom guilt” (Elizabeth, current member) regarding leaving their children with caretakers to continue their education. Elizabeth discussed leaving her child with her mother,

She enjoys spending the night at grandma's. It's me [having a difficult time in] having to leave her. And feeling like once again that mom guilt kicks in. Am I affecting my

daughter by choosing my dream over her? That's the constant battle I have. I have to continually reassure myself that she's okay.

Susan (ex-member) talked about how she believed that “mom guilt” is a universal experience, but that the Church perpetuates those feelings of guilt by encouraging women to stay at home with their children,

The majority of the women I know work and so I don't think that they would be working if they thought they were horrible moms . . . but I don't necessarily think that they're doing it without guilt . . . maybe more so in the Church because we are encouraged to be home with our kids. I . . . believe that you can still be a good mom, but I do think that people do feel guilty about doing it.

Supports in Education: Representation, Mentorship, and Wishes for the Future

Women reported that the biggest supports they had while working through their education was through relationships with mentors, colleagues and teachers, and their families. Many participants reported the help of their families, the mentorship of a trusted colleague or teacher, and others discussed how having representation for women in career fields in church inspired them to continue. Erica (current member) spoke about how having a “good support system in extended family and community” could ease the burden of attending school. Nicole (current member) described the support she received from her peers while working in the hospital, “A lot of nursing staff and managers there . . . were truly invested in me and my potential for growth. I felt so alive being a part of these people who had incredible skill sets and saw in me that I could develop it also.”

One quote shared by Stephanie was there is “more than one way to mom.” The participants in the study wished for a supportive culture that included representation of women who were developing careers and successfully mothering their children. Several participants stated that they are now starting to see more women working outside of the home and being excellent mothers. Angela (ex-member) said, “I’m seeing more of my female peers from church .

. . . getting PhDs. Who have careers. Women who have made careers work even working from home.” Mary (ex-member) talked about how representation of women in her life graduating, allowed her to start imagining that she could also complete her degree, “I started knowing women that worked and . . . had graduated . . . I started thinking, well . . . I want to graduate. . . I would say overall it was . . . seeing other women in the working world and getting [that changed] my perspective.”

However, not everyone had this experience. For instance, Kaitlyn (ex-member) explained that for her, “Everybody [I knew] was a stay at home mom. . . I didn't come into contact with a woman who had a career until I was 14. . . I didn't realize until I was . . . older . . . that it was completely normal for women outside of the Church to have careers.” When women were asked about what they would like to see change in the Church and in the Church’s culture, women listed increased female representation within all aspects of the Church, increased women with careers in leadership roles within the organization of the Church, and increased opportunities for mentorship. Kimberly (current member) said, “[Policies are] all made by men and it doesn't affect them . . . Decisions are just made differently when women are involved too. So I think that's probably my biggest gripe with [the] Church in general. Is [that] there too many decisions being made without [official input from women.]” Kaitlyn (previous member)

Women should be allowed to use their brains in the same way men are . . . Allow women to speak in conference . . . That would show me that [the Church] value[s] women, not that they are these sacred things to be valued and kept in a corner because women can't be trusted to speak their mind and not have it upset the order of the Church.

A summary of excerpts representing the themes around the barriers to and supports for education are listed in Table 7.

Discussion

This study utilized qualitative interviews with 10 active members and 10 previous members of the LDS Church to investigate the influence of religious doctrine regarding motherhood and education and how Mormon women interpret that doctrine to make decisions about their education. Throughout the interviews, in their discussions of their educational experiences and aspirations, participants repeatedly emphasized the God-given path they had been given to follow throughout their lives. This “path” was not only referenced in terms of education or gender roles, but was also a common thread throughout Mormon theology, as evidenced by the doctrine laid out in the Plan of Salvation. According to the Church website, the path of the Plan of Salvation is as follows, “[Each person is] a participant in Heavenly Father’s plan, and [their] eternal experience can be divided into three main parts: premortal life, mortal life, and life after death.” (True to the Faith, 2004). President Oaks (2003) exemplified this notion of a “path” or “roadmap” saying, “Through inspiration we can understand this road map of eternity and use it to guide our path in mortality.” Current member women in this study stated that following the principles in the gospel and in the Plan of Salvation brought comfort and peace to them, “Understanding the plan will help them hold to the truths that they are children of God. And that He has a plan for them . . . If they understand the plan, and who they are, they will not fear” (Wixom, 2010). Although many previous members wrestled with cognitive dissonance over their perceived role in the Plan, many spoke about the interwovenness of their religion and their decision-making. The path outlined in the Plan of Salvation was the central guiding principle interwoven throughout church member’s lives and their decision making.

“The road map of eternity” (Oaks, 2003) defines the roles of women within the Church to primarily focus on marriage and motherhood. While Mormons strongly believe that education is

important, motherhood and marriage are emphasized so dramatically within the culture and doctrine of Mormonism that the participants very often made decisions that prioritized their capacity for traditional marriage and motherhood over educational pursuits. Although Mormon women did not explicitly speak of the eternal ramifications of prioritizing motherhood, church doctrine teaches the absolute importance of motherhood in the Plan of Salvation. This personal sacrifice of education is deemed necessary in Mormonism due to the requirement of Eternal Marriage to enter the Celestial Kingdom in the afterlife. According to the Handbook of the Church, “We emphasize that “exaltation in the highest degree of the celestial kingdom can be attained only by those who have faithfully lived the gospel of Jesus Christ and are sealed as eternal companions” (Handbook 2: Administering in the Church, 2020). Since requirements for exaltation of women within the Church include marriage and motherhood, but do not include formal education, it is possible that when faced with conflict between these two decisions, Mormon women prioritize motherhood over education to fulfill the plan of God.

Education is Important, but not at the Expense of Family

The participants of this research study demonstrated in their interviews that education is highly valued and important within Mormonism. According to the Church Newsroom, “Education lies close to the hearts of members . . . and resonates with many of the other values they hold dear. Latter-day Saints love learning and . . . affirm that education is a broad, lifelong pursuit with a variety of vital purposes.” Education is spoken of as “vital” (Church Newsroom, n.d.) to personal development and many participants talked about how education helped them to develop their talents and interests.

However, when education is spoken of within the Church with women as the target audience, education is typically framed as an opportunity to develop characteristics that will

benefit them as *wives and mothers*, but not for the purpose of career or professional development. According to the “For the Strength of Youth” pamphlet (2011), “[Education] will help you better provide for yourself, your family, and those in need. It will also help you be a wise counselor and companion to your future spouse and an informed and effective teacher of your future children.” Education for women is typically not spoken of with the purpose of pursuing a professional career outside of motherhood, unless circumstance necessitate a woman having a career outside of the home due to divorce or disability. When women intend to become stay at home mothers, there is little extrinsic motivation to earn a college degree, especially with high barriers of debt and lack of support from their communities and families. Mormon women reported being encouraged to get an education, but not encouraged to make use of their education with a career outside of motherhood. Additionally, some participants reported being explicitly *discouraged* from pursuing careers outside of the home. To wit, President Hinckley said, “It is well-nigh impossible to be a full-time homemaker and a full-time employee” (1996).

Despite the lack of professional utility of formal education, many participants found intrinsic motivation to continue their studies and sought out justification of their educational pursuits. Several participants discussed a talk given by President Hinckley in 2007 in which he stated,

You can include in the dream of the woman you would like to be a picture of one qualified to serve society and make a significant contribution to the world of which she will be a part. [However] set your priorities in terms of marriage and family, but also pursue educational programs which will lead to satisfying work and productive employment in case you do not marry.

The participants who brought up this talk given in the General Conference of the Church spoke about how it gave them comfort in their educational pursuits. Although President Hinckley voiced permission for women to obtain a formal education, this statement qualified the purpose

of female education as a backup in case the “ideal situation” of stay-at-home motherhood did not go as planned.

Throughout the literature, contradictory statements about the purpose and priority of education confuse the official stance of the Church regarding education for women. According to President Howard W. Hunter, the Church prophet from 1994-1995, “We want [women] to obtain all the education and vocational training possible before marriage” (Eternal Marriage Student Manual, 2003) which could indicate that once women become married they should instead focus their attentions on home and family. In addition to education fulfilling the need for a backup plan, education is spoken of in Mormonism as an opportunity to better one’s spouse and one’s children (Oaks, 1974). President Oaks said, “Education will improve a woman’s ability to function as an informed and effective teacher of her sons and daughters, and as a worthy and wise counselor and companion to her husband.” However, in the same address, President Oaks clarified that Mormonism “make[s] no distinction between young men and young women in our conviction about the importance of an education and in our commitment to providing that education.” Thus, it appears that despite espousing equality in some facets, the directives regarding the *purpose* of education for both men and women are fundamentally different within Mormonism. Education for men is to benefit his professional and career development; education for women is to benefit her children and her spouse. Summarizing these sentiments regarding the purpose of education, President Benson stated,

The first priority for a woman is to prepare herself for her divine and eternal mission [of marriage and motherhood], whether she is married soon or late. It is folly to neglect that preparation for education in unrelated fields just to prepare temporarily to earn money. Women, when you are married, it is the husband’s role to provide, not yours. Do not sacrifice your preparation for an eternally ordained mission for the temporary expediency of money-making skills which you may or may not use” (Benson, 1988).

Considering the high barriers of finances in pursuing higher education in college, many of the participants felt as though they could not justify their educational goals in the context of their personal goals of full-time motherhood without working outside of the home. Many of the participants stated that they felt as though they did not have enough time to both be a mother and work outside of the home. This sentiment of “not enough time” is echoed throughout Mormon literature. In 1998, President Hinkley stated, “Families are being torn asunder everywhere. Family relationships are strained as women try to keep up with the rigors of two full-time jobs” (Eternal Marriage Student Manual, 2003).

Motherhood is More Important than Formal Education

Education and motherhood are discussed in Mormonism as non-opposing aspects of women’s lives. However, the experience of the women in this study was that of opposition in choosing whether to pursue their education or to pursue a path towards motherhood. In Mormonism, when education is discussed, education is about personal development and developing the skills necessary to be a skillful housewife and mother. Formal education is not required to develop many of these domestic skills, which can often be learned through informal methods such as “Youtube and TED talks” (Jessica, current member). Several participants identified that from a very young age they were taught that their divine role in the Plan of Salvation was to bear and nurture children.

Interestingly, modern day prophets assume their congregants will become parents someday as evidenced by the emphasis of parenthood in general conference talks and other church literature. The heavy emphasis on eternal families and eternal marriage places the priority of this core achievement in Mormonism above educational endeavors. From the time Mormon children are young, they are taught the importance of eternal marriage in the temple to a worthy

spouse. Two common primary songs called “Families Can Be Together Forever” (Gardner, 1980) and “I Love to See the Temple” (Perry, 1980) teach children the importance of marriage. “I Love to See the Temple” teaches the doctrine that “family is forever” and that it is a “sacred duty” to be able to participate in the ordinances including eternal marriage. “Families Can Be Together Forever” teaches children that preparation for eternal marriage in the temple is of utmost importance. Eternal families are heavily emphasized in Mormonism and are one of the key pieces of doctrine. President Henry B. Eyring stated:

The great work of every man is to believe the gospel, to keep the commandments, and to create and perfect an eternal family unit, and to help others do the same. Since that is true, everything we do should have celestial marriage as its focus and purpose. That means we must strive to be sealed to an eternal companion in the temple of God (2016).

Thus, in the emphasis of marriage and motherhood, any emphasis on education is lost or considered less important for Mormon women’s lives. Education is a priority amongst Mormons, insomuch as it does not hinder the most important tenet of the gospel for women: marriage and motherhood.

Motherhood is an Essential Characteristic of Righteous Women

According to President Oaks, motherhood is the “highest calling” and best “opportunity for service” (1974). Mormon women are consistently given counsel that their highest satisfaction in life will come from their children and from motherhood. Many women in this study stated that motherhood was of great importance to them and spoke about their love for their children and for mothering. Motherhood is defined as the divine role and responsibility for women in this life and into the next. Marriage and motherhood are essential pieces of the path that women are to follow in this life to be received into the highest kingdom of Heaven. Eternal life in Heaven is dependent upon being righteous and following the path that is outlined in the gospel. According to the Plan of Salvation,

Your spirit is united with your body, giving you opportunities to grow and develop in ways that were not possible in your premortal life. This part of your existence is a time of learning in which you can prove yourself, choose to come unto Christ, and prepare to be worthy of eternal life . . . With this knowledge, you can base important decisions on eternal truths rather than on the changing circumstances of life” (True to the Faith, 2004).

Thus, the fundamental eternal truths that Mormon women must base their decisions on are the core values that women are caretakers and nurturers. Recently, the Church released new curriculum in their program, *Come Unto Christ* (2015), this curriculum states, “Motherhood is an essential role to life here on earth. God gave this role to women. Fulfilling our roles here on earth is one way to bring joy and happiness into our lives. As we accomplish what we were sent here to do, we are filled with purpose.”

Participants were asked directly what the essential characteristics of righteous women were and how they differed (if they did) from righteous men. While active members tended to emphasize the similarities in essential characteristics of righteous men and women, ex-member participants identified some of their beliefs regarding the key differences. According to the *Family: A Proclamation to the World* (1995), men were to be financial providers for their families, and women were to raise and nurture children. This document solidified the doctrine that men and women are fundamentally different from each other. Therefore, “Gender is an [eternal] essential characteristic” (The Family: A Proclamation to the World, 1995), and gender determines the roles and responsibilities of God’s children on Earth. Thus, the belief that men and women are “separate but equal” is fundamentally important in Mormonism.

The Burden of Righteousness

Righteousness is an essential piece of being able to attain the highest Degree of Glory in the Celestial Kingdom (Mormon Heaven). Although Latter-day Saints believe in the atonement of Christ and in repentance, they are constantly striving to attain perfection within this life, such as is spoken of in the New Testament, “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your father which is in

heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48, King James Version) In order to go to Heaven, Latter-day Saints believe that one must participate in a set of ordinances called the Covenant Path: baptism, confirmation, receiving the temple endowment, and being married in the temple (Your Covenant Path, 2015). Marriage is an essential piece of righteousness and becoming like God. According to the Doctrine and Covenants, “In order to obtain the highest [degree of Heaven], a man must enter into [the new and everlasting covenant of marriage]” (131:1-3). In addition to marriage, Mormon individuals are called to “multiply and replenish the Earth” (Genesis 1:28, King James Version) through child-rearing. According to the Family: A Proclamation to the world, “We [the Prophets] warn that individuals . . . who fail to fulfill family responsibilities will one day stand accountable before God.” Because the primary responsibility of child-rearing falls to women, women bear the burden of fulfilling their family responsibilities and obligations to achieve the highest Degree of Glory in the Celestial Kingdom.

A Final Consideration: Ambiguous Doctrine and Creative Interpretations

Throughout the data, participants were consistently able to justify the beliefs that they held regarding education and motherhood through various scripture and prophetic revelations. The ambiguous and often contradictory pieces of doctrine that the participants cited often led to confusion and the feeling of being unable to “win” (Kimberly, current member). This confusion led many participants to be unsure of what does and does not “count” as doctrine. Some participants stated that they did not believe certain prophetic teachings from various prophets (specifically mentioning Spencer W. Kimball and Ezra Taft Benson) counted as doctrine. This middle ground approach led many Mormon women to be able to creatively “interpret” documents such as “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” by finding alternative ways to fulfill their obligations to raise and nurture their children. For example, Anna talked about

utilizing a nanny and Elizabeth talked about her mother watching her daughter. These creative solutions fulfilled their mothering obligations and allowed them more flexibility to pursue careers and education. In contrast, many ex-Mormon participants seemed to hold a more rigid approach regarding the doctrine, which is a supported interpretation throughout Mormon scripture. In the Doctrine and Covenants, a piece of scripture written by the Mormon founder Joseph Smith, it reads, “Whether by mine own voice or the voice of my servants, it is the same” (Doctrine and Covenants, 1:38). This literal approach to the doctrine and voice of the prophets led many ex-Mormon women to be unable to reconcile their personal beliefs and aspirations with the literal commandments of God in the voice of the prophets who advocated for full-time motherhood.

Ultimately, the process for determining what is and is not doctrine seemed ambiguous at best. Some of the core doctrines of the Church are found in the Articles of Faith and number 9 reads, “We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God.” In a church talk entitled, “The Doctrine of Christ,” Elder Christofferson states, “At the same time it should be remembered that not every statement made by a church leader, past or present, necessarily constitutes doctrine.” Elder Christofferson states that it is “commonly understood” in the Church that not everything said by the prophets can be considered doctrine (2012). Christofferson quotes Joseph Smith who clarified that “a prophet [is] a prophet only when he [is] acting as such.” However, despite Christofferson’s statement to the contrary, many participants were confused about what did and did not count as doctrine, and to what degree they should take all words of prophets as divine doctrine. In 2014, Elder Oaks professed that, “Just because something is a policy or practice does not mean that it does not come from God or that the prophets are free to

change it. It simply means that [policy] can or may change without bringing into question prophetic reliability.” In summary, regardless of whether religious practices are doctrine, non-doctrinal church teachings could still be considered requirements to following Christ and being righteous church members. According to Mike Goodman, a religion professor at church-owned Brigham Young University, “To say that something that isn’t doctrinal is not important would be a gross error because often those things may be salvific. They may be things which the Lord requires us to do” (Goodman, 2017).

Strengths and Limitations of the Present Study

This study employed a small qualitative interview design and was thus limited in its ability to access a diverse range of participants in the population. Additionally, selection bias appeared to be a factor in participants volunteering for this research. Perhaps due to the content of the interview and its subject matter, many participants who chose to enroll were college-educated and heavily invested in pursuing professional development and educational opportunities. This selection bias was likely occurring for both active and ex-Mormon women. Additionally, although nearly 9 in 10 members of the Mormon Church are white, this study was limited by its lack of racial diversity. Additionally, the recruitment strategy utilized in the procedures was both a strength and limitation in accessing the population studied. Although the primary researcher used her personal network to gain participants, none of the participants in this study were acquainted with the primary researcher prior to beginning the interview process.

Despite these limitations, this study was strengthened by multiple methodological strategies to increase rigor for qualitative research. First, audio recordings were taken of all interviews to allow for modified verbatim transcriptions of all conversations. Second, the researcher personally validated all transcripts, to ensure correct transcription. Third, the

researcher engaged in member checking the interviews, giving each participant the opportunity to review, correct, or otherwise validate her interview. Fourth, this study examined the perspectives of both active members of the Mormon Church and previous members; participant diversity in church experience enriched the data by showing how these two groups of women interpret their educational experiences differently, how their perceptions of motherhood compare with each other, and how a faith crisis impacts the retroactive reflection on decisions regarding education and motherhood. Fifth, the researcher engaged in regular consultation with her thesis committee and with members of the LDS community to engage in critical reflection of her data analysis. In addition, throughout the interview process, the primary researcher regularly engaged in self-reflection through journal writing and discussion with her mentors.

Finally, the personal background of the primary researcher offered insights into the unique experiences of members of the Church. The content of this research provides a needed examination into the function of gender roles and church doctrine in the educational attainment of Mormon women; approaching this research from an emic approach facilitated access to a more insular community which otherwise resists outsiders who might not understand the values inherent to Mormonism. The shared language between the primary researcher and the participants both facilitated rapport building and allowed for increased depth during the analysis of the data. A reflexivity statement is included as Appendix E.

Implications

According to the participants, the supports that were most helpful for them in pursuing their educational and professional goals were supports in their community and their families. Thus, increasing access to mentorship programs and increasing the representation of Mormon women in careers outside of the home could be highly beneficial to creating extrinsic motivation

for young Mormon women to complete their degrees. Additionally, wards and communities could increase the representation of women in high impact careers by integrating these women into more powerful leadership roles. In addition, leaders within the Church could impact young women in the ward by intentionally setting up opportunities to converse with women with various careers and who utilize non-traditional, creative methods of taking care of their families.

Many of the participants of this research endorsed that the focus for their upbringing was placed on motherhood and traditionally gendered activities associated with being a good mother. However, as the participants in this research demonstrated, “there is more than one way to mom” (Stephanie, current member) and creativity in motherhood helped many mothers continue to pursue education and career opportunities. Teaching young women how to effectively navigate balancing the two priorities of education and motherhood would provide them with the tools they need to successfully complete their education and fulfill their divine destiny of motherhood. By shifting the focus, not away from motherhood, but to also be inclusive of education, young women will have more opportunities to invest in their own personhood.

Additionally, setting up support networks for women within the Church who have children and are still attending school could be vitally important in helping them remain in school and finish their degrees. This could also be a way of capitalizing on a pre-existing strength of the Mormon community. Mormon women are extremely diligent in providing support to members of their community following childbirth and illness. Perhaps this community of support could be extended to include more emphasis on supporting women who are still in school by bringing meals or offering childcare. Mormon communities could greatly reduce the barriers for women in finishing their college education by providing dedicated support during that educational pursuit. Church leaders have an opportunity to capitalize on the strengths and

talents of women in their congregations, while also encouraging young women to pursue educational opportunities with the support of a highly engaged ward community.

Lastly, several participants discussed how obtaining education was an important characteristic of righteous women. The importance of learning and education is supported in LDS doctrine; Section 130 verse 8 of the Doctrine and Covenants of the Church states, “Whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the resurrection.” Lisa (current member) said, “to be an LDS woman is to be a woman of learning.” Young Women leaders can help young women in the Church to foster their talents through education thereby fulfilling a part of their divine identity in addition to motherhood. When motherhood is the central topic of conversation, education becomes “inadvertently un-emphasized” (Tiffany, ex-member) and young women often miss the opportunity to develop their individual, God-given talents. Leaders could implement a strengths-based approach to church programming by investing in the individual interests and capabilities of young women in their wards and communities. Understanding the strengths, interests, and desires of young women is one key step to developing activities that will foster those talents.

Directions for Future Research

While this study provides a foundation for understanding some of the barriers to Mormon women pursuing formal education, additional research is still needed. Future research could examine how church members mitigate these barriers and focus on the specific strengths that are found within Mormon communities. Additionally, many participants endorsed seeking educational opportunities outside of formal education. Thus, future research could utilize a strengths-based approach to understanding the various ways that Mormon women seek out education in settings outside of traditional university.

Future research using this data set will include further analysis of several themes which were robust, but did not directly relate to education, which was the primary aim of this paper. Several participants discussed the discrepancy in gendered responsibilities for men and women, including rules about modesty in clothing and dress. Additionally, two participants endorsed eating disorders and three participants endorsed sexual assault and abuse that impacted their lives and decision-making. Thus, understanding how these issues (modesty, eating disorders, and sexual abuse) may impact Mormon women’s experience of womanhood could provide additional insights to increasing gender equity. Additionally, this study was unable to discuss the extent to which confusion was held regarding doctrine and its impact on decision making. Future research could analyze how doctrine impacts decision-making and how members of the Church determine what is and is not considered doctrine, as little guidance is given by church leadership on this point.

Conclusion

In summary, this study found that for this sample, Mormon women highly valued education. However, they were often prevented from pursuing that education through the rigorous demands of women upheld by the Church and the overall pressure from both doctrine and church culture to prioritize motherhood. For the women studied, prioritizing motherhood created barriers to finishing education due to the burden and seemingly required sacrifice of pursuing motherhood. Thus, motherhood was highly valued by these Mormon women, to the extent that they often prioritized opportunities for motherhood over educational opportunities. In order to improve gender equity within the Church, church leaders will need to address the cultural and systemic practices that discourage women from completing higher education. The Church has a rich culture of service and support that could be extended to help women pursue

their education thereby reducing the current disparity in higher education. Young LDS women do not need to feel forced to choose between motherhood and education; the tools and doctrine are available to support both roles and aspirations. The Church has a great opportunity to begin emphasizing the doctrine that encourages education for women for the sake of education and knowledge. The Church and leadership could highlight the stories of Mormon women who pursued education and careers outside of motherhood and provide greater representation of women being both successful mothers and successful community members. Increasing gender equity benefits families and communities (Global Partnership for Education, 2018); if the Church were to invest more intentionally into helping women pursue higher education, women in the Church could reach their divine potential both including motherhood and beyond motherhood.

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Table 1

Demographics of current member participants

Participant Pseudonym	ID Number	Age	Number of Children	Marital Status	4 Year Degree?	Undergraduate Major	Years to Complete	Highest Level of Education
Jessica	1	32	4	Married	Yes	Accounting	8	4 Year Degree
Brooke	2	24	1	Married	Yes	Human Development	7	4 Year Degree
Kimberly	3	34	2	Married	Yes	Health Science	3	Master’s
Anna	4	33	5	Married	Yes	Mathematics and Music	6	Doctorate
Elizabeth	5	36	1	Married	No	Psychology (Chemistry minor)	NA	2 Year Degree
Lisa	6	32	7	Married	Yes	Business Administration and Writing	34	4 Year Degree
Amanda	7	51	5	Married	Yes	Psychology	25	4 Year Degree
Stephanie	8	23	2	Married	Yes	Economics and Psychology	5	4 Year Degree
Nicole	9	29	4	Married	Yes	Nursing	8	4 Year Degree
Erica	10	41	5	Married	No	Marriage and Family Studies	NA	2 Year Degree

Table 2

Demographics of previous member participants

Participant Pseudonym	ID Number	Age	Number of Children	Marital Status	4 Year Degree?	Undergraduate Major	Years to Complete	Highest Level of Education
Angela	1	32	2	Married	Yes	English	4	Master’s
Hannah	2	24	0	In a committed relationship	No	Theater	NA	Some college
Amy	3	34	3	Married	Yes	Biology	4	Master’s
Lauren	4	33	0	Never married	Yes	General Music	7	4 Year Degree
Mary	5	36	2	Married	Yes	Psychology, Child and Family Studies	9	Master’s
Kaitlyn	6	32	0	Single	Yes	History	12	4 Year Degree
Susan	7	51	7	Married	No	Beauty School, Certificate in Pharmacy Tech	NA	Some college
Melissa	8	23	1	Married	No	Interdisciplinary Studies	NA	2 Year Degree
Emily	9	29	1	Married	No	Horticulture Sciences	NA	Some College
Tiffany	10	41	6	Married	Yes	Elementary Education	4	4 Year Degree

Table 3

The varied reasons for obtaining an education

Reason	Participant	Quote
Opportunities and power	Anna, Current Member	[The] more education you have, the more opportunities you have to choose from. Meaning if you don't have some sorts of skills, then certain kinds of opportunities just are never even available to you to turn down or to accept. They're just now completely not even in your realm of being able to access. So I think that education opens up, it's kind of like a social justice issue where it opens up your ability to have access to a wide variety of options when it comes to providing for your family. When it comes to having purpose when it comes to as a parent helping your children. The more education you have, just the more access you have to choices.
	Nicole, Current Member	Education means power. It is power to understand. Power to make decisions . . . power to change your perspective, power to connect with other people, power to make a difference in your life and other people's lives . . . It really does grant you abilities to do whatever it is you're seeking the education in.
	Tiffany, Ex-Member	Education is opportunities and power. Knowledge... Without education, you lack opportunities and the power to, to change things or to move forward or even to help people.
Security or a buffer	Brooke, Current Member	Watching my parents' marriage end, I saw my mom stuck in a lot of situations that she couldn't afford to get herself out of because she didn't have a degree. She didn't think that she could go out and have the same life and lifestyle that she had with my dad.
	Amanda, Current Member	Later in life [education] was definitely a tool for me to be able to get a job after I got divorced . . . a big motivator for me was just watching so many families around me and like my friends and their families where the, the two parties would get divorced and then the wife would be like totally without any means of supporting herself. And I decided that wasn't going to be me. So, I felt college was a really good way to make sure that I would have a career at some point in the future. And even though that didn't exactly go the direction that I thought, it ended up being true to some degree, you know, being able to have the education did help me.
	Amy, Ex-Member	[President] Hinckley said something along the lines of encouraging all women to be educated. Getting a degree with the mindset that [a degree is good to have] in case something happens to her husband.
Purpose, identity	Elizabeth, Current Member	So that's one reason too that encouraged me to go into education and finish my education was so I had a sense of purpose and identity outside of motherhood.

	Lisa, Current Member	[Education] is my purpose for being here on earth . . . my understanding is to be an LDS woman is to be a woman of learning and a woman of growth.
	Mary, Ex-Member	I decided to pursue my masters and that's the first time that I purposefully made a decision about education for the purpose of a career that I specifically wanted because I wanted it not because that's something I'll, I'll go into teaching or I'll go into something that I can do around my kids' schedule, around my husband's schedule around that. I mean, yeah, we'll have a flexible schedule, but I went into it because it's something that helped me and I wanted to help other people and I had, was passionate about it and then there was no other reason. So I would say a big part was separating from the Church and then actually having a career mind, you know, a career in mind or a goal or reason to go other than just everybody else is.
To benefit others	Melissa, Ex-Member	The ideal Mormon woman has an education so that she can teach her children. That was something else that was always.... That was another value that I held was that you get an education as a backup in case your husband dies or leaves you and also so you can teach your children. It's not for you. It's for everybody else.
	Kaitlyn, Ex-Member	The reason that education is valuable is if something happens to your spouse, then you have a way to support you and your children. But if nothing happens to your spouse, then you have the knowledge to help your children with their homework is essentially how education was posed to me. It's not really something you need to be concerned about except in the realm of helping your children with their homework and doing basic family finance stuff. I had a Bishop counsel me to just do home and family, home-economics type things for my major to do something that involves the home and children or to do like early childhood education. Something that I can apply to being a mother. He [said, “there's no reason for you to go and get a degree in chemistry or anything like that. You should be focused on your future family.” And so that definitely colored my view of like what the Church believed was important as far as education.
	Erica, Current Member	You get an education so that you can better teach your children.
To get married	Elizabeth, Current Member	No one actually came out and directly said this to me. But [I came to understand] that [marriage] is what you go to college for.
	Emily, Ex-Member	{My main reason for going to college was} honestly, marriage. Ring by spring or your money back!

Table 4

What it means to be a righteous woman in the church and the importance of motherhood

Current Members	Ex-Members
<p>Anna: And I remember, you know, all of the talks were always about staying at home with your kids, but my mom worked full time and, but everything was always, always about how important it was to stay at home. I just always remember growing up feeling that cognitive dissonance there. I knew I wanted to graduate from college, but when I got married, I determined I was going to be a stay at home mom . . . I was going to graduate from college, but then I would stay at home because that's what righteous women did.</p>	<p>Melissa: I listened to the General Women’s meeting (October 2018) and I’m just sitting there and I’m getting more and more upset because the women speakers spoke and they talked about how to be a good person and how to be a good disciple and I was like ‘this is great, yeah!’ And then the first presidency gets up and speaks and it’s all about the declining birth rate in the Church and the rising marriage age and how that’s all the fault of women. How to just be a good wife and mother and how the women of the Church aren’t living up to that because we’re postponing childbearing and we’re not having as many children. And I was like wait a second does the Church not care about women? And that for me was like a lightbulb moment I was like “what?” I’m so mad and hurt.</p>
<p>Lisa: I remember going to daytime enrichment meetings and they're all talking about decorating and their kids are all clean and cute and they're all talking about decorating, that's what they talked about. They didn't talk about books they'd read. . . . And so that definitely [fed] into my inadequacies [in a homemaker role] rather than in a business role.</p>	<p>Tiffany: I love being a mom. I want that to be totally, totally clear. I love being a mom. I just think that society does a bad job in general preparing women for this. But especially for the Church to take so much airspace and insist on motherhood as being the end all be all, they do such a crappy job of preparing women actually for it. They do a bad job of preparing women to be moms . . . It just is not the same. That's all. It's not the same.</p>
<p>Amanda: And to me [marriage] was a higher priority than getting [an education]. I've still always wanted to get education. That was still a very important priority to me, but [marriage] was more important than pretty much anything else in my life. So being a mom was super important and I feel like the Church aligns with me to that degree. If you're a mom, that's the most important job that you can do.</p>	<p>Emily: The woman is supposed to be handling all of the soft skills of life, how to cook, clean, take care of yourself, prepare for life in general, that's happening with the children . . . be the perfect housewife, or whatever. . . I'll hear quotes about ‘the most important achievement you can ever make in this life is being a wife and a mother’ sort of stuff is repeated over and over and over again regardless of policy change. It still gets brought up, still is quoted every Sunday in church, still is quoted all the time, at young women.</p>

Table 5

Culture versus doctrine of the Church

Participant Identity	Quote
Stephanie, Current member	Moms should be perfect outfits, every day reading to your kids . . . these things, there's such a standard. Like moms should be devoted to their children in these certain ways . . . So I think there's just like that guilt that we're not perfect and everyone expects you to be perfect. That had to affect my self-esteem, but now it's getting better. It's like, Hey, I'll be giving them a better life than I had.
Jessica, Current member	(Speaking about the age at which she married), Oh, absolutely. No, I totally get it. And keep in mind too. I lived in BYU housing. Like I lived on BYU campus. I was 100% the old lady. And so everybody's like, 'so you didn't go on a mission? What are, you're not married? What is wrong with you?' You know, they didn't say that, but they definitely felt that way.
Nicole, Current Member	I think truthfully it was never actually the Church saying that [women need to stay home]. It was people's interpretation.
Erica, Current member	As I've gotten older, I'm able to make a distinction between what is culturally the Church and what is the gospel of Jesus Christ....growing up I feel like it was, the world was very black and white and there was right and wrong and the Church was true. And as I've grown and we moved outside of Utah then open to different people and different situations that show me how much diversity and love there is around me. Being in a homogeneous culture like Utah was more difficult. I think a lot of what we think of as church culture is Utah culture, maybe Utah LDS culture... there's an importance on appearances. On appearing perfect. Appearing Like everything is fine.
Angela, Ex-member	One of the things about the culture that always peeved me was “you always say yes. You always say yes to a calling, you never say no.” Something that had been put into my head for years and years and years. It wasn’t just about callings. It was about other things. It was about like dances. Never say no to a boy who asks you to dance or something like that. That was kind of part of everything. Don’t ever say no. Don’t ever do anything outside of the norm.
Hannah, Ex-member	My dad was sick and so my mom worked. She had people telling her that she should leave my dad because he couldn't work and that [since] she couldn't be home so she should just find someone else entirely. That was a very cultural, it wasn't very doctrinally based it was just a cultural thing aspect that really affected her life.
Emily, Ex-member	[Gender roles] may not have been exactly outlined in the curriculum, but it was definitely there. Certainly cultural.

Table 6

What is encouraged versus what is discouraged

Participant Identity	Quote
Anna, Current member	During my formative years, it's not that I felt like the Church said not to get an education. I felt like we should get as much education as we possibly can. I always felt President Hinckley, who was the prophet while I was a teenager, was always talking about getting an education and getting as much education as you could. So it wasn't that I felt like we shouldn't get an education. It was that you got an education. The purpose of an education if you were a woman was to be a better mom. That was the purpose. And it wasn't necessarily to make money.
Nicole, Current member	I feel that you actually have to spend time digging in the scriptures to find that encouragement to pursue [education]. Whereas culturally we glorify the woman who gives up everything. We just do. We glorify the woman who follows her husband everywhere to support him in his career. We glorify the woman who drops everything to make sure every kid feels super special on their birthday. And every family holiday is the most amazing thing ever. And all the extended family feel so loved and supported by this woman and she knows what's wrong with everybody in the ward before the Bishop does. We really do glorify that.
Erica, Current member	[The Church] said that family comes first. Right? I feel like that's a clear message of Latter-day Saints is the family comes first in all things. So that does make it difficult for someone pursuing higher education or career goals. If you're being told that you need to put your family first at all times, that can be hard.
Lauren, Ex-Member	[The Church] encouraged [education] by saying basically an education is important. Go get education, but if you get your education without getting married in the meantime, that's a problem. So get your education, wink, wink.
Susan, Ex-Member	They want you to go to college, but they don't want you to actually work and have a career. I think that's two different things. You know what I'm saying? They teach the education part of it, but they don't teach the career, career side of it. It's always stay home and be a mom and don't have a career. Your career is to be a mom . . . on one side we're saying learn more, but the other side don't work outside the home . . .
Melissa, Ex-member	I always wanted to be a mom. I always wanted to be a homemaker. and I wanted to [have a job too but] they were always things I would say to myself, “I would only do that until I had kids.” . . . [I never thought], “well maybe I’ll work and my husband will stay at home or maybe we won’t have kids.” Those were never things in my head. It was always kind of a given I’ll have kids and be married . . . The Church praises kids who say things like that . . . No one will give you a hard time about that as long as you say you want to be a mom.

Table 7

Barriers to and supports for education

Barriers to Education	Current Members	Ex-Members
	<p>Lisa: Dealing with school stuff and then dealing with home stuff. I'm dealing with my children. I'm dealing with burnout.</p>	<p>Susan: A lot of people say, 'well, you're not too old to do it. And I get that. I totally agree. I'm not too old to go back to school and do something like that. But now there has to be a cost benefit.</p>
	<p>Kimberly: Childcare for sure . . . I think childcare is the biggest [barrier].</p>	<p>Mary: Most of my guiding decisions were based on this ideal of trying to be good enough in the Mormon world and get married, have kids and multiply, replenish the earth. And you know, education was good for just being educated . . . it was a shameful feeling to feel like you wanted a career.</p>
<p>Amanda: [I] ran out of money because my parents weren't paying for any part of [my schooling] and I was paying for all of it.</p>	<p>Melissa: When I thought about education [while growing up] I wanted to have an education, but my desire was always "I'll get married and have children then I'll stop. You know. Then maybe I'll pick it up again 20 years later.</p>	
Supports for Education	Current Members	Ex-Members
	<p>Anna: I had a nanny. I remember sitting in church sometimes. "Yes. So, my nanny..." funnily, nobody ever like made a deal out of it.</p>	<p>Kaitlyn: The Church being true meant that everything was secure, and everything made sense in my world. It was very comforting to me.</p>
	<p>Erica: The Church educates its people. And so I learned so many things by serving, and doing trainings and just being around other people who have taught me so much, like real skills that I did not have. So it's definitely a different education that way.</p>	<p>Hannah: I like the idea of having kids and having a partner who I know is going to put in just as much effort as I'm putting in to this and not have it be like this is your responsibility.</p>
<p>Nicole: I love Sister Renlund's example . . . She says, 'nobody can see the army of people behind me.' And very openly admitted she could not attain all she had without assistance of so many.</p>	<p>Angela: My husband had put off school so that I could finish mine first . . . I had support that was so very different from the culture and support I had growing up, that enabled me and probably set the fire on me to finish.</p>	

Appendix A

Glossary of Terms

Active Members: A person who is actively participating in the Church. This includes regularly attending church meetings and fulfilling their church assignments.

Articles of Faith: 13 basic beliefs of the Church which were written by Joseph Smith and are regarded as scripture. They are included in the Pearl of Great Price.

Atonement of Christ: The Atonement of Christ is the belief that Christ suffered for the sins of humankind. This suffering allows for individuals to participate in the repentance process, be forgiven, and become perfect to return to God and Christ in the afterlife.

Baptism: An ordinance required to return to God in Heaven. At 8 years old, children in the LDS faith are baptized and make a covenant with God. Baptism signals the **age of accountability** where children become accountable to God for their sins. Baptism signals a **covenant** (a sacred promise) with God to obey his commandments. Baptism and Confirmation create an official membership record within the Church.

Belief in God the Father: A belief that God is the creator of humankind and is their direct father. Mormons believe that humans are created in the image of God and that He is the literal Father of our spirits.

Bishop: The local leader of a congregation of the Church, similar to a Pastor or Preacher.

Brigham Young University (BYU): A private university run by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. BYU is located in Provo, Utah; Rexburg, Idaho; and Laie, Hawaii. Many young people in the LDS Church attend college at BYU which has a strict religious culture. BYU has a strict **honor code** which requires all students to: be honest, abstain from sexual relations outside of marriage, avoid profane and vulgar language, abstain from alcohol and substance use, observe specific dress and grooming standards, and encourage others to comply with the Honor code (BYU University Policies).

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS/Mormon/The Church): A religious organization headquartered in Salt Lake City, Utah. It was founded in 1830 by **Joseph Smith**. The Church has over 16 million members worldwide and is currently run by President Russel M. Nelson. President Nelson has two counselors (**Dallin H. Oaks** and Henry B. Eyring) and a Quorum of the Twelve Apostles who are also considered prophets and revelators of the word of God. The Church is highly conservative in values and teaches the importance of traditional families, gender roles, and believes in the eternal nature of the family. The Church prefers to not be referred to by the acronym LDS or by the nickname Mormon, however, colloquially it is still referred to with these names and these names were used by participants in the interview which is why the terms are used throughout this paper.

Church Newsroom: The official website for Church related news.

Confirmation: An ordinance required to return to God in Heaven. Following baptism, children are given a blessing by the laying on of hands and are given the gift of the Holy Ghost. Confirmation and Baptism create an official membership record within the Church.

Converted: Conversion to the Gospel means to be united with the purposes of the Church and the Gospel.

Doctrine: Official church teachings and principles for how to live a good life and return to live with God the Father. Statements of truth as confirmed by the Holy Ghost. Closely related to this term is the term **Gospel** which is the guidance given by Jesus Christ in the New Testament books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John and is God’s plan for exaltation. Some church members use these terms interchangeably, though they aren’t necessarily the same.

Doctrine and Covenants: A piece of scripture written by Joseph Smith that includes revelations given to him by God to restore the Church in its fulness. The first section of the book contains the Doctrine that was revealed to him and the second section of the book contains Covenants and commandments by God. The Doctrine and Covenants also includes some of the early history of the beginning of the Church.

Earthly Experience/Earthly Life: Part of the Plan of Salvation. Mormons believe that our existence on Earth is a trial of faith and agency. They believe that we existed before our birth on Earth and that humankind will continue to exist following death.

Elder: A title given to men who attain a certain level of the priesthood and are members of the leadership of the Church.

Endowment: An ordinance required to return to God in Heaven. When individuals go to the temple for the first time they receive the Endowment which is a gift from God that includes the name they will be known by in the afterlife which is required for resurrection and Eternal Marriage. During the Endowment, members of the Church make **covenants** (sacred promises) with God.

Eternal Learning: The belief that each individual will have the opportunity to grow and develop and continue learning throughout the afterlife.

Eternal Marriage/Companions/Families: Mormons believe that families will remain a cohesive unit in the afterlife. Relationships formed on Earth will continue throughout the eternities including marriage. These Eternal Marriages provide the basis for couples to continue having children and to create their own worlds throughout the Eternities.

Ex-Mormon: Someone who was previously a member of the Church but has since left. This person usually experiences a **Crisis of Faith (Faith Crisis)** which is an experience wherein they question their beliefs in the Church and whether they believe the doctrine anymore. Ex-Mormons may or may not officially remove their name from the records of the Church (or **changed their church affiliation**), but they have experienced an **intentional stop of faith** which means they no longer believe the Church’s truth claims. Ex-Mormon is potentially different from someone who

is inactive in the Church. **Inactive** indicates that someone stopped attending church meetings, but did not necessarily experience a faith crisis.

For the Strength of Youth: A pamphlet that shares guidance from the prophets for young men and women in the Church regarding a variety of topics including education, family, friends, their bodies, and other topics.

Law of Chastity: The belief that men and women are to abstain from all sexual activity before marriage and to only have sexual relationships with their spouse. The Law of Chastity states that sexual relationships are only to be employed between husband and wife. Same sex relationships are against the Law of Chastity.

General Conference: Every six months in April and October the Church holds a conference where prophets and apostles give **talks** (speeches) to provide guidance to the Church.

Gender Essentialism: The belief that men and women are fundamentally different from each other and therefore have different **divine roles** and responsibilities from each other. The divine role of men is to provide financially and preside over their families while the divine role of women is to nurture and raise children within the home.

Given Counsel: Members of the Church are given counsel by leaders in authority over them. Counsel may be formal and informal either through lessons, patriarchal blessings, or conversations with church leaders.

Gordon B. Hinckley: President of the Church from 1995 - 2008

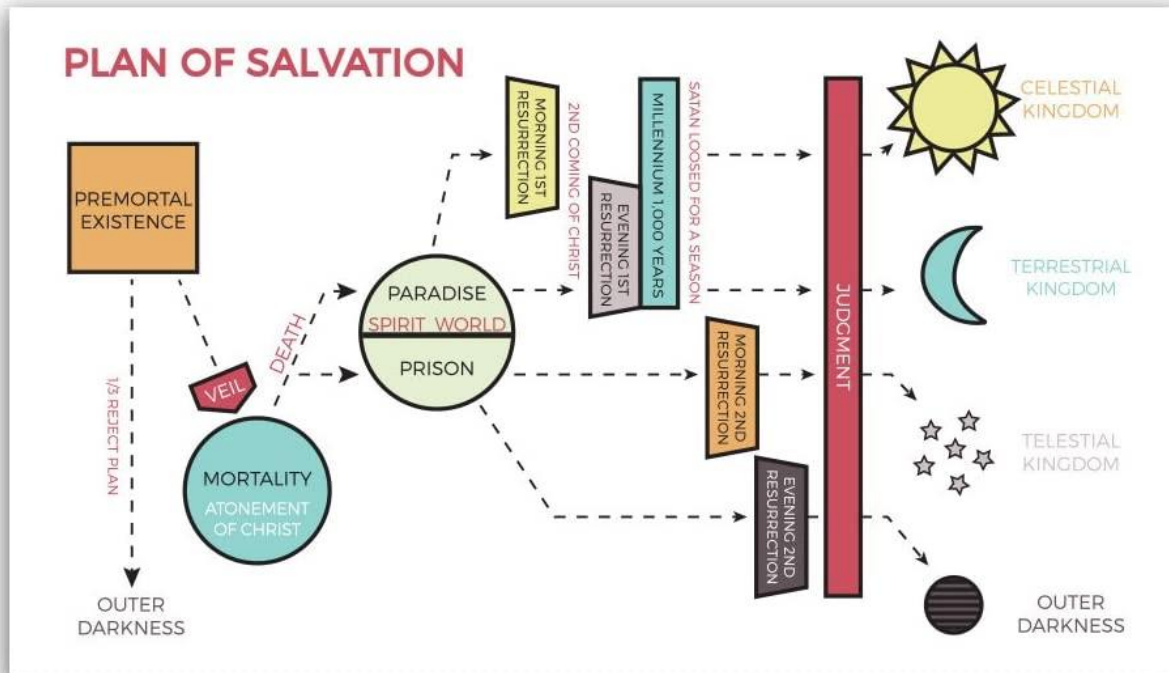
Handbook of the Church: A book guiding local church leadership on how to work through a variety of issues.

Member in Good Standing: A member of the Church who has not been disfellowshipped or excommunicated from the Church.

Mission: Young men at age 18 and young women at age 19 can submit paperwork to be called on a mission for the Church. On the mission, they proselytize the doctrine to the area they have been called to serve in. Young men typically serve for a period of 2 years. Young women typically serve for a period of 18 months.

Plan of Salvation (The Path, The Roadmap of Eternity): The Plan of Salvation is a theological belief that states that all of humankind are God’s children. Those who are on Earth chose in the premortal life to be given the power of agency and to be tested during an Earthly existence to determine whether they would choose to follow Christ. Following death, all individuals will be resurrected and will be judged by God to determine which Kingdom of Heaven they will be received into. The three Kingdoms of Heaven also known as the **Degrees of Glory** are the Telestial, Terrestrial, and Celestial Kingdoms. The **Celestial Kingdom** is the highest Degree of Glory. In order to enter into the Celestial Kingdom one must have a testimony of Jesus and believe in Him, be baptized by immersion, receive the Holy Ghost, obey the commandments and be free of sin, overcome by faith, and be sealed in the temple. Individuals in the Celestial Kingdom will dwell with God and Jesus, be able to continue to have children and be

Eternal Parents, and minister to terrestrial and telestial beings. Doctrine and Covenants teaches that temple marriage (**Being Sealed**) is required to obtain **Exaltation** in the Celestial Kingdom.



(Plan of Salvation Bookmark – Map, LDS Bookstore, <https://www.amazon.com/Plan-of-Salvation-Bookmark-Map/dp/B07553CZZ4>)

Prophet: The head of the Church. Receives direct revelation from God and communicates that revelation to members of the Church.

Primary Songs: Songs sung by children ages 4-11. These songs teach children basic principles of the Gospel.

Repentance: The process by which individuals make restitution for their sins and are forgiven.

Righteousness: The quality of being God-like. An aspiration for holiness and becoming more like God. A righteous man (and a righteous woman) is someone who is fulfilling their divine callings.

Salvific: adjective. Leading to eternal life and salvation. Ordinances are salvific.

Sustaining the Prophet: A physical indication (raising the right arm to the square) that an individual supports the prophet and believes that he is God’s mouthpiece on Earth.

Temple: A holy building where members of the Church go to participate in saving ordinances. Saving ordinances are required for passage into Heaven. To enter the Temple, one must be given a **Temple Recommend** which is a signal of worthiness that is provided after meeting and being interviewed by the Bishop of the local congregation. Regular **Temple Attendance** indicates that

church members continue attending the temple to perform saving ordinance rituals by proxy for individuals who are dead.

Temple Sealing: An ordinance required to return to God in Heaven. Mormons believe in eternal marriage and families by **being sealed**. This ordinance means that in Heaven, family relationships that were created while on Earth will continue throughout the afterlife. A Temple Sealing is required for access to the highest degree of the Celestial Kingdom.

Utah County: A county in the state of Utah with a very dense population of Mormons. Approximately 85% of this county identifies as LDS.

Testimony: A testimony is a belief in the truthfulness of the Church including its doctrine and its leaders. A testimony is required to receive a temple recommend.

Wards: A local congregation based on geography. Individuals are assigned which church they will attend and at what time of the day on Sunday.

Word of Wisdom: A dietary code that dictates what members of the Church can ingest into their bodies. Members of the Church are required to follow the Word of Wisdom to receive a temple recommend.

Young Women Leaders and Lessons: Girls who are aged 12-18 attend church classes together in what is called Young Women. Older women in the Church are given callings to teach the girls aged 12-18 and are called Young Women Leaders. They teach lessons during one of the two hours of church every other Sunday. Prior to January 2019, girls aged 12-18 years old attended this class during the third hour of church every Sunday.

Appendix B

Screening Questionnaire

Q1 Hello and thank you for your interest in participating in this research study. Please select the term that best describes you.

- Current and active member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS, Mormon)
- Previous member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Ex-Mormon, Post-Mormon)
- Other: Please specify - _____

Q2 What is the highest level of education you've obtained?

- Less than high school
- High school graduate
- Some college
- Completed 2 year degree
- Completed 4 year degree
- Master
- Doctorate
- Prefer not to say

Q3 At what age did you begin college?

Q4 What is/was your college major?

Q5 At what age did you finish your bachelor's degree?

Q6 Which description best suits you?

I have attended some college, but I do not intend to finish my Bachelor's degree within 5 years.

I have attended some college, and I plan on going back to school to finish my Bachelor's degree within 5 years.

Other: Please Describe _____

Prefer not to say

Q7 Which College/University did you attend for your undergraduate degree?

Q8 Which University did you attend for your graduate or professional degree?

Q9 Are you a mother?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to say

Q10 How many children do you have?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- Other: Please specify _____
- Prefer not to say

Q11 At what age did you become a mother?

Q12 Were you ever pregnant and attending school at the same time?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to say

Q13 Did you have a baby while attending college?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to say

Q14 Do you currently work outside of the home?

- Yes, Full time
- Yes, Part time
- No, I am a stay at home mom/housewife
- Other: Please specify _____
- Prefer not to say

Q15 Please indicate your marital/relationship status (select as many as are applicable).

- Married
- In a committed relationship
- Widowed

- Divorced/Separated
- Single
- Never married
- Other: Please specify
- Prefer not to say

Q16 How long have (or had) you been in this relationship?

- 1-2 years
- 3-4 years
- 4-5 years
- 6-10 years
- 11-15 years
- 16-20 years
- 25+ years

Q17 At what age did you enter your committed relationship or marry your spouse? *If you have had multiple committed relationships or have been married multiple times, please indicate the age of your first marriage/partnership.*

Q18 What is the highest level of education obtained by your partner/spouse?

- Less than high school
- High school graduate
- Some college
- Completed 2-year degree
- Completed 4-year degree
- Master
- Doctorate

Q19 Does your mother have a college degree?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure
- Prefer not to say

Q20 Did your mother work outside of the home during your childhood and/or adolescence?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to say

Q21 Were you baptized at 8 years old?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to say

Q22 Did you earn your Personal Progress Young Women Medallion?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to say

Q23 Did you serve a mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to say

Q24 Do you currently serve in any of the following callings?

- Primary Presidency
- Young Women Presidency
- Relief Society Presidency
- None of these

Q25 Do you currently hold an active temple recommend?

- Yes
- No

Q26 Prior to leaving the Church, did you serve in any of the following callings?

- Primary Presidency
- Young Women Presidency
- Relief Society Presidency
- None of these

Q27 Prior to leaving the Church, did you hold an active temple recommend?

- Yes
- No

Q28 Read each of the following statements. Please indicate the response that best describes how true each statement is for you. *If you identify as Ex-Mormon, please choose the response that most reflects your belief prior to your faith crisis.

	Not at all true of me	Somewhat true of me	Moderately true of me	Mostly true of me	Totally true of me
I often read books and magazines about my faith.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I make financial contributions to my religious organization.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I spend time trying to grow in understanding of my faith.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Religion is especially important to me because it answers many questions about the meaning of life.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My religious beliefs lie behind my whole approach to life.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I enjoy spending time with others of my religious affiliation.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Religious beliefs influence all my dealings in life.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It is important to me to spend periods of time in private religious thought and reflection	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I enjoy working in the activities of my religious affiliation.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I keep well informed about my local religious group and have some influence in its decisions.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q29 How old are you?

Q30 What is your race and/or ethnicity? *Please select all that apply.*

- White
- Black or African American
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- Latinx
- Not Listed: Please specify

Q31 What is your household income?

- Less than \$10,000
- \$10,000 - \$29,999
- \$30,000 - \$49,999
- \$50,000 - \$69,999
- \$70,000 - \$89,999
- \$90,000 - \$120,000
- \$120,000 - \$149,999
- More than \$150,000

Q32 In what state do you currently reside?

Q33 Have you ever lived in Utah?

Yes

No

Q34 For how long did you live in Utah? (*Please answer in years*)

Appendix C

Interview Guide for Current Member Participants

Thank you for agreeing to let me interview you today. I am interested to learn about a couple of different things from you. Throughout the course of this interview we will be discussing how the choices you made regarding your education have been influenced by your [relationship to, status within] the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I want to reassure you that your responses will be kept confidential. Do you have any questions about confidentiality before we get started?

EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE: I’m going to start by asking you some questions about your educational experiences. Specifically, I want to know about who and what was influential in shaping the decisions you made regarding pursuing your education. Additionally, I am interested to know about whether the Church encouraged or discouraged pursuing your education. First, can you tell me about what education means to you?

- 1) How does one become educated? What makes education important or not important? Is college an essential part of becoming educated?
- 2) When you first started attending college, what were your primary reasons for attending? What were your education and career goals? How did those goals change and evolve over time? What motivated you to continue going to school even when it became difficult?
- 3) Tell me about the person who influenced you the most regarding your attitudes towards attending college. (Relationship to you, status within the Church, positive/negative attitude)
- 4) How did the Church encourage or discourage you from pursuing your education?
 - a. What are/were the biggest supports while attending school?
 - b. Tell me about a time where you felt especially encouraged or excited while attending school?
 - c. What were the greatest barriers to attending school?
 - d. Tell me about a time where you felt especially discouraged in your education?
 - e. Tell me about a time you questioned whether you should continue in your studies?
- 5) How did being a member of the Church make attending college easier or more difficult?
- 6) If you could go back and change any decisions you made regarding your education what would you change and why?
- 7) What did the Church teach you about your responsibilities regarding education as a woman? I am especially interested to hear your interpretation of what the value of, purpose of, and goals of education are according to the Church.
- 8) What could the Church do to better demonstrate their value of education?

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE: The next section I would like to cover is your experience as a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Throughout this section I am interested to hear what lessons you learned, what people you knew, and what experiences you have had that influenced the way that you make decisions and live your life and especially how you made decisions regarding your education. First,

- 1) How and when did you first learn the Church was true? How did you gain your testimony?
 - a. What does it mean to you that the Church is true? What impacts does[did] that have in how you choose to live your life?
- 2) Tell me about the most influential person(s) in your religious journey? What did you learn from them?

GENDER EXPERIENCE: The final section is about gender. The section will cover what it means to you to be a woman within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Additionally, this section will ask questions about motherhood and womanhood. Motherhood is one of the primary roles for women within the Church, but child-rearing can be disruptive of educational attainment. I would like to learn more about your personal experiences.

- 1) What does it mean to you to be a righteous woman in the Church? What I mean when I say that is, what are the requirements, goals, etc. for women specifically in the Church? How are female responsibilities different than male responsibilities?
- 2) What does Feminism mean to you?
- 3) How was your education affected by getting married?
- 4) What does motherhood mean to you? How do you feel about being a mother (now or future)?
 - a. How did the Family: A Proclamation to the World affect decisions you made in relation to you and your family?
- 5) How was your education affected by becoming a mother?
- 6) What did the Church teach you about how women should balance their family obligations and their educational/career goals?
- 7) If you could go back and change any decisions you made regarding motherhood what would you change and why?
- 8) If you could go back and change any decisions you made regarding marriage what would you change and why?

TO CLOSE: What did we miss or not cover that you feel is important to understanding how gender and the Church influence educational attainment?

Appendix D

Interview Guide for Previous Member Participants

Thank you for agreeing to let me interview you today. My name is Haylee. I am doing this research project for my Master of Social Work thesis at the University of Washington. Throughout this interview, I am interested to learn about a few different things from you. In this interview, we will be discussing how the choices you made regarding your education have been influenced by your relationship to the Mormon Church. I want to reassure you that your responses will be kept confidential. Do you have any questions about confidentiality before we get started?

Interview Guide

EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE: I’m going to start by asking you some questions about your educational experiences. I want to know about who and what was influential in shaping the decisions you made regarding pursuing and continuing your education. Specifically, I am interested to know about how the Church encouraged and/or discouraged pursuing your education. First, can you tell me about what education means to you?

- 9) How does one become educated? What makes education important or not important? Is college an essential part of becoming educated?
- 10) When you first started attending college, what were your primary reasons for attending? What were your education and career goals? How did those goals change and evolve over time?
- 11) Tell me about the person who influenced you the most regarding your attitudes towards attending college. (Relationship to you, status within the Church, positive/negative attitude) going in the first place, continuing and pressing forward
- 12) How did the Church (and people within the Church) encourage or discourage you from pursuing your education?
 - a. What were the biggest supports while attending school?
 - b. Tell me about a time where you felt especially encouraged or excited while attending school?
 - c. What were the greatest barriers to attending school?
 - d. Tell me about a time where you felt especially discouraged in pursuing your education?
 - e. Tell me about a time you questioned whether you should continue in your studies?
- 13) How did being a member of the Church make attending college easier or more difficult?
- 14) If you could go back and change any decisions you made regarding your education what would you change and why?

- 15) What did the Church teach you about your responsibilities regarding education as a woman? I am especially interested to hear your interpretation of what the value of, purpose of, and goals of education are according to the Church.
- 16) How has your perspective regarding education changed from the time you were Mormon until now? What I mean when I say that is, how have your views towards education changed from when you were a member of the Church?
- 17) How has the Church’s message about education changed from the time you were a child until now?
- 18) What could the Church do to better demonstrate their value of education?

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE: The next section I would like to cover is your experience as a member of the Mormon Church. Throughout this section I am interested to hear what lessons you learned, what people you knew, and what experiences you had that influenced the way that you make decisions and live your life and especially how you made decisions regarding your education. As an ex-Mormon, you might have two different, or overlapping, sets of people. The first being those who influenced you as a member, and the second being those who influenced you to leave or are your current supports. I am interested to hear about both groups of people. First,

- 3) How and when did you first learn the Church was true? What did it mean to you that the Church was true? What does the term “true” mean to you?
 - a. What impacts did the Church being true have in how you chose to live your life?
- 4) Tell me about the most influential person(s) in your religious journey? What did you learn from them?
- 5) When did you learn the Church was false? How did you lose your testimony?
 - a. What impact did losing your faith have on the way that you choose to live your life and make decisions?

GENDER EXPERIENCE: The final section is about gender. The section will cover what it meant to you to be a woman within the Mormon Church and how your role has changed since leaving. Additionally, this section will ask questions about motherhood and womanhood. Motherhood is one of the primary roles for women within the Mormon Church, but child-rearing can be disruptive of educational attainment. I would like to learn more about your personal experiences.

- 9) What did it mean to you to be a righteous woman in the Mormon Church? What I mean when I say that is, what are the requirements, goals, etc. for women specifically in the Church? How are female responsibilities different than male responsibilities?
- 10) What does it mean to be a good woman now vs when you were a member of the Church?
- 11) How has your relationship towards your gender identity as a woman changed and evolved since you left the Church?

- a. What does Feminism mean to you?
- 12) How was your education affected by getting married?
- 13) What does motherhood mean to you? How do you feel about being a mother (now or future)?
 - a. How did the Family: A Proclamation to the World affect decisions you made in relation to you and your family?
- 14) How was your education affected by becoming a mother?
- 15) What did the Church teach you about how women should balance their family obligations and their educational/career goals?
- 16) If you could go back and change any decisions you made regarding motherhood what would you change and why?
- 17) If you could go back and change any decisions you made regarding marriage what would you change and why?

TO CLOSE: What did we miss or not cover that you feel is important to understanding how gender and the Church influence educational attainment?

Appendix E

Reflexivity Statement

To increase transparency and in the tradition of many qualitative researchers, I am writing this reflexivity statement. I was born and raised in the Church in a very orthodox Mormon family. My family was very devout, and I had a strong testimony of the Church. When I moved away for college, I had the opportunity to invest time into truly examining my beliefs and I chose to leave the Church on November 10, 2015 following the policy release that excluded children with LGBT parents from being baptized. Although I am no longer a member of the Church, my heritage is within this community that I hold dearly to my heart. As an Ex-Mormon woman, my personal experiences have given me the opportunity to have access to a community I may not have otherwise had access too. My knowledge of the customs, beliefs, and priorities within Mormonism provide a unique lens to understanding how Mormon religiosity influences educational attainment within the community. Education and gender equity are extremely important to me as these topics and its positionality within Mormonism have affected me and the decisions that I have made throughout my life. These values led me to this research topic of understanding the unique supports and barriers that my community faces in pursuing their education.