

MORMONS, SEXUAL MINORITIES, AND THE CHURCH OF JESUS  
CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS

by

Elijah K. Nielson

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**STATEMENT OF DISSERTATION APPROVAL**

The dissertation of **Elijah K. Nielson**

has been approved by the following supervisory committee members:

<b>Patrick Thomas Panos</b>	, Chair	<b>5/2/2017</b>
		<hr/> Date Approved
<b>Ruth Gerritsen-Mckane</b>	, Member	<b>5/2/2017</b>
		<hr/> Date Approved
<b>Larry Lorenzo Smith</b>	, Member	<b>5/2/2017</b>
		<hr/> Date Approved
<b>Lawrence Henry Liese</b>	, Member	<b>5/2/2017</b>
		<hr/> Date Approved
<b>Walter P. Reeve</b>	, Member	<b>5/2/2017</b>
		<hr/> Date Approved

and by **Lawrence Henry Liese**, Dean of

the College of **Social Work**

and by David B. Kieda, Dean of The Graduate School.

## ABSTRACT

Individuals who identify as Mormon—adherents to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church), a distinct and peculiar form of Christianity—and who also identify as gay or lesbian face a unique challenge to their mental health as they wrestle with the integration of their faith and their sexuality. Compounding this matter is the commonly held belief that one cannot authentically be gay and Mormon nor can one be a practicing Mormon and gay. As academics and professionals gain a more nuanced understanding of the complexity of (a) those who identify as both Mormon and a sexual/gender minority, and (b) of the Church itself, they will begin to deconstruct their own biases and increase their multicultural competence, thus becoming better equipped to address the mental health concerns of this particular sexual-minority group.

Cultural competence in this context involves an awareness that, under the modern gay rights movement, a troubling dominant discourse has emerged that—if taken to an extreme—is oppressive to the coexisting narrative of the LDS Church. For example, the LDS Church's doctrinal view on same-sex marriage contrasts sharply from the dominant, gay-affirming discourse and, as a result, has been stigmatized and marginalized. To examine this marginalization, I employ critical discourse analysis (CDA) in order to uncover the LDS Church's coexisting subordinate narrative and to further enable academics and professionals to deconstruct their own possible biases towards the Mormon religious minority group.

Important to this deconstruction of bias is a realization that although cultural and societal values regarding sexuality, marriage, and family have rapidly evolved over this past decade, the fundamental doctrine of monogamous, heterosexual marriage espoused by LDS Church has not. Questions arise as to how orthodox Mormon families come to terms with their child coming out in light of the LDS Church's policy on same-sex marriage and families. To answer that question, I employ a case study method to explore the experience of one such orthodox Mormon family whose child came out as gay. The findings from my case study suggest that it is possible for families and individuals in these circumstances to develop and maintain loving and supportive relationships in spite of religious differences.

To all those struggling to reconcile their sexual orientation with their spirituality, to the family members of those who so struggle, and to the faith tradition that has expressly invited into the choir all who want to be there.

“What is changing—and what needs to change— is to help Church members respond sensitively and thoughtfully when they encounter same-sex attraction in their own families, among other Church members, or elsewhere.”

-Elder Dallin H. Oaks

Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	ix
Chapters	
1. INTRODUCTION .....	1
1.1 Statement of the Problem.....	1
1.2 Importance of the Problem.....	2
1.3 Theoretical Foundations.....	3
1.4 Overview of Important Literature.....	3
1.5 Research Questions and Methodology.....	6
1.6 Conclusion .....	7
1.7 References.....	8
2. INCLUSIVITY IN THE LATTER-DAYS: GAY MORMONS .....	12
2.1 Abstract.....	12
2.2 Introduction .....	13
2.3 Literature Review .....	15
2.4 Methods .....	18
2.5 Data Analysis.....	22
2.6 Results and Discussion .....	23
2.7 Conclusion .....	29
2.8 References .....	34
3. MARRIAGE IN THE LATTER DAYS: THE MORMON POLICY ON SAME-SEX MARRIAGE .....	43
3.1 Introduction.....	43
3.2 Literature Review of Critical Discourse Analysis .....	47
3.3 Use of CDA To Examine Mormon Policy On Same-Sex Marriage.....	50
3.4 Methods.....	59
3.5 Analysis.....	60
3.6 Conclusion .....	67



3.7 References.....	69
4. WHEN A CHILD COMES OUT IN THE LATTER-DAYS: A CASE STUDY OF MORMON PARENTS .....	76
4.1 Introduction.....	76
4.2 Literature Review.....	80
4.3 Methods.....	85
4.4 Data Analysis .....	88
4.5 Results and Discussion .....	90
4.6 Conclusion .....	97
4.7 References.....	99
5. CONCLUSION.....	106
5.1 Summary of Findings.....	106
5.2 Discussion .....	108
5.3 Recommendations.....	114
5.4 References.....	117

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **1.1 Statement of the Problem**

Mormons—adherents to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church)—are a religious minority in the United States, making up just 1.7% of the adult population (Pew Research Center, 2009). As a religious minority, the LDS Church’s doctrinal views on heterosexual marriage and same-sex relationships and behaviors contrast sharply from the dominant, gay-affirming discourse (Hodge, 2007; Nielson, 2012, 2016). Mormons identifying as a sexual or gender minority (SGM) face unique challenges and have varying viewpoints on the inclusiveness of their respective congregational communities (Nielson, 2016). On the other hand, the doctrines, beliefs, and practices of LDS Church itself have at times been stigmatized by dominant society, resulting in the marginalization of the coexisting, subordinate Mormon narrative. In addition, the juxtaposition of the LDS Church’s theistic values vis-à-vis the dominant societal secular values can lead Mormons themselves to experience a moral pinch point wherein they feel that they must choose between their faith and their child who identifies as an SGM (Cooper & Brooks, 2016). The current body of knowledge does not adequately address these issues. Therefore, my proposed research makes an important contribution by taking the first step in addressing this knowledge gap.

## 1.2 Importance of the Problem

In order to “promote the general Welfare” (U.S. Const. pmb.) of an increasingly pluralistic society, it is necessary for diverse groups to find and build on common ground. This is especially critical under the modern gay rights movement wherein fundamental human rights appear to be in direct conflict with each other (U.S. Civil Rights Commission, 2016). It is in this crucial and sensitive area that social workers can play an integral role in finding commonality and building bridges of understanding between SGM and religious groups.

Under the National Association of Social Workers’ Code of Ethics (NASW; 2008), *all* social workers are mandated to “obtain education about and seek to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression with respect to . . . sexual orientation . . . [and] religion.” Ethical social workers must be aware that, at times, “religious beliefs” have been “used to dehumanize and demonize gay and lesbian people, and those beliefs can harm and oppress” (Melendez & LaSala, 2006, p. 375-376). Ethical social workers must likewise be aware of the harmful and oppressive implications of secular beliefs contending that “religious liberty” and/or “religious freedom” are mere “code words for discrimination, intolerance, racism, sexism, homophobia, Islamophobia, Christian supremacy, or any form of intolerance” (Castro, 2016, p. 29). Such “discriminat[ion] against faith groups is anathema to social work’s values and ethics” (Bolen & Dessel, 2013, p. 544). As a religious minority group, Mormons need research focused specifically on issues related to the complexities of their socially conservative faith in an increasingly dominant, gay-affirming society. Such research is part of what enables diverse groups to build on common ground and “promote the general Welfare” (U.S. Const. pmb.) of modern society.

### **1.3 Theoretical Foundations**

My epistemological perspective is one of social constructionism in that people construct their social reality through language and interpersonal interactions (Andrews, 2012). While I accept that an objective reality exists, my view is that objective reality can only be understood through our own subjective filters of experience (Walker, 2015). This epistemological perspective is also the lens through which I examined the concept of inclusivity within the LDS Church. My analysis of the LDS Church's coexisting but subordinate narrative vis-à-vis the dominant gay-affirming narrative of greater society was also informed by a modified Marxist theory (Hodge, 2002), which holds that some actors within the secular, gay-affirming hegemony are intent on marginalizing the competing, but nonetheless subordinate, theistic narrative/world-view of heterosexual marriage and relationships. And finally, my case study of Mormon parents whose child had come out as gay was informed and guided by family systems theory.

### **1.4 Overview of Important Literature**

While familial or religious systems that promote “heterosexist messages” (Szymanski, Kashubeck-West, & Meyer, 2008, p. 514) might subsequently lead to the development of “internalized heterosexism (IH)” (p. 510), family and religion can serve as protective factors for adolescents identifying as SGM (Dalton, 2015; Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006; Hatzenbuehler, Pachankis, & Wolff, 2012; Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2005; Stone, Luo, Lippy, & McIntosh, 2015). Hatzenbuehler, Pachankis, and Wolff (2012) “investigated religious climate as a contextual-level measure of the social environment” and found that “LGB youths living . . . with more supportive religious

climates exhibited fewer health risk behaviors” and concluded “that religion can be protective for LGB youths.” (p. 661). Young (2014) also spoke to the protective factor of religion for those identifying as SGM. These studies suggest that an SGM adolescents’ degree of IH may in fact be correlated to the amount of heterosexism contained or existing in the respective familial and religious systems making up their sociocultural environment (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008).

In the sociocultural context of the Mormon faith tradition, weekly worship services and youth activities supplement family-based religious practices including but not limited to: (a) daily family and individual prayer, (b) daily family and personal scripture study, (c) weekly “Family Home Evening” (typically scheduled on Monday night), and (e) monthly temple attendance (Church, n.d.). Given the geographic-specific boundaries of Mormon congregational units, it is not uncommon—particularly in Utah with its dense Mormon population—for a Mormon family’s social environment to be made up primarily of its family members and fellow Mormon congregants. Depending on the level of heterosexism in a given congregation and neighborhood, this can present a significant challenge for a Mormon who identifies as SGM.

Fortunately, research on Mormons who identify as SGM is increasing. Goodwill (2000) focused specifically on the spiritual needs of Mormon men who identified as gay. Kelly (2002) focused on the perspective of Mormon women identifying as SGM. Johns and Hanna (2011) explored the spirituality of Mormons who identify as SGM. Jacobsen and Wright (2014) studied the mental health needs of Mormon women with “same-sex sexuality” (p. 665). Bradshaw, Dehlin, Crowell, Galliher, and Bradshaw (2015) examined the efforts of Mormons who identify as SGM to change their sexual orientation through

psychotherapy. Bradshaw et al. (2015) explored the religious experience and development of sexual identity of Mormon men who identify as gay. Mattingly, Galliher, Dehlin, Crowell, and Bradshaw (2015) likewise focused on the perspective of the Mormon individual identifying as SGM. Dehlin, Galliher, Bradshaw, Hyde, and Crowell (2015) researched the sexual orientation change efforts of Mormons who identify as SGM. Dehlin (2015) outlined the mental health implications of sexual orientation change efforts by Mormons identifying as SGM. Dehlin, Galliher, Bradshaw, and Crowell (2015) similarly examined the conflict between religious and sexual identity. Crowell, Galliher, Dehlin, and Bradshaw (2015) reviewed the relationship between minority stress experienced by Mormons who identify as SGM, and depression. The autobiographical work of Cooper and Brooks (2016) focused on Cooper's experience undergoing conversion therapy and subsequent legal proceedings after coming out to her Mormon parents. Thus, as evidenced by the foregoing scholarship, there is a growing body of research on Mormons who identify as SGM.

What the foregoing research suggests to me, however, is that scholars have focused on the perspective of the individual to the near exclusion of the overarching system. I argue that a systems perspective requires studies that examine, among other things, (a) the perspectives of Mormons—both current and former members of the LDS Church—as well as the LDS Church itself on the concept of inclusivity, (b) the LDS Church's subordinate, coexisting narrative on Mormons who identify as SGM, and (c) the parental system of orthodox Mormon parents whose child identifies as SGM. I submit that my research efforts into these areas address and supplement the holistic gap in the current body of knowledge.

### 1.5 Research Questions and Methodology

One primary research question I had concerned the concept of inclusivity as applied to Mormons who identify as SGM within the LDS Church (i.e., “Gay Mormons”) (Nielson, 2016, p. 5). I thus developed a qualitative, descriptive research study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and examined what Gay Mormons (both current and former members of the LDS Church) and the LDS Church were saying on the Internet. I observed these populations online because “online communities are...typically subcultures of larger communities made up of people with a particular interest” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 158). My research culminated in an article published in the journal of *Mental Health, Religion, & Culture* (Nielson, 2016).

Another important research question I had was in regard to the coexisting but subordinate narrative regarding the LDS Church’s policy on same-sex marriage (Policy). I was well aware of how the dominant, gay-affirming society defined this Policy, but my interest was in deconstructing the dominant narrative and thus exposing the LDS Church’s coexisting subordinate narrative that would otherwise have remained obstructed. I argue that my use of critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, Mulderigg, & Wodak, 2011) provided me with the tools to move past the dominant narrative and examine the subordinate narrative the LDS Church uses to socially construct its Policy.

A final primary research question I had was the determination of how orthodox Mormon parents responded to a child “coming out” to them. In other words, I wanted to better understand what the *parents’* perspectives were. To this end, I argue that the case study design (Ragin & Becker, 1992; Tsang, 2014) was well suited to my efforts to understand how Mormon parents reacted to their child coming out as nonheterosexual. My



criteria for determining eligibility for inclusion in my case study was that participants were (a) a Mormon married heterosexual couple who, (b) belong to, actively participate in, and attend their congregation on a consistent basis, (c) are authorized to participate in temple rites, (d) *hold lay-leadership callings in their congregation*, and (e) have one or more children who identify as SGM and have elected to pursue and engage in same-sex relationships. My case study of a Mormon couple helped me to better understand the impact a child's coming out has on the parental system of an orthodox Mormon family.

## **1.6 Conclusion**

My research has led to the development of three independent but closely related articles that blend nicely to form a coherent body of work. The articles I propose—which will serve respectively as my Multiple Article Plan Chapters 2, 3, and 4—are (a) *Inclusivity in the latter-days: Gay Mormons* (a qualitative descriptive study), (b) *Marriage in the latter-days: The Mormon policy on same-sex marriage* (a critical discourse analysis), and (c) *When a child comes out in the latter-days: A case study of Mormon parents* (a case study). Each of these articles addresses Mormons as a religious minority within the social-cultural-context of a dominant, gay-affirming society. As such, each of these articles begins to flesh out—in a more holistic fashion—the current body of knowledge on Mormons who identify as SGM. In the end, each of these articles will assist scholars, practitioners, clergy, and others to build bridges of understanding between diverse groups in a rapidly evolving society.

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## CHAPTER 2<sup>1</sup>

### INCLUSIVITY IN THE LATTER-DAYS: GAY MORMONS

#### 2. 1 Abstract

Individuals who identify as Mormon – adherents to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (“Church”), a distinct and peculiar form of Christianity – and also identify as gay or lesbian face a unique challenge to their mental health as they wrestle with the integration of their faith and their sexuality. Compounding this matter is the commonly held belief that one cannot authentically be gay and Mormon nor can one be a practising Mormon and gay. As academics and professionals gain a more nuanced understanding of the complexity of (a) those who identify as both Mormon and a sexual/gender minority and (b) of the Church itself, they will begin to deconstruct their own biases and increase their multicultural competence, thus becoming better equipped to address the mental health concerns of this particular sexual minority group.

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter contains my published article reprinted with permission from: Nielson, E. (2016). Inclusivity in the latter-days: Gay Mormons. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 19(7), 752-768.

## 2.2 Introduction

There is a commonly held belief that one cannot authentically be gay and Mormon nor can one be a practising Mormon and gay (Goodwill, 2000; O'Brien, 2005). Given the fundamental doctrines and policies regarding homosexuality decreed by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints ("Church"), the integration of faith and sexuality by Mormon sexual and gender minorities ("SGM"), specifically gay and lesbian Mormons ("Gay Mormons") presents an obvious challenge. Related to integration is the concept of inclusivity which, for the purposes of this article, is defined as, "an intention or policy of including people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized, such as those who are...sexual minorities" (Online Oxford Dictionary, n.d.). As society becomes increasingly secular, certain beliefs or doctrines of conservative religions may conflict with society's preferred secular cultural norms and or values (Dessel, Bolen, & Shepardson, 2011; Ressler & Hodge, 2003). The Church is among other conservative Christian denominations specifically addressing the role and inclusion of gays and lesbians within their respective congregations (Hatzenbuehler, Pachankis, & Wolff, 2012). Yet, while the Church is similar to other conservative Christians sects in some aspects, the distinct nature and history of the Church warrant a separate examination of the inclusivity of Gay Mormons within the Church. For the reader unfamiliar with the Church and its history, I utilise the following paragraph to provide a brief primer on the Mormon faith tradition.

The institutional Church is a unique Christian-faith tradition that claims to be restored Christianity led by prophets and apostles just as in biblical times (Bowman, 2012; Bushman, 2008; Church, n.d.a). Unlike Catholicism which asserts an unbroken chain of papal authority dating from St. Peter onwards, and distinctive from the various reformed

Protestant sects, the Church asserts (a) that the crucifixion of Christ and the deaths of his original 12 apostles resulted in an apostasy wherein Christ's church no longer existed on the earth, (b) that Christ personally appeared in vision to Joseph Smith, Jr., in the year 1820 (c) that Joseph had priesthood authority conferred upon him by the resurrected apostles Peter, James, and John, (d) that through this conferral of priesthood authority Joseph was authorised and commanded to restore Christ's church to the earth, and that (e) he succeeded in doing so by organising the Church in the state of New York on 6 April 1830 (Bowman, 2012; Bushman, 2008; Church, n.d.b, n.d.c). In each of their attempted settlements, Church congregants – initially referred to pejoratively as “Mormons” – experienced violent expulsions (which at times included the murder of Mormon men, women, and children) at the hands of organised mobs; Joseph Smith and other leaders were eventually killed by one such mob while in state custody in Carthage, Illinois; and the Mormons subsequently fled as refugees from continuous religious persecution in the United States to the arid Salt Lake Valley claimed by Mexico prior to the Mexican–American War (Bowman, 2012; Bushman, 2008; Church, n.d.d; Murphy, 1995). Since settling in the Salt Lake Valley, the Church has maintained its headquarters in Salt Lake City, Utah and continued an unbroken line of apostolic authority (Bushman & Bushman, 2001). It is this authority, contained in the Church's presiding hierarchies of the First Presidency and Council of the Twelve Apostles, that determines fundamental Church doctrines and policies regarding homosexuality (Nelson, 2016).

In regard to Mormons who identify as SGM, although Church leadership is on record as seeking inclusivity for all members identifying as SGM (Christofferson, n.d.; Jones, 2016; Gustav-Wrathall, 2015, 2016; Oaks, n.d.; Stack, 2015), the Church also



recently established a policy (“Policy”) that is unquestionably exclusive of same-sex marriage and families (First Presidency, 2015; Nelson, 2016). Official Church doctrine is that same-sex attraction is itself not a sin and does not preclude a Mormon identifying as SGM from full participation in all aspects of the Church – including sacred temple rites (Otterson, 2015). On the other hand, the Policy establishes (a) that Mormons in same-sex marriage require Church discipline with the possibility of excommunication and (b) restricts Church ordinances for minor children residing primarily with a parent in a same-sex marriage until that minor child reaches the age of majority and disavows the practice of same-sex marriage (First Presidency, 2015).

### **2.3 Literature Review**

It is perhaps not surprising that Meyer, Teylan, and Schwartz (2015) report that individuals identifying as SGM generally view the Church as a hostile, even heterosexist institution. While not speaking specifically of the Church or of Mormons who identify as SGM, Szymanski, Kashubeck-West, and Meyer (2008) define “internalized heterosexism (IH)” as “the internalization by lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals of negative attitudes and assumptions about homosexuality that are prevalent in society” (p. 510). And while religiosity may provide protective factors for sexual minorities (Dahl & Galliher, 2012; Grigoriou, 2010; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2012; Young, 2014), Szymanski et al. (2008) surmise that, among other things, IH could develop through “heterosexist messages from...religion” (p. 514). Super and Jacobson (2011) similarly submit that inadvertent or intentional religious abuse of congregants identifying as SGM leads to thoughts of suicide. Meyer et al. (2015) likewise report that religious or spiritual counselling for homosexual

issues is correlated to increased rates of suicide attempts among individuals identifying as SGM. Wood and Conley (2014) also seem to be speaking to this issue as they highlight the trauma and loss of religious identity experienced by some members of conventional faith traditions who identify as SGM. Johns and Hanna (2011) spoke to the challenges faced specifically by Gay Mormons attempting to reconcile their sexuality with their faith. Bradshaw et al. (2015) report that unsuccessful efforts by gay Mormon men to change their sexual orientation resulted in a loss of spiritual identity and belief. Dehlin, Galliher, Hyde, Bradshaw, and Crowell (2015) assert that Mormons (both former and current members of the Church) who identify as SGM and participated in sexual orientation change efforts were often emotionally and spiritually traumatised. Kelley's (2014) research, on the other hand, argues that supportive clergy members were a protective factor for Mormon women identifying as lesbian and aided them in remaining comfortable in their faith. Heerman, Wiggins, and Rutter (2007) note the challenges faced by SGM and speak specifically of the need for clergy to minister to congregants identifying as SGM and assist them in their desires to integrate their faith tradition with their sexuality. Although Meyer's (2003) minority stress theoretical framework will not be elaborated on in this article, it is helpful in understanding the challenges faced by SGM in conservative faith traditions.

As a minority group dealing with heterosexism and or homophobia, adults and youth identifying as SGM – compared to adults and youth identifying as heterosexual – struggle with increased incidents of drug use, bullying, and related mental health issues of depression and suicidal ideation (Birkett, Newcomb, & Mustanski, 2014; Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Cover, 2012; Garofalo, Wolf, Kessel, Palfrey, & DuRant, 1998; Marshal et al., 2011). Along this vein, suicidal behaviours among youth and adults identifying as

SGM are greater than among individuals identifying as heterosexual (Haas et al., 2010; Remafedi, French, Story, Resnick, & Blum, 1998; Russell & Joyner, 2001). Gonsiorek and Rudolph (1991) point out that IH can lead to mental health issues ranging from self-doubt to thoughts of suicide and self-harm, while Meyer (1995, 2003) and Szymanski (2005) emphasise that IH is damaging to an individual's overall mental health. This reality may be a leading reason why gay-affirming individuals and organisations increasingly demand that religions “change...doctrines that condemn homosexuality” (Hopkins, 2014, p. 160).

But that call to transform fundamental religious doctrines also highlights the oftexpressed concern of various faith leaders (including leaders of the institutional Church) regarding the social oppression of religious freedom (Francis, 2013; Moore, 2015; Oaks, 2014), a fundamental right (a) codified both in the U.S. Constitution (U.S. Const. amend. I) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (The United Nations, 1948, art. 18) and (b) recognised in the code of ethics of various counselling guilds (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014; American Psychological Association [APA], 2010; National Association of Social Workers [NASW], n.d.). Crucial to this basic human right is the operationalising principle of self-determination wherein a religious organisation is free to determine its policies and doctrines and individuals are free to join or leave that institution at will.

Clearly, the present tension between those identifying as SGM and religious organisations is a pressing, multilayered matter. A key component of this issue is the inclusivity of gay men and lesbian women within their respective faith traditions. This exploratory study examines the inclusivity of Gay Mormons within the Church through the lens of social constructionism – the theory by which humans construct their reality and

make that reality concrete through their use of language (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). As counsellors gain a more nuanced understanding of inclusivity of Gay Mormons within the Church, they will increase their multicultural competence and be better equipped to address the spiritual concerns of this particular sexual minority group.

## **2.4 Methods**

I performed a qualitative research study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) in order to examine the concept of inclusivity of Gay Mormons within the Church. My intention in conducting this exploratory study is to find out “What is going on here?” (Wolcott, 1994, p. 12), or as Schutt (2011) aptly stated, I am seeking:

to find out how people get along in the setting under question, what meanings they give to their actions, and what issues concern them. The goal is to learn “what is going on here?” and to investigate social phenomena without explicit expectations. (p. 13).

I wanted to understand what Gay Mormons and the Church were saying online without formal prompting from a researcher. To that end, I elected to observe what Gay Mormons and the Church were saying on the Internet because “online communities are...typically subcultures of larger communities made up of people with a particular interest” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 158). I also wanted to investigate the ways in which the Church itself and Gay Mormons (both former and current members of the faith) were socially constructing the concept of inclusivity of Gay Mormons within the Church. As Crotty (1998) writes of social constructionism:

Truth, or meaning, comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities of our world. There is no meaning without a mind. Meaning is not discovered, but constructed. In this understanding of knowledge it is clear that different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon. In this view of things, subject and object emerge as partners in

the generation of meaning. (pp. 8-9)

Again, to borrow a topographical phrase, my primary motivation for this qualitative study was to observe the “layout of the land” – to gain a general idea of the ways in which individual Mormons identifying as SGM construct inclusivity within the Church and the way in which the Church constructs its inclusivity of Mormons who identify as SGM. I recognise that an argument could be made that I could improve the trustworthiness of my method by contacting the originators of each statement or document I collected and inviting each of them to participate in interviews or to clarify their meanings in light of my interpretation. I remind proponents of that argument, however, that while there is merit to that logic – this qualitative research study is an observational study. In other words, this a descriptive study in which I am attempting to – without manipulating the environment – describe things as they are by collecting information (Brickman & Roy, 1998; San Diego State University, n.d.) in order (a) to better understand what is going on with Gay Mormons and the Church, and (b) from which I – and other similarly minded researchers – might formulate additional research questions and or frameworks to guide future research on this or related topics.

I also take this moment to respond to the notion that informed consent from the originators of publicly available documents is required in order to observe those documents and analyse and draw conclusions from the same. From an ethical standpoint, I note that all of the statements I observed and documents I mined were “totally public” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 159) and gathered from official websites, public information sites, blogs made public, and YouTube channels made public – all of which were placed intentionally by the originators into cyberspace for the purpose of public consumption. At the time of

my access, none of the statements I observed or documents I mined required a password to access their information nor in any way prohibited public observation (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012).

Given the comparatively rapid evolution of SGM legal rights over the past few years (Denniston, 2012; Obergefell v. Hodges, 2015), I elected to limit my observation to statements made or documents created and made publicly available on the Internet from 2012 to 2016. My primary criterion was that each public statement or document spoke to the concept of inclusivity as defined in this article and originated from either (a) the Church, (b) Gay Mormons who are current members of the Church, or (c) Gay Mormons who are former members of the Church.

To conduct my research, I employed purposeful network sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) by initially utilising the search terms “Gay Mormon” in the popular search engines Google and Bing. This in turn led me to social media leads and news stories with hyperlinks to relevant videos, websites, and posts made by the Church and by Gay Mormons. I simply followed these hyperlinks that took me to statements or documents that spoke to the concept of inclusivity within the Church and that met my criteria of originating from either (a) the Church, (b) Gay Mormons who are current members of the Church, or (c) Gay Mormons who are former members of the Church. Notably, when colleagues learned of my research, they also provided me with additional relevant Internet sources either from the Church or from Gay Mormons.

Importantly, towards the conclusion of my initial research on inclusivity of Gay Mormons within the Church, the Church revealed its new Policy regarding same-sex marriages and families. To explore that Policy and its relation to inclusivity, I again

employed network sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) utilising the search terms “Mormon same-sex policy” the popular search engines Google and Bing. As before, this search likewise led to social media leads and news stories with hyperlinks to relevant videos, websites, and posts made by the Church and by Gay Mormons. And just as before, colleagues also provided me with additional relevant Internet sources from either the Church or from Gay Mormons.

As may be imagined, entering the search term “Gay Mormon” into Google and Bing brought up numerous results with Google providing “1,380,000” results and Bing “4,280,000” results related to this search term. Similarly, entering the search term “Mormon same-sex policy” into Google and Bing called up “663,000” and “13,400,000” results, respectively. Obviously, I did not review each and every one of these results. Again, however, I employed network sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to discover statements or documents that spoke to the concept of inclusivity within the Church and that met my criteria of originating from either (a) the Church, (b) Gay Mormons who are current members of the Church, or (c) Gay Mormons who are former members of the Church and which were made publicly available online from 2012 through 2016. The statements and quotations I reference in this article are by no means exclusive, but I do submit that – as I will outline more fully below – these statements are representative of how the concept of inclusivity is socially constructed by the Church and Gay Mormons (both current and former members of the Church).

In the interest of transparency (Creswell & Miller, 2000), I note that while I have friends, colleagues, and extended family members who identify as SGM, I myself identify as a cisgendered-male-heterosexual and am in a monogamous traditional-marriage. I am

also a practising Mormon. In order to bracket and control for conscious and nonconscious researcher bias, however, I sought review and feedback on my research and conclusions in the form of “bracketing interviews” (Rolls & Relf, 2006; Tufford & Newman, 2012, p. 86) from (a) colleagues who identify as Mormon, (b) colleagues who identify as Mormon with SGM family members, and (c) colleagues who identify as non-Mormon and or SGM.

## **2.5 Data Analysis**

For my data analysis, I applied variations of open, axial, and selective coding to develop themes and relationships for analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As I encountered statements and documents online, I utilised open coding to organise data into possible themes. Through axial coding, I began to arrange data into categories. I utilise selective coding to organise relationships between my themes. Through this iterative process, I determined that the predominant recurrent themes of interest to me in this study were sexuality, marriage, and family – which in the context and constructs of the Mormon faith tradition seemed to be frequently intertwined and nearly synonymous. Because of this – instead of examining these themes separately – I have elected for the purposes of this article to treat these themes as a complex whole. Suicidality, when mentioned, often arose out of or was intrinsically related to those hetero-normative dominant themes and is arguably subsumed therein. Consequently, for the purposes of this article, my discussion of suicidality is limited to the context of sexuality, marriage, and family.

Notably, my analysis of these themes as a complex whole took place prior to the Church releasing its Policy. The release of the Policy, however, did not induce me to change my theme as the policy reaffirmed the Church’s positions on sexuality, marriage,



and family. I therefore utilised open, axial, and selective coding to analyse the Church's Policy in the context of this observational qualitative research study. The themes I felt to be relevant were (a) the eternal nature of marriage and families and (b) the acceptance or rejection of the Church's divine authority.

Again, as stated previously in my methods section, in order to bracket and control for conscious and non-conscious researcher bias, I sought review and feedback on my research and conclusions in the form of "bracketing interviews" (Rolls & Relf, 2006; Tufford & Newman, 2012, p. 86) from (a) colleagues who identify as Mormon, (b) colleagues who identify as Mormon with SGM family members, and (c) colleagues who identify as non-Mormon and or SGM.

## **2.6 Results and Discussion**

**2.6.1 Sexuality, marriage, and family.** A central tenet of the Church is that only sexual relations between a man and woman married to each other and joined as a family are ordained of God and essential to God's plan of salvation for His children (Bednar, 2013; Oaks, 2013; Packer, 2015; Perry, 2015). All other sexual experiences or relations outside of heterosexual marriage are contrary to God's commandments (Bednar, 2013; Oaks, 2013; Packer, 2015; Perry, 2015). According to the Church, this fundamental doctrine "has not changed and is not changing" (Oaks, n.d.).

The homosexual feelings of Gay Mormons conflict directly with the Church's doctrine on sexual relations being limited to heterosexual marriages. This conflict has led some Gay Mormons to experience feelings of hopelessness, suicidal ideations, and frequent thoughts of or longing for death. Peterson (2014) reveals that she was hospitalised for

suicidality due to the intense conflict between her “Gay heart” and her “Gospel heart” regarding marriage and sexuality. Adamson (2012) describes the Church as an emotionally unsafe place for him because of his homosexuality. Ferguson (2015) states that he regularly had thoughts of “hurting myself, jumping in front of subway trains...”. Johnson (2015) reports that when flying the thought of the plane crashing brought relief because with death he would be released from his internal angst. Mackintosh (2014) stated that he felt suicidal because he did not want to bring shame to his family or be condemned by God for being gay. Adamson (2015) writes, “I’ve read the damning words of men I believed spoke for God. I know how it feels when the only solace left to be found, that last glimmer of hope, rests in the promise of death.”

At the same time, other Gay Mormons report being able to accept, comply with, and even embrace the Church’s doctrine on sexual relations being only between a man and woman married to each other. Although Peterson (2012) initially experienced suicidal ideations related to his homosexual feelings as a young gay man, he writes that for him:

The answer to making life better wasn’t ‘finding myself’ in homosexuality or ‘coming to terms with reality’ on that measure. It was finding God, realizing how completely He loved me, and then surrendering my will to Him... God gave me the happiness and peace I needed. I’m truly and authentically happy with who I am because I embrace who I am – a son of God – and in following God’s path I find far greater happiness than I ever could find outside.

Notably, D. Peterson is not describing the suppression of his individual sexual identity to that of his religious group identity. Rather, he is describing (a) his personal relationship with deity which defines his primary identity as a “son of God”, and also defining (b) his sexuality as being simply one component of his primary identity. D. Peterson’s words are echoed by other Gay Mormons who speak of integrating their homosexuality with their faith tradition. They report recognising and accepting (a) their homosexuality, (b) their

intrinsic worth as children of a loving, divine being they refer to as “Heavenly Father,” and also report (c) authentically choosing to accept, follow, and live the Church’s fundamental doctrine regarding sexuality, marriage, and family (Johanson, 2012; Kendall, 2013; Koontz & Koontz, 2013; Mansfield, 2014; Moll, 2014; Peterson, 2014; Ted, n.d.). Some of these Gay Mormons speak of integrating their homosexuality and religious beliefs by choosing to remain celibate (Ted, n.d.); others speak of expanding their sexuality to such a degree that they entered into monogamous, heterosexual marriages with an informed spouse (Mansfield, 2012; Weed, 2012).

Although the Church condemns all sexual activity outside of marriage between a man and a woman, the Church does not encourage mixed-orientation marriages nor does it counsel or require Gay Mormons to marry (Church, n.d.e). The Church makes clear that all Mormons, gay or straight, who comply with Church doctrine regarding sexuality, qualify for all of the rights and privileges inherent in Church membership (Church, 2015). In addition, the Church unequivocally states that its “affirmation of marriage as being between a man and a woman ‘neither constitutes nor condones any kind of hostility toward gays and lesbians’” (Church, n.d.f). In spite of these express statements, however, the Church remains concerned that its resources for Gay Mormons are underutilised by members (Stack, 2015). Still the Church continues to remind Mormons in the pews that as disciples of Christ, they are to “reach out to all God’s children, including our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters” with “love and understanding” (Church, n.d.g)

As followers of Christ, the Church stresses that its members should be “at the forefront in terms of expressing love, compassion” to Gay Mormons and that “as a Church nobody should be more loving and compassionate...” (Cook, n.d.). The Church further

emphasises:

There is no change in the Church’s position of what is morally right. But what is changing – and what needs to change – is to help Church members respond sensitively and thoughtfully when they encounter same-sex attraction in their own families, among other Church members, or elsewhere. (Church, n.d.h)

To this end, the Church is continually training its congregational lay-ministers (“bishops”) on the issues faced by Gay Mormons and how to address those challenges with sensitivity and compassion (Christofferson, n.d.).

**2.6.2 Policy regarding same-sex marriage and families.** Perhaps the pre-eminent challenge to the idea of inclusivity within the Church is a recent exclusionary Policy regarding same-sex marriage and families which mandates Church discipline for Mormons entering same-sex marriage and prohibits Church ordinances for children residing primarily in same-sex households until they reach the age of 18 (First Presidency, 2015).

**2.6.3 Eternal nature of marriage and families.** According to the First Presidency, which is the presiding body of the Church, the Church instituted this Policy because:

Revealed doctrine is clear that families are eternal in nature and purpose. We are obligated to act with that perspective for the welfare of both adults and children. The newly added handbook provisions affirm that adults who choose to enter into a same-gender marriage or similar relationship commit sin that warrants a Church disciplinary council. (First Presidency, 2015)

The First Presidency also clarified that it acted for “the current and future well-being [of children] and the harmony of their home environment.” This presiding body further emphasised that “All children are to be treated with utmost respect and love. They are welcome to attend Church meetings and participate in Church activities. All children may receive priesthood blessings of healing and spiritual guidance.” Nelson (2016), next in line to become president of the Church, affirmed this policy saying:

we wrestled at length to understand the Lord’s will in this matter...We met

repeatedly in the temple in fasting and prayer and sought further direction and inspiration. And then, when the Lord inspired His prophet, President Thomas S. Monson, to declare the mind of the Lord and the will of the Lord, each of us during that sacred moment felt a spiritual confirmation [of this policy].

Other members of senior leadership also offered clarification of the motivation behind this Policy. Christofferson (2015), a member of the Council of Twelve Apostles, stated, “same-sex marriages are now legal in the United States...people have the right, if they choose, to enter into those, and we understand that. But that is not a right that exists in the Church.” At the same time, D. Christofferson also emphasised that this Policy in no way changes the mandate for Mormons to follow Christ in “the matter of love and sympathy and help and brotherhood and serving in doing all we can for anybody” while “at the same time maintaining the [moral] standards Christ maintained.”

**2.6.4 Acceptance of divine authority.** For Gay Mormons attempting to integrate their sexuality with their faith tradition, however, this exclusive Policy presents more than a simple challenge. Yet, many report that there is still an inclusive place for them in the Church in spite of this Policy. According to Christofferson (2015), the gay brother of Church apostle D. Todd Christofferson (cited previously), dealing with this new policy is a matter of faith and says,

I know what I have felt about the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith, and I particularly know how I feel about the Savior and the prayers and inspiration I’ve had. So for me these are hard things that I don’t understand, but I know where the words of eternal life are.

Richardson (2015), a gay member of the Church in New York, initially thought of leaving the Church when this policy was announced, but during a prayer, he experienced a “profound feeling that this is a hard thing, and for whatever reason that it’s happened it’s been allowed to happen. And the savior is asking me if I’m going to walk away...and I

decided that I'm not going to." These and other Gay Mormons focused less on advocating for a change in Policy and more on creating a welcoming and inclusive space within their congregations by reaching out to individuals and families negatively impacted by this new rule (Barnett, 2015; Christofferson, 2015; Peterson, 2015). Walton (2015), an adult child of a same-sex family, shares that as a child she "felt torn between my beliefs and my mothers' choices" as she underscored the need to reach out to and support children from same-sex homes who are impacted by this policy. Walton also argues that although Church doctrines and policies require moral conformity, "the Church at large is one of the most welcoming and understanding churches there is when it comes to homosexuality."

That sentiment is echoed by other Gay Mormons who also report feeling accepted by their congregations (Gustav-Wrathall, 2015; Richardson, 2015). Although Gustav-Wrathall (a gay Mormon man in a same-sex marriage) has been excommunicated from membership in the Church for decades, he continues to worship with his Mormon congregation. He is also president of Affirmation, an organisation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) Mormons. Gustav-Wrathall writes of personally meeting with senior Church leaders to discuss this new policy and says in pertinent part,

What I can say without the least shadow of doubt is that [Church] leaders see the Church as an inclusive community founded on love, and yearn for all to be a part of it, LGBT people no less than any others.

Based on these and other similar accounts, the Church presents a paradox, in that the new Policy is clearly exclusive but at the same time, Church leadership and congregations are mandated as disciples of Christ to be welcoming and inclusive.

**2.6.5 Rejection of divine authority.** Other Gay Mormons, in contrast, make no distinction between this exclusionary Policy and the institutional Church itself. Kendell (2015) writes that she officially resigned from the Church based on this Policy which she describes as “gratuitously cruel and stigmatizing” to children from sexual minority households. Mayne (2015) compares the Church’s Policy towards sexual minorities as being similar to that of an abusive spouse and contends that the Church does not deserve a second chance with Mormons identifying as SGM. Kennedy (2015) suggests that this Policy intentionally targets children of same-sex couples for bullying. Clark (2015) believes that the Policy is based on “hatred”, is a form of “ongoing bullying”, and is based on the false idea that same-sex couples are “poor parents”. Berrett (2015) expressed fear that the Policy, which effectively labels her and her wife as apostates, would marginalise her family saying, “Having our family labeled as that, even down to the kids – our neighbors are going to treat us differently.” Former-Mormon and gay-ally Dehlin (2015), who released this Policy to the media, contends that the Church instituted this policy to be “intentionally malicious” akin to branding same-sex families and their children with a “scarlet letter.”

## **2.7 Conclusion**

What my exploratory research suggests, at a minimum, is that inclusivity within the Church is a nuanced issue. Understanding inclusivity in this context requires a movement away from the overly simplified dichotomous argument of inclusive versus exclusiveness. My research suggests a third space wherein the Church – which cannot correctly be labelled in the current ideological dyad as either “gay-affirming” or “homophobic” – is inclusive of

Gay Mormons. There is no question that the Church's Policy regarding same-sex marriages and families is exclusive, yet the motivation behind that policy cannot tenably be reduced simply to – as some would argue – homophobia, hatred, or maliciousness towards individuals identifying as SGM.

What the evidence at hand does seem to support, however, is the idea that Gay Mormons' respective perception of inclusivity within the Church exists on a spectrum. On one end of that spectrum are exclusion and marginalisation. On the other are acceptance and inclusion. Clearly, some Gay Mormons find being a member of the Church intolerable, even emotionally violent and damaging to their overall mental and physical health. At the same time, other Gay Mormons find satisfaction, belonging, and great peace through their Church membership. The question becomes, then, what explains this division between Gay Mormons regarding their inclusivity within the Church?

Based on my observations, part of this divide seems to be the level of belief individual Gay Mormons have in the Church's divine authority to pronounce doctrines on sexuality, marriage, family, and the afterlife. This point in particular seems somewhat contrary to the argument propounded by Bradshaw et al. (2015). In their research, Bradshaw et al. submit that for Mormon men who identify as SGM, it is their Kinsey Scale sexual orientation – as opposed to their spiritual belief – that determines “faith in, or a departure from, fundamental doctrinal belief” (p. 311). In regards to Bradshaw et al.'s assertion, I note that my observational descriptive study did not include a Kinsey Scale measure and so can neither confirm nor contradict Bradshaw et al.'s claim. It is important to note, however, that when conducting research among populations that identify as SGM, “the role of heterogeneity in orientation [is] an important variable” of analysis (Bradshaw



et al., 2015, p. 315). My work contributes to the body of knowledge by, among other things, providing additional evidence of an apparent correlation between sexual orientation and acceptance of the Church's divine authority. In addition, given that a fundamental Church doctrine is "that the family is central to the Creator's plan for the eternal destiny of His children" and "that God has commanded that the sacred powers of procreation are to be employed only between man and woman, lawfully wedded as husband and wife" (Church, n.d.i), my observations do support the belief of Gay Mormons in regard to the Church's authority to make these claims is correlated to their social construction of the Church as being either inclusive or exclusive. At a minimum, this information may be useful to scholars, providers, clergy, and families in understanding and addressing some of the challenges faced by Mormons who identify as SGM. Future research should explore this matter further.

Another influential factor appears to be the outreach to and acceptance of Gay Mormons on a congregational level. The Church itself has repeatedly expressed a desire to support and strengthen Gay Mormons and has developed training and other resources – such as [Mormonsandgays.org](http://Mormonsandgays.org) – to that end. Given the Church's organisational structure, where congregations ("wards") consist of set geographic boundaries presided over by layminister-bishops, a key area of influence is working at the ward level with each bishop. In my own ward, the bishop's counsellor's son is gay, and our bishop has become sensitised to the needs of Gay Mormons. In fact, the bishop recently sponsored a ward activity hosted in the home of a married gay couple. This couple also regularly attends and is welcomed to other ward activities and socials in which they desire to participate. Although the Church's doctrine on homosexuality has not changed, the evidence in this particular case

with my own ward demonstrates that this gay couple is included in, comfortable with, and loved by our ward family. I surmise that this situation is similar to that of Gustav-Wrathall (2015) and his husband in their own ward.

While Hopkins (2014) research suggests that some would advocate a reorganisation of the Church's fundamental doctrines on sexuality, my position – based on my observations and interpretation – is that as advocates for inclusivity counsellors should focus less on challenging the Church's religious dogma and more on aiding the Church in responding with empathy and compassion on a congregational level to the needs of their Gay Mormon clients. Obviously not every Gay Mormon will want to remain in the Church, and given the Church's Policy on same-sex marriage, not every Gay Mormon will be able to retain Church membership. But perhaps assisting the Church, especially lay-minister bishops and their ward members to respond with empathy and compassion to these individuals and families could reduce or even prevent further estrangement and marginalisation of Gay Mormons.

All individuals have the fundamental human right to freedom of conscience and the choice of their own beliefs (ACA, 2014; APA, 2010; NASW, n.d.; U.S. Const. amend. I; Universal Declaration of Human Rights, art. 18). Likewise, as a religious institution, the Church also has the unalienable right to determine its own doctrines, policies, and requirements for membership. Consequently, focusing on dogma to the exclusion of other important variables creates unnecessary conflict without necessarily increasing inclusivity. The Church is saddled with the paradoxical responsibility of (a) defining divinely sanctioned sexuality and family while at the same time (b) unconditionally loving and sensitively meeting the needs of Gay Mormons, all while (c) recognising the right of these

individuals to self-determination. As counsellors and advocates for inclusivity, we must look for areas of common ground. While religious dogma is rightly the prerogative of religious groups, as counsellors, we can authoritatively create spaces where marginalised voices of sexual minorities are heard and individual, familial, congregational, and institutional understanding and sensitivity are increased.

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## CHAPTER 3

### MARRIAGE IN THE LATTER DAYS: THE MORMON POLICY ON SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

#### **3.1 Introduction**

As Orwell's (1945) oppressed farm animals "looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again," comparing their former persecutor to their current oppressor, "it was impossible to say which was which" (pp. 107-108). In a similar manner, advocates for social justice must be careful that—in their efforts to obtain political and social change for one group—they do not, in turn, become agents of marginalization and oppress the fundamental rights of other vulnerable groups. Currently, even as society is becoming more affirming under the modern gay rights movement, a troubling dominant discourse is emerging which contends that (a) fundamental religious doctrines relating to same-sex marriage should be overturned (Hopkins, 2014), (b) concepts such as "religious liberty" or "religious freedom" are not actually fundamental human rights codified in U.S. and international law (U.S. Const. amend. I; Universal Declaration of Human Rights, art. 18) but rather "code words for discrimination, intolerance, racism, sexism, homophobia, Islamophobia, Christian supremacy or any form of intolerance" (Castro, 2016), and, further, that (c) central religious doctrines are mere "pretext...to discriminate" (U.S. Civil

Rights Commission, 2016, p.26). Far from being benign, however, such rhetoric challenges bona fide social justice and, as expressed by an interfaith group composed of Muslims, Christians, Jews, and others, “can have a chilling effect on healthy debate over, or dissent from, the prevailing orthodoxy” (Lori et al., 2016, p. 2). This attempt to silence alternative discourses occurs at least in part because the beliefs expressed in such rhetoric represent “psychological walls that individuals and groups use to defend their individual and collective psyche. Accordingly, such walls of belief are political and will be defended” (Fox, 2000, p. 427). My contention, however, is that in an increasingly pluralistic society, diverse groups must deconstruct such walls and work together in order to “insure domestic Tranquility...promote the general Welfare” (U.S. Const. pmb1.) and obtain “liberty and justice for all” (4 USC § 4).

Under the modern gay rights movement, some gay rights advocates have asserted that the doctrinal views of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church)—a religious minority in the United States, making up just 1.7% of the adult population (Pew Research Center, 2009)—on heterosexual marriage and same-sex relationships and behaviors contrast sharply from their dominant, gay-affirming discourse (Hodge, 2007; Nielson, 2012, 2016). The dominant discourse they assert, however, is inaccurately stigmatizing and caricaturizing (a) the LDS Church and its adherents as “nice,” White, conservative, heterosexual, and homophobic and (b) the LDS Church itself as a one-dimensional homophobic organization hostile to and incompatible with individuals identifying as sexual and/or gender minorities (SGM; Goodwill, 2000; Meyer, Teylan, & Schwartz, 2014; Nielson, 2016; O’Brien, 2005). Indeed, this process of marginalizing and stigmatizing the LDS Church as a homophobic institution is underscored by the intense

societal scrutiny of the Church's internal policy (Policy), which was developed to provide guidance for its North American lay-ministers on same-sex marriages and families in light of the *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015) legalization of same-sex marriage in the United States (Nielson, 2016). This homophobic characterization has entered the dominant discourse, and local and national news headlines often described the LDS Church and its Policy in unabashedly homophobic terms. For example: (a) "Mormon church reacts to marriage equality ruling by punishing children of same-sex couples" (Gettys, 2015), (b) "Mormon Church: Kids of same-sex marriage get no blessing" (CNN, 2015), (c) "New Mormon policy makes apostates of married same-sex couples, bars children from rites" (Dobner, 2015), (d) "Mormon's unchristian policy on LGBTQ" (Hertzberg, 2015), and (d) "Mormon Church to Kids: Disavow Gay Parents to Join" (Ramirez, 2015). Other dominant voices built upon this narrative, insisting that the Policy had no legitimate purpose other than to attack those who identify as SGM. Specifically, Kendall (2015) described the Policy as "gratuitously cruel and stigmatizing," while Dehlin (2015) framed it as "intentionally malicious" and akin to a "scarlet letter." In a similar manner, Clark (2015) contended that the LDS Church believes same-sex couples are "poor parents" and instituted the Policy simply to engage in "hatred" and the "ongoing bullying" of same-sex couples. Based on the foregoing, I submit that the Policy heightened the tension between gay right activists and the LDS Church, which conflict, I argue, has otherwise tended to ebb and flow since at least 2008 (Nielson, 2012, 2016).

In 2008, I became both alarmed and intrigued at the stigmatization of the LDS Church and its members. This stigma arose out of and was related to the modern gay rights movement. Specifically, I noted (a) the targeting and harassment of the LDS Church as

well as the blatant and overt anti-Mormon rhetoric subsequent to California's passing of Proposition 8 (Garrison & Lin, 2008; Nielson, 2012), (b) the disruption of LDS temples and the physical and verbal harassment of temple patrons because of the Church's recognition of traditional marriage (Garrison & Lin, 2008), and (c) the public reviling of law student members of the J. Rueben Clark Law Society in California—an interfaith law fraternity sponsored by the LDS Church-owned J. Rueben Clark Law School—at school functions (S. Jensen, personal communication, October 1, 2009). This resentment towards the LDS Church and its position on same-sex marriage was not isolated to California (Moynihan, 2008; Nielson, 2012). Again, I argue that under the modern gay rights movement, the tension between gay rights activists and the LDS Church has continued to ebb and flow since at least 2008 and has been heightened by the Policy. I further submit that under the modern gay rights movement, an adversarial, socially constructed, dominant discourse has developed that minimizes, silences, and, in effect, oppresses the coexisting but subordinate religious minority narrative of the LDS Church. In order to break the adversarial impasse that has developed, my purpose in this article is to aid practitioners, scholars, and other societal actors in the deconstruction of ideological bias contained in the common characterization of the LDS Church by shedding light on the narratives of the LDS Church that have been heretofore subordinated by the dominant discourse. As I cannot deconstruct the dominant discourse by employing its own social constructs, I must necessarily introduce and make visible the LDS Church's own narrative in order to give voice to this particular minority group. In doing so, I will employ Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how the LDS Church constructs the intent behind its Policy vis-à-vis the dominant discourse. In order to provide additional context, I will also employ



Gee's (2005) building tasks to analyze transcripts of Christofferson's (2015) explanation of the LDS Church Policy on same-sex marriage and families. I argue that Christofferson's explanation represents the official position of the LDS Church given that he spoke (a) on assignment from the First Presidency, (b) to the LDS Church's official spokesman Michael Otterson, and (c) in an interview posted by the LDS Church on its primary website, LDS.org. Other proffered clarifications for the Policy—even from members of senior leadership—have *not* been similarly sanctioned by the Church (P. Reeve, personal communication, May 2, 2017).

Again, I am limiting my analysis to how the LDS Church constructs the intent behind its Policy vis-à-vis the dominant discourse. Furthermore, as Christofferson's (2015) explanation does not address the unintended consequences, if any, arising from the Policy, my analysis is likewise limited in scope. Future research should examine the impact of this Policy in more depth. In a similar vein, future research should also examine (a) biases within Church membership towards the Policy and (b) how well-versed Mormons are in the institutional discourse surrounding the Policy—subjects which are beyond the scope of this article. Through this process I will make visible (a) how the LDS Church's constructed narratives differ vis-à-vis the dominant societal narrative(s) of the Church, (b) how the LDS Church constructs human identity and purpose, and (c) the narrative the Church constructs for its members who identify as SGM.

### **3.2 Literature Review of Critical Discourse Analysis**

Advocates for social justice in a diverse society must be careful that their advocacy does not in turn become oppressive to other vulnerable populations. Dominant discourses

marginalize subordinate narratives because “values that resonate with the dominant worldview tend to be seen as objective, reasonable, and moral, whereas those affirmed by subordinate groups often seem biased, ideological, and immoral” (Hodge, 2005, p. 209). Marginalizing and stigmatizing subordinate narratives is an effective defense mechanism in that people “believe the person with a stigma is not quite human” and can thus be wholly discriminated against because the stigmatized individual is viewed as inferior (Goffman, 1963, p. 14). The dominant discourse’s stigmatization of the LDS Church as a homophobic institution subordinates and marginalizes the LDS Church’s own narrative so that its voice on SGM is rarely, if ever, heard. From personal conversations and my own observations, I argue that, unless individuals have intentionally sought out the LDS Church’s narrative, few advocates for social justice—particularly those focused on advocacy for SGM—are aware of critical components within the LDS Church’s narrative. For instance, these components are (a) the LDS Church’s oft repeated position that “affirmation of marriage as being between a man and a woman ‘neither constitutes nor condones any kind of hostility toward gays and lesbians’” (Church, n.d.); (b) the LDS Church’s repeated condemnation of any and all “who engage in so-called ‘gay bashing’—physical or verbal attacks on persons thought to be involved in homosexual or lesbian behavior” (Oaks, 1995, p. 7); (c) the Church’s express position that its “opposition” to “same-sex marriage”:

should *never* be interpreted as justification for hatred, intolerance, or abuse of those who profess homosexual tendencies, either individually or as a group. . . our hearts reach out to those who refer to themselves as gays and lesbians. We love and honor them as sons and daughters of God. ***They are welcome in the Church.*** It is expected, however, that they follow the same God-given rules of conduct that apply to everyone else, whether single or married (Hinckley, 1999; emphasis added);

(d) the LDS Church’s acknowledgment of the legal validity of *Obergefell v. Hodges* (Christofferson, 2015; Church, 2015); (e) the LDS Church’s alignment with gay-rights

activists in seeking housing and employment protections for SGM (Christofferson, 2015; Nielson, 2012); and (f) the LDS Church's focus on improving the inclusivity of Mormons who identify as SGM within its families, congregations, and communities (Nielson, 2016). Indeed, while same-sex marriage continues to remain contrary to fundamental LDS Church doctrine (First Presidency, 2015; Oaks, n.d.), there is still common ground on which to seek social justice (Nielson, 2012, 2016). Unfortunately, the natural consequence of stigmatizing the LDS Church is the development of an ideological bias towards and an intentional or inadvertent marginalization and oppression of the LDS Church by societal members—including advocates for social justice. Given this conflict between institutions of faith on one hand and social movements affirming SGM on the other (Dessel, Bolen, & Shepardson, 2011; Ressler & Hodge, 2003), I submit that there is an ethical mandate for dominant social justice advocates to deconstruct their “own ideological biases” (Hodge, 2002, p. 411)—be they covert or overt—against religious minorities in general and against the LDS Church in particular (NASW, 2008).

Fairclough (2001) noted that in discourse analysis, “The only access that the analyst has to [the discourse processes of production and interpretation] is in fact through her capacity to herself engage in the discourse processes she is investigating” (p. 138). CDA is an approach to studying interactions and communications between people in society—specifically, how power is developed and/or maintained through language (Fairclough, 1995). Borrowing from Foucault's works, Fairclough (2001) examined the influence of dominant societal discourses in the creation of societal customs, power, and consent. According to Fairclough, Mulderigg, and Wodak (2011), the draw of CDA is that it allows for the exploration of “the semiotic dimensions of

power, injustice, abuse, and political-economic or cultural change in society” (p. 357). According to Chilton (2011), CDA enables us to explore how society is linked together by language.

Just as CDA allows us to explore societal links through language, the method is utilitarian in that the technique can be used with different methods or theories—even with different disciplines. According to Weiss and Wodak (2003), CDA “never has been and has never attempted to be or to provide one single or specific theory, and one specific methodology is not characteristic of research in CDA” (p. 12). Thus, CDA may appropriately be used as an interdisciplinary tool for various fields of study seeking to understand the various discourses in society. According to Fairclough (2001) and Gee (2005), the critical analysis of a discourse includes not only the speech used, but also the unspoken elements of speech that assist the speaker in being understood. Fairclough (2001) specifically directs that CDA include “*description* of text, *interpretation* of the relationship between text and interaction, and *explanation* of the relationship between interaction and social context” (p. 91). Gee (2014) states in pertinent part that discourse analysis “includes...what has previously been said and done by those involved in the communication; and any shared knowledge those involved have, including shared cultural knowledge.” (p. 12). Thus, context is a material component of CDA (Reisigl & Wodak, 2000; Richardson, 2007; Wodak & Meyer, 2009).

### **3.3 Use of CDA To Examine Mormon Policy On Same-Sex Marriage**

In his educational study utilizing CDA, Warburton (2016) notes that social identities are created through the discourse employed by members of society. In this way,

discourses are at once both enabling and constraining (Fairclough, 2001). For example, discourse defines what it means to be “Mormon” and what it means to be “gay.” Members of society have a certain reference point for what these words mean in the dominant discourse. In this sense, discourse is enabling in that it allows us to determine who can appropriately be referred to as Mormon as well as who can likewise be appropriately referred to as gay. On the other hand, discourse is restrictive in that it sets limits on what behavior is acceptable for someone who identifies as Mormon and/or gay. This restriction has led to a belief shaped by a dominant discourse that being Mormon does not allow one to also be gay or vice versa (Nielson, 2016). It is this enablement and restriction inherent in discourse that gives rise to the power of discourses. The more dominant a discourse becomes in society, the more power that discourse has in society even to the extent of marginalizing and excluding discourses of views and beliefs that are less dominant (Warburton, 2016). I argue that my use of CDA provides me with the tools for deconstructing the dominant narrative and thus exposing a coexisting subordinate narrative—that of the LDS Church—that would otherwise remain obstructed (Fairclough, Mulderigg, & Wodak, 2011). In the case of the LDS Church, my epistemological and theoretical constructs combined with CDA enable me to move past the dominant narrative label of the Church as a homophobic institution (Nielson, 2016), and determine how the LDS Church constructs human identity and its narrative regarding individuals who identify as SGM. Again, since I am seeking to understand the LDS Church’s coexisting subordinate narrative, adopting the dominant secular view of the LDS Church as a homophobic and oppressive institution provides ineffectual assistance in the deconstruction of that same ideology.

My intention in this study is on *understanding* the LDS Church and the *meaning* that the institutional Church is constructing for itself and its members, and *not* on the meaning ascribed to it by others, particularly when those dominant others seek to oppress and marginalize members of the divergent, theistic class—of which orthodox people of faith (including Mormons) are primary members—because of this theistic class’s “competing construction of reality” (Hodge, 2002, p. 404). Moreover, because “reality is socially constructed” (Mertens, 2005, p. 12) and becomes fixed through language (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), in order to deconstruct the current dominant narrative of the LDS Church as a one-dimensional homophobic institution hostile to and incompatible with individuals identifying as SGM, it is imperative for me to view the LDS Church in context as a religious minority both within Christianity itself and in secular society at large. As Crotty (1998) expressly notes, “Different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon” (p. 9). Therefore, how senior leadership of the LDS Church (consisting of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles) constructs its views and policies on same-sex marriage and relationships vis-à-vis the dominant secular and gay-affirming society will not be the same (see, e.g., Crotty, 1998; Hinckley, 1999; Hodge, 2002). In other words, the LDS Church is constructing a reality subordinate to, and thus oppressed by, the dominant secularly constructed reality. As Mertens (2007) argued, “realities are constructed and shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, and racial/ethnic values,” so researchers must take into account “power and privilege” because these factors determine “which reality will be privileged in a research context” (p. 212). Thus, I argue that, in an increasingly gay-affirming, secular society, the dominant narrative will (a) privilege discourses that affirm same-sex marriage and (b)

stigmatize opposition to same-sex marriage—even if a religious minority like the LDS Church bases its opposition to same-sex marriage as being contrary to the faith’s fundamental doctrine and identity. Again, as Hodge (2005) emphasized, “Values that resonate with the dominant worldview tend to be seen as objective, reasonable, and moral, whereas those affirmed by subordinate groups often seem biased, ideological, and immoral” (p. 209).

Yet as even a simple review of history attests, values from the dominant worldview change over time. A material example is the evolution of the legal rights and privileges enjoyed by those who identify as SGM—particularly individuals who identify as gay or lesbian. Whereas in the past, homosexual activities, behavior, and relationships were viewed as immoral and prosecuted as illegal on both a state and federal level in the United States (Eskridge, 2008; Johnson, 2004), under *Obergefell* same-sex marriage is now authorized and enjoys the same legal status as traditional heterosexual unions. The dominant worldview—at least in the United States and many western nations—is one of affirmation of individuals who identify as SGM. On the other hand—as evidenced by the recent report from the U.S. Civil Rights Commission (2016)—values of subordinate religious groups that remain doctrinally opposed to same-sex marriage are viewed through the current dominant worldview lens as being biased, ideological, immoral, mere “code words for discrimination” and “stand for nothing except hypocrisy” (p. 29). It is in this sociocultural context that the LDS Church—included by Hodge (2002) in his reference to “people of faith” (p. 404)—currently finds itself.

Although Hodge’s (2002) research on oppression of people of faith focuses primarily on Evangelical Christians, he readily notes that the LDS Church is included in

his reference to religious groups subject to “active oppression” (p. 404). Hodge (2005) also clarifies that his research utilizes “Christianity” and Evangelical Christians in particular “as proxy to represent a family of underrepresented spiritual traditions” (p. 208). In subsequent research on Evangelical Christians, he again specifically notes that LDS Church adherents who supported the faith’s doctrine on sexuality as being reserved for marriage between a man and a woman—a common belief among orthodox Christian traditions—were for that reason denied admission to colleges of social work (Hodge, 2007). Thus, I argue that Mormons may appropriately be included under Hodge’s Evangelical-proxy umbrella.

According to Hodge (2004), Evangelical Christianity may be referred to and thought of “as an inclusive, trans-denominational Protestant movement characterized by (a) a relationship with God, (b) a spiritually transformed life, and (c) an authoritative view of the Bible” (p. 252). In a similar vein, the Mormon faith tradition, while distinct from the Evangelical subtradition of Christianity, is likewise characterized by (a) a personal relationship with God, (b) a spiritually transformed life, and (c) a belief that the Bible is the word of God (Church, n.d.b). Furthermore, given that (a) the Evangelical umbrella arguably includes Southern Baptists (Kidd, 2016), and (b) Mormons are similar to Southern Baptists in regards to their beliefs on morality (Walton, Limb, & Hodge, 2011), I argue that, at a minimum, discrimination against Evangelical Christians as “people of faith” by secular or progressive society mirrors the marginalization and oppression experienced by LDS Church. Moreover, given the blatant and overt anti-Mormon rhetoric subsequent to California’s passing of Proposition 8 (Garrison & Lin, 2008; Nielson, 2012), I submit that the LDS Church—compared to Evangelical Christian denominations—might possibly face



even more instances of targeted oppression from an increasingly dominant gay-affirming society. Establishing whether this is the case empirically is beyond the scope of my present research, and I make no claim at this point as to the reliability of that statement. My intention in making that statement is to emphasize and lay the foundation for my argument that in Hodge's work, *Evangelical Christianity*, at a minimum, may reasonably serve as proxy for the LDS Church in regards to societal disfavor and oppression. Such oppression, Hodge (2002) contends, is the direct result of a secular dominant class seeking hegemony for its secular worldview by eliminating the competing theistic worldview developed and maintained by orthodox religions.

According to Hodge's (2002) proposed modified Marxist theory, a secular dominant class—demarcated as a “third” or “new class” (p. 402)—has emerged and increased in power since World War II. This new class (a) is ideologically driven, (b) “wields political and cultural power disproportionate to its relatively small size” due to its “ability to control the labels and manipulate the symbols by which the broader population understands themselves and their purposes in life” (p. 403), (c) is focused on obtaining a “cultural hegemony” (p. 403), and (d) will readily marginalize and oppress the competing theistic construction of reality to achieve its ends. For the sake of convenience, I refer to Hodge's “third” or “new class” simply as the secular dominant class (SDC) and again note that under Hodge's modified Marxist theory, it is the SDC that oppresses people of faith in order to consolidate its own power. I expressly note at this juncture that attempting to define who or what actors constitute the SDC is beyond the scope of this article. My purpose is giving voice to the LDS Church's coexisting narrative that has been subordinated by what Hodge argues is the SDC's dominant narrative.

Yet Hodge's claim of societal oppression of people of faith by a SDC is not without its critics. Dessel, Bolen, and Shepardson (2011), in particular, argue that Hodge's work is exclusive of people who identify as SGM and in practical effect "aligns evangelical and 'orthodox' Christians against everyone else" (p.228). Bolen and Dessel (2013) insist that Hodge's work has "issues with validity" (p. 543); and, while they allow for the "*possible* discrimination of students of *some* faith groups," their focus is primarily on "the very *real* discrimination against LGB students in some schools of social work" (p. 544; emphasis added). Bolen and Dessel further caution against the potential legal liability of acknowledging potential discrimination because "students may sue when they experience their religious views as not supported" (p. 543). Admittedly, as a seasoned litigator, I find this caution strange and their premise illogical; in my opinion, the likelihood of a successful lawsuit increases when—as Bolen and Dessel propose—a university ignores and takes no reasonable steps to address complaints of discrimination based on religion (Blake, 2016; *Cash v. Missouri State University*, 2016). But I shall forebear countering in detail the logic—or rather the illogic—of that position as doing so is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, I will emphasize that the response of Bolen and Dessel (2013) to Hodge's work highlights the dominant discourse's emphasis on challenges faced by SGM to the near exclusion of coexisting narratives of the oppression faced by faith-based minority groups such as members of the LDS Church.

In addition to the foregoing critiques of Hodge's work, other scholars also challenge Hodge's research methods and/or his claims of religious oppression (Jimenez, 2006; Melendez & LaSala, 2006). Hodge in turn responded to each of these critiques, clarifying his positions and challenging the assumptions/statements/positions taken by his critics

(Hodge, 2003, 2007, 2011). I found Hodge's responses to be reasonable and persuasive. On the other hand, I found many of Hodge's critics to be so focused on the concerns of individuals identifying as SGM that they appeared unable or unwilling to acknowledge challenges faced by the LDS Church and other faith groups. Perhaps that anxiety stems from an unspoken zero-sum game wherein one side wins and the other loses. That may be a fruitful area for future research. In the meantime, however, I am pleased by Bolen and Dessel's (2013) express acknowledgment that "Discriminating against faith groups is anathema to social work's values and ethics" (p. 544). I find this to be a powerful statement of common ground from which advocates for change may seek social justice.

In the end, what these critiques of Hodge's work and his responses emphasize to me is the delicate nature of discussing oppression experienced by conservative religious minorities in the sociocultural context of the modern gay rights movement and its impact on "which reality will be privileged in a research context" (Mertens, 2007, p. 212). To be clear, I affirm the narrative of individuals who identify as SGM whose fundamental human rights have been and are denied by individuals, groups, and society claiming religion as a basis for that oppression. I agree with Melendez and LaSala (2006) that, at times, "religious beliefs" have been "used to dehumanize and demonize gay and lesbian people, and those beliefs can harm and oppress" (pp. 375-376). I also expressly agree with Wallis (2005) that, "We must always acknowledge that our religious traditions can be both a cause of oppression and an inspiration for liberation. Religious arguments have fostered terrible sectarian division, hatred, and violence, but faith has also helped set people free" (p. 67). None of this, however, contradicts my likewise affirming the narrative of religious groups whose fundamental rights have been and are oppressed because of a doctrinal opposition

to same-sex marriage. My position is that “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere....Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly” (King, 1963, p. 1). I further submit that violations of social justice—be they based on sexual orientation or religion—are not hierarchical in nature (NASW, 2008) and must be addressed by those able to wrestle with these complex issues in a focused, balanced, and competent manner. In my efforts to address the subordinated narrative of the LDS Church, I have elected to be guided by Hodge’s (2002) modified Marxist theory because this theory provides me with a framework for my objective of deconstructing the ideological biases, if any, of actors in an increasingly gay-affirming society towards the LDS Church as a religious minority. Again, under this modified Marxist theoretical perspective, I argue that the SDC labels the LDS Church as a homophobic and oppressive institution *because* of the LDS Church’s theistic view of same-sex marriage, which view directly conflicts with the SDC’s construction of reality as an entirely gay-affirming regime. I further contend that the LDS Church’s same-sex marriage Policy (Church, 2015; First Presidency, 2015) conflicts with the SDC’s worldview and is thereby (a) constructed as being strictly “homophobic,” and (b) cited as evidence to justify labeling the LDS Church as a homophobic institution. This SDC view of the LDS Church is material to my CDA of Christofferson’s (2015) explanation of the Policy on same-sex marriage and families and my efforts to make visible (a) how the LDS Church’s constructed narratives differ vis-à-vis the dominant societal narrative(s) of the Church, (b) how the LDS Church constructs human identity and purpose, and (c) the narrative the Church constructs for its members who identify as SGM. Again, my intention in this study is on *understanding* the LDS Church and the *meaning* that the institutional Church is constructing for itself and its members and *not* on the meaning

ascribed to it by others, particularly when those dominant others seek to oppress and marginalize members of the divergent, theistic class—of which orthodox people of faith (including Mormons) are primary members—because of this theistic class’s “competing construction of reality” (Hodge, 2002, p. 404).

### 3.4 Methods

In his work, Gee (2005) holds that “the goal of discourse analysis is to render even Discourses with which we are familiar ‘strange,’ so that even if we ourselves are members of these Discourses we can see consciously....” (p. 102). I acknowledge that I am a member of the Discourse that I am attempting to critically analyze. I was raised in an orthodox Mormon family of origin in Utah where my Mormon ancestors settled in 1847 as refugees fleeing religious persecution in the United States (Nielson, 2016). I continue to practice my faith tradition. Growing up, I was aware that several of my extended family members identified as gay and that my parents—who like many people of their generation and time thought individuals chose to be gay<sup>2</sup>—still sought to be inclusive and loving of those who identified as SGM. This principle of inclusiveness and love for others was and remains foundational to my familial and religious worldview, and this worldview naturally colors my research as well as my personal interactions with my family members, friends, and colleagues who identify as SGM. I further acknowledge that while there may be an objective reality, my experience of that reality is influenced by my own subjective and socially constructed filters. I take comfort, however, in knowing that the same is true for

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<sup>2</sup> The LDS Church “does not have a position on the causes of...same-gender attraction. Those are scientific questions...the Church doesn’t have a position on” (Oaks, n.d.b).

all human scholars, practitioners, and societal actors.

Gee (2005) holds that language is used to “carry out seven building tasks” (p. 97), namely (a) significance, (b) activities, (c) identities, (d) relationships, (e) politics, (f) connections, and (g) sign systems. For the purposes of this article, I will focus on the building tasks of significance, activities, identity, relationships, and politics, which I argue were most useful for my analysis of Christofferson’s (2015) interview transcript (transcript). For ease of reference I utilized the features in Microsoft Word (Microsoft Office Professional Plus 2016, Version 16.0.4456.1003) to paste the transcript into Word. I then double-spaced the text and added line numbering, which numbered the lines from 1-96. Notably, I approach my CDA through a social constructionist (Berger & Luckman, 1966) epistemological perspective that focuses on the human construction of knowledge through language and daily transactions (Andrews, 2012). I am further guided in my analysis by Hodge’s (2002) modified Marxist-theory, which I outlined previously.

### **3.5 Analysis**

**3.5.1 Significance.** According to Gee (2005), the language we use gives value or meaning to something; in other words, we make something significant through our word choice and focus. In his interview on the Policy, Christofferson (2015) makes the *Obergefell* decision significant by expressly stating “that same-sex marriages are now legal in the United States and some other countries and that people have the right, if they choose, to enter into those, and we understand that” (l. 16-18). Through these lines, Christofferson gives value and meaning to legitimacy of the *Obergefell* decision by expressly stating that the LDS Church acknowledges the legal validity of this ruling and does not contest the

same—even though this law’s holding is contrary to fundamental Church doctrine. While affirming the validity of *Obergefell* and upholding this as the law of the land, Christofferson also clarifies, however, that same-sex marriage remains contrary to the teachings of the LDS Church, and “is not a right that exists in the Church” (l. 18).

Christofferson (2015) further makes significant the distinction between “what may be legal and what may be the law of the Church and the law of the Lord” (l. 25-26). He emphasizes that same-sex marriage is regarded “as a particularly grievous or significant, serious kind of sin that requires Church discipline” (l. 13-14). Importantly, when Christofferson speaks of “Church discipline” he is referring *only* to actions related to an individual’s membership in the Church—such as a restriction of membership privileges (i.e., taking communion, attending the temple)—and not any action relating to an individual’s legal rights. The LDS Church itself expressly states its position is that no “religious society has authority to try [people] on the right of property or life, to take from them this world’s goods, or to put them in jeopardy of either life or limb, or to inflict any physical punishment upon them,” but, rather, “can only excommunicate them from their society, and withdraw from them their fellowship” (Doctrine and Covenants 134:10).

Christofferson (2015) continues to make the Policy significant by stating, “We’re going to stand firm [on this Policy] because we don’t want to mislead people. There’s no kindness in misdirecting people and leading them into any misunderstanding about what is true, what is right, what is wrong, what leads to Christ and what leads away from Christ” (l. 37-39). According to the LDS Church’s construction of human identity and purpose, people exist on this planet in order to learn to follow Jesus Christ, to establish families, and to prepare for the afterlife, which is viewed as eternal life with Christ *and* their families

(Hales, 1996).

**3.5.2 Activities/identities.** Through our language use, we demonstrate that we are presently engaged in a specific activity; we also employ language to clarify the identity or role that we are taking on in the present moment (Gee, 2005). For example, in his first few sentences regarding the Policy, Christofferson (2015) clarifies that as a member of the LDS Church’s senior leadership, his role “first and foremost” is “a ministry” (l. 3-6). He defines his ministry as “travel[ing] across the world in many places, in many circumstances doing what the Lord commanded Peter to do and feed His sheep.” He further clarifies that his ministry—and that of his colleagues in senior leadership—is primarily “about love and especially the love of the Savior and how He wants people to be helped and fed and lifted, and that’s the whole motivation that underlies our effort” (l. 8-9). A breakdown of these sentences reveals more clearly the activity being engaged in and the identity he is taking on in at this point in the interview on the Policy.

Christofferson (2015) unambiguously uses his opening statements to demonstrate that he is engaged in the specific activity of speaking in his official capacity on behalf of the LDS Church regarding the Policy. In other words, what he says at this particular point in time has the authority of being the LDS Church’s official position on the Policy. In addition to referencing his authority as Church spokesman, Christofferson also reaffirms his apostolic authority as a representative of Jesus Christ. He expressly does this by referencing the Apostle Peter and his charge to minister to early Christians (l. 5-6). Christofferson then underscores his authority as Jesus’ representative by expressly stating that his efforts are about “how [Jesus] wants people to be helped, and fed and lifted....” (l. 8-9). In his opening lines, Christofferson uses language to clarify his identity as an apostle



in the LDS Church and to demonstrate that he is presently engaged in the specific activity of speaking (a) for the LDS Church and (b) on behalf of Jesus.

**3.5.3 Relationships.** Gee (2005) holds that we use language to establish social relationships and that our language signals to the recipient the form of that relationship we are attempting to enact or recognize. As previously established, Christofferson (2015) begins his interview by emphasizing his position as an apostle in the LDS Church (l. 3-9) and subsequently reaffirms his apostolic authority (l. 41-42). In the LDS faith tradition, apostles are viewed as “prophets, seers, and revelators” (Holland, 2004). Importantly, while the terms “prophet,” “seer,” and “revelator” are similar, they are also distinct. Specifically within the LDS faith, a “prophet is a teacher. That is the essential meaning of the word. He teaches the body of truth, the gospel, revealed by the Lord to man; and under inspiration explains it to the understanding of the people. He is an expounder of truth.” (Widstoe, 1987, p. 257). A “revelator,” in LDS context, is one who receives and shares revelatory communication from the divine (Baugh, 2014). A “seer” on the other hand, “is a revelator and a prophet also.... a seer can know of things which are past, and also of things which are to come” (The Book of Mormon Mosiah 8:16-17), and is thus considered to be even “greater than a prophet” (Mosiah 8:15). Thus, when Christofferson (2015) references his title as an apostle, he is also reminding his listeners that he is a prophet, seer, and a revelator.

In addition to his identity as a spokesman for the LDS Church and apostle of Jesus, Christofferson also lays claim to his identity as a member of a family system. He states that in addition to his role as a church leader he is also speaking as “a husband, as a father and as a grandfather” (l. 41-42) and emphasizes that these familial roles give him a “sense

of compassion and sympathy and tender feelings....” (l. 43) for those impacted by the Policy. Notably, this Policy also impacts him personally as his brother identifies as gay (Christofferson, as cited in Rational Faiths, 2015). In referencing his position in a family unit, Christofferson chooses to frame these roles as even “more enduring callings” (l. 43) than his apostleship. In the LDS faith, traditional marital roles of husband and wife and the parental roles of mother and father are believed to continue into the afterlife (Church, 1995). Specifically, the LDS Church holds that “that marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God and that the family is central to the Creator’s plan for the eternal destiny of His children... and for families to be united eternally” (Church, 1995).

In regard to the dominant discourse’s assertion that the LDS Church is using the Policy to stigmatize children of same-sex couples, Christofferson (2015) emphasizes that the LDS Church implemented the Policy specifically because “We don't want the child to have to deal with issues that might arise where the parents feel one way and the expectations of the Church are very different” (l. 51-53); “We don't want there to be the conflicts that that would engender” (l. 51). He clarifies that “if, when a child reaches majority, he or she feels like [Church memberships is] what they want... they can [then] make an informed and conscious decision about that” (l. 54-55), but “in the meantime, they’re not placed in a position where there will be difficulties, challenges, conflicts that can injure their development in very tender years” (l. 56-57). Christofferson further clarifies that if children of same-sex couples who desire to join the LDS Church would specifically be asked to “assent... to the doctrines and practices of the Church with regards to same-sex marriage. So they would... not [be] disavowing their parents, but disavowing the practice [of same-sex marriage]” (l. 72-73). In addition, Christofferson emphasized

that

When we are talking about blessings, priesthood blessings, given to those who are ill or want a blessing of comfort or guidance, that's open to all. We would expect that to be done throughout their lifetime, from infancy on as long as that's the desire of the parents and of the child. That's something we are anxious to provide....Where there is any kind of need for blessing, for counsel, for help of whatever kind, that can be offered; we want to do that. (l. 88-91, 95-96)

According to Christofferson (2015), one important *intent* of the Policy is to prevent familial conflict for children of same-sex couples. Again, for the purposes of this article, I am looking specifically at the “intent” behind the Policy and *not* the “impact,” if any, of the Policy. That is a question for future research.

**3.5.4 Politics.** Gee (2005) argues that “any situation involves social goods and views on their distribution.” Language is the building task through which we determine the distribution of social goods. At its root, the concept of marriage equality involved the distribution of social goods; this was expressly noted by the Supreme Court of the United States, which held that the same-sex couple petitioners in *Obergefell* were seeking the right to marry “because of their respect—and need—for its privileges and responsibilities” (p. 4). While the dominant discourse under the modern gay rights movement suggests that religious freedom and central religious doctrines are mere “pretext...to discriminate” (U.S. Civil Rights Commission, 2016, p. 26), the LDS Church’s coexisting narrative is that religious freedom is necessary for the Church and its members to exercise their fundamental human rights. Christofferson (2015) uses his language to argue for the distribution of the social good of religious freedom. He states, “there needs to be respect and acknowledgment of the rights of the religious community to set its standards and to live according to them and to teach and abide by its own doctrines, such as regards marriage in this case” (l. 80-82). In a sense, Christofferson’s words echoed a point also made in the

*Obergefell* decision wherein the majority noted in their opinion that the traditional view of “Marriage...by its nature a gender-differentiated union of man and woman. . . . long has been held—and continues to be held—in good faith by reasonable and sincere people here and throughout the world” (p. 4). To marginalize or stigmatize religious minority narratives such as that of the LDS Church is a threat to religious freedom—which itself is a social good that has at times been restricted by political forces (Nielson, 2016; Pew Research Center, 2012).

Christofferson emphasizes that the LDS Church’s demand for the recognition of its fundamental rights of worship is really one side “of the same coin,” the other being that “we have worked with [members of the LGBTQ community] and will continue to do so to protect rights and employment and housing and that sort of thing...” (l. 78-80). At this point, I also wish to emphasize the context in which Christofferson is speaking. Again, the LDS Church has long stressed that its “opposition” to “same-sex marriage”:

should *never* be interpreted as justification for hatred, intolerance, or abuse of those who profess homosexual tendencies, either individually or as a group. . . our hearts reach out to those who refer to themselves as gays and lesbians. We love and honor them as sons and daughters of God. They are welcome in the Church. ***It is expected, however, that they follow the same God-given rules of conduct that apply to everyone else...***(Hinckley, 1999; emphasis added)

In this narrative, we see that the LDS Church views its members who identify as SGM as “sons and daughters of God” and welcomes these individuals in the Church while still requiring those who identify as SGM to comply with the standards for membership. Christofferson (2015) acknowledges the difficulty of this for Mormons who identify as SGM, stating, “these questions that have arisen, we’re sympathetic to...they’re difficult, they’re sensitive, they tug at the heartstrings and they’re very real” (l. 6-7). Christofferson emphasizes that while the Policy “requires Church discipline” for Mormons in same-sex

marriage, it does not “dictate outcomes” for discipline (l. 14-15). In other words, the Policy is designed to provide “clarification” (l. 19) and “a distinction... between what may be legal and what may be the law of the Church” for lay ministers (bishops) addressing same-sex marriage in their congregation. At the same time, however, under the Policy, bishops still retain the ability to determine the outcome of Church discipline, thus enabling them to continue to minister with “love and sympathy and help and brotherhood and serving in doing all [they] can...” (l. 29-30) for Mormons who identify as SGM. This is a distinct contrast from the dominant discourse labeling the Policy as simply a homophobic reaction to the *Obergefell* decision.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

Society is increasingly diverse. In order to have meaningful collaboration among diverse groups we must build on common ground and shared values (Nielson, 2012). If we as a society “hold these truths to be self-evident, that all [people] are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” (The Declaration of Independence, U.S. 1776, para. 2), then I submit that the next step towards working together is developing mutual understanding (Covey, 2004), which necessarily requires deconstructing overt and covert biases towards all people—particularly vulnerable groups including but not limited to religious and/or sexual minorities. I further contend that advocates for social justice are ethically mandated to “obtain education about and seek to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression with respect to...religion” and further “should act to prevent and eliminate domination of, exploitation of, and discrimination against any person, group, or

class on the basis of...religion” (NASW, 2008; see also American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014; American Psychological Association [APA], 2010).

I conclude where I began, which is with my position that the preeminent fundamental human freedom is the freedom of conscience. I submit this is operationalized as the freedom of religious belief and practice codified in United States and international law (U.S. Const. amend. I; Universal Declaration of Human Rights, art. 18). The respective code of ethics of various counseling guilds likewise recognize the significance of this right (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014; American Psychological Association [APA], 2010; National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2008). As advocates for social justice, we must be ever conscious of the impact our advocacy has both on our population of interest and on other vulnerable populations. We can and must build on common ground—for it is only by seeing the other that we can see more clearly ourselves and truly “form a more perfect union” (U.S. Const., pmbl.).

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## CHAPTER 4

### WHEN A CHILD COMES OUT IN THE LATTER-DAYS:

#### A CASE STUDY OF MORMON PARENTS

##### **4.1 Introduction**

“No family should feel they have to choose between their faith and their child” (Cooper, as cited in Wong, 2016). Yet in light of the US Supreme Court’s legalization of same-sex marriage in *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints’ (LDS Church) subsequent policy on same-sex marriage and families (Nielson, 2016), feeling the need to choose between faith and family is a critical reality for many Mormon parents whose children have “come out.” Although cultural and societal values regarding sexuality, marriage, and family have rapidly evolved over this past decade, the fundamental LDS Church doctrine of monogamous, heterosexual marriage has not (Nielson, 2016). Thus, when Mormon parents are confronted with a child’s nonheterosexuality, their first response may be one of “heterosexism” as defined by Herek (1990): “an ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any nonheterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship, or community” (p. 316). This heterosexism may be manifest through thoughts such as those expressed by Jolley, namely, “We’re an LDS family, ‘we’ll get this fixed’” (as cited in Donaldson, 2015). These thoughts, in turn, could eventually lead to extreme heterosexist parental behaviors, such as

seeking conversion therapy or even disowning their child because of their nonheterosexuality (Cooper & Brooks, 2016).

Just as a family should not feel compelled to choose between their faith and their child, no child should ever be told that because they identify as a sexual and or gender minority (SGM), “Your family doesn’t want you. God has no place for people like you in his plan” (Cooper & Brooks, 2016, p.1). Such heterosexist statements (a) contribute to internalized heterosexism, (b) impact the mental health of an individual identifying as SGM, and (c) highlight the potential for heterosexism to occur in families and in religion. I argue that, in order to better understand the potential for heterosexism within the LDS Church, and thus Mormon families, it is important to have a basic understanding of the history and culture of the LDS Church in relation to homosexuality. I readily admit that I am neither trained as a historian nor as an anthropologist. I anchor my foray into these fields, however, on the foundational principle established by Draper (2016), where he argues that by its very nature, religion is both encapsulated in and reacts to the surrounding sociocultural context. Rees (2000) asserts that the LDS Church’s attitude towards homosexuals was largely shaped for at least “three decades” by Elder Spencer W. Kimball (p. 145). A biography of Kimball, written by his son Edward L. Kimball, states that, although Kimball “had great empathy for” people who identified as homosexual, his “attitude toward homosexuality” itself was similar to “other Americans at mid-century” in that it was “strongly negative, shaped in large part . . . by an abhorrence for what he was convinced was unnatural” (Kimball, 2005, p. 86). Perhaps Kimball’s book *The Miracle of Forgiveness*, which was published in 1969 when he was a member of the LDS Church’s Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, is the most notorious example today of a Mormon text

that harshly condemns homosexuality (Crivello, 2013; Stack, 2015). According to Kimball (2005), his father's views were more "explicit, emphatic, and strict than others," and his book "described homosexual acts as an ugly sin, a perversion, an abomination" (p. 86).

Kimball himself emphasized that he had written *The Miracle of Forgiveness* in an effort to fulfill his divinely given mandate to preach repentance to the world. He described his role and his efforts thus:

Those of us whom the Lord has called to leadership have an inescapable responsibility, like that of Jacob and Joseph, to – [take] upon us the responsibility, answering the sins of the people upon our own heads if we did not teach them the word of God with all diligence; wherefore by laboring with our might their blood might not come upon our garments. (1969, p. xi)

In a very real sense, Kimball viewed his text as a part of his ministry as an LDS Church apostle to proclaim Jesus Christ to the world. In his words:

This book is not presented to entertain, but rather it has the serious purpose of presenting scriptures, experiences and exhortations with the hope that thereby many will be enticed to repent of their sins and indiscretions and set out to purify and perfect their lives. (p. ix)

As propounded by Kimball, noncompliance with principles contained in the Church's canonized scriptures and the official teachings of presiding Church leaders constituted sin, and, as such, needed to be rooted out in order for individuals to come to Christ and be made whole and holy. Kimball frankly denounced what he referred to as the avarice of sexual sin—be it heterosexual or homosexual. He specifically defines homosexuality, however, as being a threat to the traditional family and to the moral character of the nation in a tone that is arguably ostracizing and unduly harsh. *Without in any way condoning or defending the severity of Kimball's language use and word choice*, it is important to note that, at the time of his book's publication, homophobia and heterosexism were the norm in American society. This is evidenced by the fact that (a) the federal government of the United States



actively discriminated against actual homosexuals or individuals merely suspected of being homosexual (Johnson, 2004), (b) antisodomy laws were not only codified as state statutes, but also actively enforced by the police as such (Eskridge, 2008), (c) the American Psychiatric Association listed homosexuality as a mental illness in its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (Garnets & Kimmel, 2003), (d) the therapeutic “rehabilitation” of homosexuals was considered cutting-edge science (Drescher, 1998), and (e) the Stonewall Riots, which commenced with a police raid of the Stonewall Inn on or around June 28, 1969, would not take place until nearly six months after the publication of Kimball’s book in or around January of 1969.

Unfortunately, the severe stance towards homosexuality in Kimball’s book—which sold over a million copies and was widely read by Mormons (Stack, 2015)—arguably continues to influence heterosexuals attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors currently exhibited by some Mormons (Crivello, 2013; Rees, 2000). That heterosexism has in some cases continued in spite of the fact that the LDS Church itself has emphatically stated unequivocally that such heterosexism “needs to change” and that Mormons should “respond sensitively and thoughtfully when they encounter same-sex attraction in their own families, among other Church members, or elsewhere” (Oaks, n.d.), and further that “as a church, nobody should be more loving and compassionate . . . in terms of expressing love, compassion, and outreach” (Cook, as cited in Church, 2012).

In addition to Kimball’s influence on Mormon thought, I also note that one cannot overlook the specific influence of family members and family culture on the development of the internalized and/or unconscious mind’s perspectives and beliefs towards others (Bargh & Morsella, 2008; Robinson & Gordon, 2011). This influence necessarily includes

familial attitudes towards individuals who identify as SGM. Thus, unless individuals become aware of this internalized bias by making that bias conscious and then critically analyzing the same (Bergin, 2002; McGeorge & Stone Carlson, 2011), they may, in turn, unconsciously subscribe to heterosexist beliefs, statements, and behaviors in response to a child's coming out.

## **4.2 Literature Review**

Such “heterosexist messages from family and religion” (Szymanski, Kashubeck-West, & Meyer, 2008, p. 514) might subsequently lead to the development of “internalized heterosexism (IH)” which is defined as “the internalization by lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals of negative attitudes and assumptions about homosexuality that are prevalent in society” (p. 510). IH has a negative impact on individual mental health (Meyer, 1995; Szymanski, 2005), leading to issues ranging from insecurity to self-harming behaviors and/or suicidal ideation (Gonsiorek & Rudolph, 1991). In fact, identifying as an SGM has been found to be a major factor that increases a youth's risk for suicide. (Cover, 2012; Garofalo, Wolf, Kessel, Palfrey, & DuRant, 1998; Marshal et al., 2011; Meyer, Teylan, & Schwartz, 2014). In their research, Remafedi, French, Story, Resnick, and Blum (1998) noted the correlation between risk for suicide and homosexual/bisexuality in adolescent males. Russell and Joyner's (2001) work suggests that, when compared to their heterosexual peers, youth (both male and female) identifying as SGM have increased rates of suicidal ideations and suicide attempts. Bontempo and D'Augelli (2002) concluded that the rate of suicidal ideations for SGM youth victimized at school was higher than the rate of suicidal ideations experienced by their similarly bullied heterosexual peers. In his meta-

analysis, Meyer (2003) introduced a minority stress theoretical framework and argued that the prevalence of mental health issues among SGM youth, vis-à-vis their heterosexual peers, arises out of the SGM youth being marginalized through what Herek (1990) referred to as a heterosexist culture.

It is important to point out, however, that being a religious family does not in and of itself equate to propagating heterosexist messages just as identifying as an SGM does not, in and of itself, equate to being antireligious (Christofferson, as cited in *Rational Faiths*, 2015; Mansfield, 2011; Weed, 2012). Belonging to the Mormon faith tradition does not by itself determine how supportive parents are of their children identifying as nonheterosexual. Some Mormon parents not only accept their child's nonheterosexual orientation but also continue to nourish and maintain a strong, loving, and supportive relationship with that child (Christofferson, as cited in *Rational Faiths*, 2015; Weed, 2012). Notably, family and religion can in fact serve as protective factors for adolescents identifying as SGM. (Dalton, 2015; Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006; Hatzenbuehler, Pachankis, & Wolff, 2012; Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2005; Stone, Luo, Lippy, & McIntosh, 2015). Detrie and Lease (2007) report that, for adolescents up to age 18 who identify as SGM, psychological well-being is related to perceived social support from their families. Supportive families reduce the psychological distress experienced by adolescents who identify as SGM (Hershberger & D'Augelli, 1995). Goldfried and Goldfried (2001) emphasize the power and importance of parental support for SGM youth. Self-esteem among SGM is positively correlated to a supportive parental relationship (Savin-Williams, 1989). Hatzenbuehler, Pachankis, and Wolff (2012) "investigated religious climate as a contextual-level measure of the social environment," found that

“LGB youths living . . . with more supportive religious climates exhibited fewer health risk behaviors,” and concluded “that religion can be protective for LGB youths.” (p. 661). Young (2014) also noted the protective factor of religion for SGM. These studies suggest that an SGM adolescents’ degree of IH may, in fact, be correlated to the amount of heterosexism contained or existing in the respective familial and religious systems making up their sociocultural environment (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008). In the sociocultural context of the Mormon faith tradition, weekly worship services and youth activities supplement family-based religious practices including, but not limited to: (a) daily family and individual prayer, (b) daily family and personal scripture study, (c) weekly “Family Home Evening” (typically scheduled on Monday night), and (e) monthly temple attendance (Church, n.d.). Given the geographic specific boundaries of Mormon congregational units, it is not uncommon—particularly in Utah with its dense Mormon population—for a Mormon family’s social environment to be made up primarily of its family members and fellow Mormon congregants. Depending on the level of heterosexism in a given congregation and neighborhood, this can present a significant challenge for a Mormon who identifies as SGM.

Fortunately, research on Mormons who specifically identify as SGM is increasing (Bradshaw et al., 2015; Bradshaw, Dehlin, Crowell, Galliher, & Bradshaw, 2015; Crowell, Galliher, Dehlin, & Bradshaw, 2015; Dalton, 2015; Dehlin, 2015; Dehlin, Galliher, Bradshaw, & Crowell, 2014; Dehlin, Galliher, Bradshaw, Hyde, & Crowell, 2015). Unfortunately, however, that research has outpaced studies on Mormon families of SGM, in that few studies have focused specifically on the Mormon *parents* of youth identifying as SGM. Consequently, Mormon families in these circumstances are in particular need of

assistance from research focused specifically on issues related to the complexities of their family and their faith.

I recognize, however, that Mormon families are not alone in these struggles (D. Olsen, personal communication, August, 29, 2016). Hatzenbuehler, Pachankis, and Wolff (2012) emphasize that in addition to Mormons, other politically conservative religious groups are also correlated to increased heterosexism. Support for that theory has been highlighted by the recent conflict over the redefinition and extension of legal marriage to same-sex couples (Brewer & Wilcox, 2005; Nielson, 2012, 2016). Yet the varying Christian sects are not uniform in their responses to and attitudes towards same-sex marriage and homosexuality; these differences are likewise reflected in the beliefs of their respective adherents (Hatzenbuehler, Pachankis, & Wolff, 2012; Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2003). In spite of the official position of the LDS Church on marriage, Mormons themselves are diverse in their own attitudes towards same-sex marriage (M. Meacham, personal communication, February 2009; Mansfield, 2012, 2014; S. Murdock, personal communication, April, 27, 2016; Walton, 2015; Weed, 2012). Indeed, while Mormons are frequently caricatured as “nice,” White, conservative, heterosexual, and homophobic, that denigrating and monolithic stereotype is contradicted by the *actual* diversity among practicing Mormons, which diversity includes but is not limited to sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and political views and affiliations (Mansfield, 2011; Smith & Vranes, 2014). To be clear, however, my choice to focus specifically on the needs and complexities of Mormon families attempting to reconcile their faith with a child’s sexual orientation in no way diminishes the need for ongoing research focused on the similar struggles of other politically conservative religious groups.

In a similar vein, my focus on the needs and complexities of Mormon families attempting to reconcile their faith with a child's sexual orientation in no way diminishes, denigrates, or makes light of the very real challenges and vulnerability of the *child* who has come out as an SGM to conservative, religious parents. The need for ongoing research in this area is of paramount importance. In order to build bridges between a child or youth who has come out to family members, however, there must also be research that focuses on the very real needs of the *parents/family*. Thus, I make the argument that currently the “body of knowledge” is suffering under a research imbalance, wherein fewer studies have focused specifically on the Mormon parents of youth identifying as SGM. This imbalance has, in turn, led to a knowledge gap in regard both to the parental system and the overall family system of Mormon youth identifying as SGM. Again, when we juxtapose (a) the rapid evolution of cultural/societal values regarding sexuality, marriage, and family, with (b) the LDS Church's unchanging and fundamental doctrine of heterosexual marriage and family, this juxtaposition highlights the sociocultural pinch point catching hold of many Mormon families when a child “comes out.” Thus, I have chosen to focus my research primarily on the *parents and family*—which terms I will use interchangeably—in lieu of the child identifying as SGM. I recognize that my decision to proceed in this fashion may result in defensiveness from scholars and lay people across the political, religious, and sexual gamut—particularly if they perceive my efforts to take away from the very real needs of those identifying as SGM. So, while addressing this issue may be akin to navigating the proverbial mine-field, I am compelled to move forward as sensitively as possible. I take confidence in knowing that under the National Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics, I am mandated to “obtain education about and seek to understand

the nature of social diversity and oppression with respect to . . . sexual orientation . . . [and] religion” (NASW, 2008). Mormon families in particular need research focused specifically on issues related to the complexities of their family and their faith. Truly, as Alex Cooper said, “No family should feel they have to choose between their faith and their child” (as cited in Wong, 2016).

### 4.3 Methods

I am focused on bridge building and assisting Mormon families to avoid the pinch-point of a familial-religion-zero-sum game, wherein they feel they must either choose their religion or their child (Cooper & Brooks, 2016). I am using nonprobabilistic purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015) to analyze the complexities of Mormon families’ coming to terms with the doctrines of their faith tradition in light of their child’s sexual orientation in the sociocultural context of a rapid evolution in cultural/societal values regarding sexuality, marriage, and family. Patton (2015) defines nonprobabilistic purposeful sampling as obtaining “information rich cases...from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of inquiry....” (p. 53). My criteria for determining eligibility for inclusion in my study is that participants are (a) a Mormon married heterosexual couple who (b) belong to, actively participate in, and attend their congregation on a consistent basis, (c) are authorized to participate in temple rites, (d) *hold lay-leadership callings in their congregation*, and (e) have one or more children who identify as SGM and have elected to pursue and engage in same-sex relationships. I have selected these criteria because doing so will provide me with Patton’s “information rich cases” about the “issues of central importance to the purpose of inquiry” (p. 53) given the

Church's heteronormative policies and fundamental doctrines on marriage and family (Nielson, 2016).

I argue that the case study design is well suited to my efforts to understand how Mormon parents react to their child coming out as nonheterosexual. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) assert that a case study is "an in depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (p. 39). Gerring (2004) maintains that a case study "is best defined as an intensive study of a single unit with an aim to generalize across a larger set of units" (p. 341). Such an in-depth study of a contained system allows researchers to obtain what Geertz (1973) described as a "thick description" (p. 3) of a particular unit, which unit—while not generalizable itself—allows for the discovery or analysis of *principles that themselves* may in fact be useful (i.e., generalizable) in furthering understanding of other similarly situated units. Merriam (2009) emphasizes the role of the case study as a powerful method for generating information on real life phenomenon that cannot be replicated in a controlled setting. Tsang (2014) likewise finds merit in the use of the case study method to obtain useful data and notes that this method may, depending on the research question, be preferred in some instances.

In propounding my argument that a case study is well suited to my dissertation research question regarding Mormon families when a child "comes out," I am cognizant of the reality that a case study in and of itself is not the final word on the research question at hand. In fact, I readily acknowledge that in the very nature of case study work there is an express acknowledgment of the existence of other units—other cases—outside of but in some way related to the unit being studied (Elman, Gerring, & Mahoney, 2016; Gerring, 2004). I follow Ragin and Becker's (1992) assertion, subsequently echoed by Sandelowski



(2010), that the criteria for what defines a particular case study is socially constructed by the researcher depending on the particular phenomenon to be examined. For example, in my research focusing on Mormon families who learn that a child identifies as an SGM, I will construct that Mormon family as my case. I anticipate that my research will provide useful insights into this phenomenon—but I readily acknowledge that my findings will not be the final word on the experiences of Mormon families with a child that identifies as SGM.

I also note the occurrence of controversies around and criticisms that have been lobbed at the case study format as a bona fide research method (Campbell & Stanley, 1966; Diamond, 1996; Dogan & Pelassy, 1990). I do not desire to pursue those criticisms in detail here, however, as I find them unconvincing and argue that they have already been both adequately and astutely addressed by Flyvbjerg (2006) and Tsang (2014). I likewise reject the positivist view of a researcher actually operating from an objective reality (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2008). That view appears to me to be a primary driver behind generalized criticisms of the case study method. Instead, I subscribe to Ragin and Becker's (1992) view of social construction and Gerring's (2007) assertion that now is the "renaissance" (p. 2) of the case study.

My research focus is on building bridges between Mormon families and their child who identifies as SGM. I want to prevent the severance of family ties, or in cases where this trauma has already occurred, I want to build bridges between such a family and its child so that familial relations are restored. My efforts to understand how a set of Mormon parents—my case—react to their child coming out as nonheterosexual will allow for a "thick description" (Geertz, 1973, p. 3) of useful information from which I anticipate

gleaning principles that *themselves* will be useful in addressing this human phenomenon. As Stake (2005) emphasized, case studies are unique in that not only is the researcher providing useful information, but the consumer of a case study is likewise constructing or “reconstructing the knowledge in ways that leave it . . . more likely to be useful” (p. 455). Therefore, given that my research in the field of social work has a decidedly practical bent and by design should result in some sort of social action or change (Alston & Bowles, 2003), the proposition that performing a case study on Mormon families with a child who identifies as SGM is “more likely to be useful” to that same population makes the case study method preferable to other research methods.

#### **4.4 Data Analysis**

Again, I engaged in this research topic from the perspective of individuals who identify as practicing Mormons. For the sake of transparency, I note that I also identify as a practicing Mormon and—although such labels are *not* typically applied in the LDS Church—I would likely be categorized as an “orthodox” practitioner of the faith tradition. In order to control for my conscious and nonconscious bias as a researcher, I employed bracketing (Tufford & Newman, 2010; Rolls & Relf, 2006) by (a) engaging in dialogue with my colleagues about this case study and the questions I wanted to ask and (b) making informal notes about my research. It is not my habit to maintain a separate, formal record or journal of my notes. I have done so in the past, but have now evolved to a system of note taking wherein I utilize scratch paper and make notes/comments to myself in the drafts of my writing; I then address those notes by eliminating or incorporating them into my actual writing. This is the process I utilized here in my research activities, analysis, and

writing about the complexities of a Mormon family coming to terms with the doctrines of their faith tradition in light of their child's sexual orientation in the sociocultural context of a rapid evolution in cultural/societal values regarding sexuality, marriage, and family.

In my data analysis, I developed themes and relationships through an iterative process of utilizing variations of open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I made a transcription of my semistructured interview with a Mormon couple and employed open coding to create possible themes. I developed categories through axial coding and created relationships through selective coding. I expressly note that for the purposes of this case study I have demarcated the Mormon *couple* as my unit of analysis. I am nonetheless aware that I could have chosen to define the wife as one case and the husband as another case. I chose to focus on the *couple* as my case, however, because the LDS Church constructs “the family as the fundamental unit of society” (Church, 1995) and this seemed to be a natural starting point for this research—particularly since a part of my analysis involves the *family system*. I again note that in demarcating my case, I selected and recruited (a) a Mormon married heterosexual couple who (b) belong to, actively participate in, and attend their congregation on a consistent basis, (c) are authorized to participate in temple rites, (d) hold lay-leadership callings in their congregation, and (e) have one or more children who identify as SGM and have elected to pursue and engage in a same-sex relationship. To maintain confidentiality, I refer to my participants by their respective code names—specifically “Diana” and “Steve”—and not their real names.

In regards to the demographics of my participants, both Diana and Steve are in their mid-forties and are successful professionals. Both report that they were born and raised in LDS homes. Furthermore, Diana made it a point to emphasize that her family of origin

was a very strict orthodox Mormon family. Diana and Steve were each baptized at age 8—the earliest age for baptism in the LDS faith tradition. As a young man, Steve served a full-time, two year mission for the Church as is common for Mormon men between the ages of 18-20. In the LDS faith tradition, woman may serve a mission if they so desire; Diana reports that she had no desire to serve a mission and did not do so. In regards to service within the Church itself, both Diana and Steve have extensive experience serving in leadership and supportive positions in the various lay-organizations of the Church, including, but not limited to: nursery, primary, young men/young women organizations, and Sunday school. Steve currently serves at the congregational level as a counselor in the bishopric, which provides congregational leadership. Steve and Diana have been married for over 25 years and are the parents of four children.

Based on my analysis, the predominant categories of interest to me for the purposes of this article are relationships and spirituality. I note that in the Mormon faith tradition, spirituality and relationships are inseparably linked, given that “The divine plan of happiness enables family relationships to be perpetuated beyond the grave. Sacred ordinances and covenants available in holy temples make it possible for individuals to return to the presence of God and for families to be united eternally” (Church, 1995, para. 3).

## **4.5 Results and Discussion**

**4.5.1 The parent-child relationship.** Steve and Diana report that they “always had this inkling” that their son might be gay. Diana says, “It wasn’t like he came out and said, ‘Mom, I’m gay.’ I would find texts between him and like another kid at school...it

was like this unsaid yeah, we know and he knows and we are all kind of frustrated over it.” The couple “tried to do everything we could to prevent that” but “really didn’t know what to do.” They placed restrictions on him. When he was “having interactions on Facebook with other guys... we were like, ‘no Facebook’ and we deleted the Facebook account, and then he, you know, he was texting back and forth. And I remember one night I grabbed his phone. . . I just took it.” In spite of their intense frustration, they report “We knew that we loved him.... we wanted to help him and we thought that we were, but looking back, yeah, there were definitely things we would do different.”

Initially they viewed their son’s being gay “as a choice or just, like, a bad decision” that was related to pornography use and so they tried counseling in an effort to “fix” the problem of their son being gay. They selected a counselor who specialized in treating sexual addiction, thinking that “maybe she can fix that, maybe she can help him get that figured out.” They also tried other “things that we thought that would help” including having “talks with [their son] ... that [being gay] is not the way the Lord has designed it.” When they sat in a counseling session with their son, however, they realized that the therapist “was not helping and addressing [their son’s] feelings and his questions” and that they “were taking a step backwards with counseling.”

When they realized that their son was gay and that this would not change, they described their emotions as a “true, real feeling of loss” accompanied by a “huge mourning period.” Part of that sense of loss, they explained, was “the death of the future” they “had envisioned” of their son getting “married in the temple” in a heterosexual union, an ordinance which Mormons believe is necessary “for individuals to return to the presence of God and for families to be united eternally” (Church, 1995, para. 3; The Doctrine and

Covenants, Section 131). They describe going “through mourning phases because you love them to death and you want to be with them forever and you wonder if that will prevent that from happening.”

Over time, Diana and Steve have been able to reconcile and continue to develop their relationship with their son. They report “always” wanting:

to make sure that he was and felt part of the family and that he is loved regardless—even though at first we had felt like...we had to set boundaries of what we would allow in our own house, you know? While he is living here, but at the same time him understanding that we loved him no matter what, but that we believe in traditional marriage and, you know, between a man and a woman.

They report that in addition to their efforts to reconcile and build relationships with their son, he has also “gone through some strides to try and reconcile with us.” They “feel like he is living his life in a really good way, aside living with another man...” and that he is remaining true to a number of principles they taught him growing up. Specifically, they report “he has told us that he still says his prayers,” that he said that he “has a testimony,” and “that there’s a little boy they watch once in a while and [our son] said that he bought him *The Book of Mormon Reader* and he will read with him.” Diana states that she and her son “have had really good talks about his childhood where I have been able to say, ‘I’m sorry I did not understand’ and ‘I’m sorry I did not know how to handle it better’ and he has come back and he always says, ‘that’s okay I know you were doing your best.’”

Steve reports that his own relationship with their son “is better now because of my understanding more than anything he has done.” Specifically, he says “I feel like my relationship is better with him now too just because I view his struggles much differently than I did then.” He notes, “I used to view [being gay] much more as a choice or just, like, a bad decision. That’s the way I used to view it and I know now and feel strongly that

being gay is not simply something someone chooses but rather that there is a “physical and biological component to it.” He says, “if I had to do it again, I would do my best to make sure that I knew that, you know, that there was nothing wrong with him for feeling that way.” He continues, “We obviously would still have held to the doctrine” of marriage between a man and a woman, but “I would have done my best to not have my son feel ashamed of that part of him, you know?” Steve feels that approaching his son in this way “would have done [a] world a good for me and for him to see it from that perspective and say there is nothing wrong with having this kind of trial and there is nothing wrong with feeling that way.”

**4.5.2 Inclusion of their son’s boyfriend.** In addition to maintaining a loving relationship with their son, Diana and Steve also make a concerted effort to include both their son and his boyfriend in family activities because “They are a part of the family, obviously.” In regards to their son’s boyfriend, Diana and Steve report “we are really inclusive.... he comes for all of the birthdays and we have gone on vacation and have had him on family vacations and we have gone to church a few times, so he is part of the family.” At the same time, the couple reports public displays of affection between their son and his boyfriend are “a hard thing for us. So we asked, you know, not in our home and they have been really good about that.”

Part of the reason Diana and Steve are able to be inclusive of their son and his boyfriend is that “our son and his boyfriend, are very respectful of our beliefs...so when they come over and whenever we go and do things all together as a family, then they respect us...we try and do the same.” Diana and Steve also note that they have a “rule that they cannot sleep over here, that is our boundary” but when the family goes on vacation, it is “a

little bit more unique” because their son and his boyfriend “get their own room when we are on vacation, so yeah.” Diana and Steve emphasize that their son and his boyfriend “have been really good and respectful and are both very good people. Very good members of society and contribute a lot.”

Another component that helps Diana and Steve be inclusive of their son’s boyfriend is “that his boyfriend does not hate the church... we are blessed that [our son] is with somebody who does not hate the church and still believes in prayer. And when he was sick in the hospital or when our son was sick, he will text us and call us and say, ‘can you please pray for us’ so that helps a lot.”

**4.5.3 Influence of friends who identify as gay.** Part of Diana and Steve’s reconciliation with their son was influenced by their friends and colleagues who identify as gay. Diana noted how her experience at work with members of the LGBTQ community enabled her to “get to know them on a personal level.” She reports “I saw that as a blessing because... I confided in a few people and got their take and their feeling [about] ‘what would you want your parents to do differently?’ So I found it was a good resource” for when their son came out.

These interactions also allowed the couple to meet “a lot of good people who” identified as gay and to see that a number of “them were very good, happy people”. These experiences “changed our view and made us a little bit more prepared” for when their son came out as gay. They note that their experience being around members of the LGBTQ community who have left the LDS Church as well as “others who have...[become] involved in the church again...” also helped them to maintain their relationship with their son.



**4.5.4 Spirituality and Christ.** Spirituality, specifically their belief in the messianic and atoning role of Jesus Christ, also enabled Diana and Steve to adjust to their son identifying as gay. Diana reports, “when our son moved out [to live with his boyfriend], I just kind of left it to the Lord and I said ‘he is in your hands’ and it took a huge burden off of me to give that to the Lord. And so for me, I feel... that the Lord will work it out.... I find peace in that.” Steve likewise relied on his belief in the atonement of Christ to find peace. He shared that when his son first came out, his “concern from a spiritual standpoint” was “‘wait, [he] won’t be with us in the Celestial Kingdom? [Heaven].” He shared his belief that, “ultimately, Christ is the one who paid the price for him and all of us so he is the one that gets to decide, not us, because he paid that price. And that does bring a lot of comfort.... that there is always hope and there is no way to sink lower than the atonement can reach....”

Diana and Steve repeatedly emphasized the influence of the divine in their interactions with their son. They report, “The Lord helped us pretty quickly to reconcile and see [their son’s situation] more clearly.” Diana shared an experience she had wherein her friend—who identified as gay and had left the LDS Church—decided while in her fifties to come back to the faith. Diana concluded by saying, “I really think that the Lord gave that to me as a gift of hope, that, you know, not to give up and not to doubt that he is going to take care of me.” Other affirmations of trust in the divine include the couple reporting “The Lord knows what he is doing” and that they are “not going to doubt that....” because “the Lord will work it all out somehow.” They also emphasized that “the Lord loves everyone” and felt very assured that “the Lord loves [their son] and wants him to be happy and keep him safe as much as possible just like everyone else.” Diana and Steve

likewise take comfort in Christ's atonement as they contemplate the afterlife. They wonder how their son's choices will impact him "in the next life" but know "the Lord will work it out and if that means less glory, than that is what it means. But still a degree of glory" through the grace of Christ.

**4.5.5 Doctrinal beliefs.** In spite of their love and support for their son, the couple still believes "wholeheartedly that...marriage is ordained by God [between] a man and woman and that is the way it is meant to be.... [and their son's] same sex attraction does not impact what we believe...." The couple believes that LDS Church policies "will change from time to time depending on the world and what laws come down...but the doctrine [on marriage and family] won't." And while Diana knows families who have left the LDS Church because of the challenges their children face remaining in the Church, she reports, "I think it gives more strength to those children when the parents... still do what they have been teaching their children as they were growing up and I feel like there are blessings in that."

With respect to how they would feel about their son entering into same-sex marriage, Diana reports that if her son and "his boyfriend were to get married, I would be there. I would be there as his mom because I love him, but he knows what I still believe. I still believe in marriage between a man and a woman...." Steve concurs with Diana and adds the doctrine of marriage being solely between a man and a woman is "pretty cut and dry" in the Bible, The Family Proclamation, and "everywhere else" in the LDS Church.

In regards to their own respective relationships to deity since their son came out, Diana reports that her relationship "has gotten stronger because I have had to rely on [God] more with faith to take care of my son...." Steve similarly acknowledged that this

experience led him to “go through a little bit of soul searching” and likewise forced him to strengthen his faith. Both parties report praying “all of time and asking [for my son] to have experiences in his life to feel the Spirit and have good people come in his life.” They worry that their son has in some ways cut himself off from being able to feel and recognize God’s guidance in his life, but both have continued to encourage their son to pray. Both parents likewise continually reassure their son that God loves him and will answer his prayers. They believe that for Mormon parents of children who identify as gay, “being able to combine both [their testimony and their love] when their child comes out is very powerful.”

Diana and Steve report that they have gained an increased understanding of how God feels about his children. Specifically they note that they “have come to understand [God’s love] better because, you know, to be able to completely disagree with actions or life choices of one of your children, but then still just love them completely, you know, without fail it teaches you a little bit about how” much God loves you.

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

In this case example, Diana and Steve have worked to arrive at a place where they do *not* currently feel that “they have to choose between their faith and their child” (Cooper, as cited in Wong, 2016). At this time, they are able to remain actively involved with their faith and draw comfort and strength from the same while at the same time maintaining an inclusive and loving relationship with their son and his boyfriend. Instead of focusing exclusively on their faith or their child, they have found a way to maintain their faith while at the same time loving and being supportive of their son. Part of the way they have done

this is by accepting (a) that their son's identifying as gay and engaging in a same-sex relationship "is what it is," (b) that based on their observations of their son from a very young age there is likely a "physical and biological component to" same-sex attraction, and (c) that in regards to their son's spiritual salvation, "ultimately, Christ is the one who paid the price for him and all of us so he is the one that gets to decide." In other words, they recognize that at present they are "not seeing and understanding the whole picture," and they have learned to dwell in that space.

Perhaps, in the end, what this case study suggests is that there are orthodox Mormon families and Mormons who identify as gay who have been able to maintain positive familial relationships with each other in spite of fundamental religious differences. This, in and of itself, is a significant finding upon which future research should continue to expand. Such future research might look (a) more in depth at how a family's bishop and other members of the congregation reacted to the family and or their child identifying as SGM, and/or (b) explore in greater detail whether a child identifying as SGM has faced LDS Church discipline and how this in turn impacted their parents. There is still much to be learned in this area. At a minimum, however, "No family should feel they have to choose between their faith and their child" (Cooper, as cited in Wong, 2016), because—as this case study suggests—families can maintain positive familial relationships with each other in spite of fundamental religious differences.

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## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

#### **5.1 Summary of Findings**

My research suggests that the LDS Church itself cannot accurately be categorized as a monolithic, homogenous, and homophobic institution. For example, Holland (2017) expressly referenced “those with differing sexual attractions” in his metaphorical statement that “there is room in this choir [the LDS Church] for all who wish to be there” (para. 14). At the same time, my research also suggests that the LDS Church’s lay ministry and Mormons themselves differ in their levels of heterosexism. I argue that those differing levels of heterosexism in turn impact how inclusive families, congregations, and communities are of those who identify as SGM. I further argue that, in lieu of focusing on religious dogma, social justice interventions should focus on creating inclusive spaces within families, congregations, and communities.

In addition, my research also brings to light the coexisting, subordinate Mormon narrative regarding the intent of the LDS Church’s policy on same-sex marriage. Contrary to the dominant secular narrative stigmatizing the Policy as homophobic bullying, my analysis leads me to conclude that the Policy arises out of and is related to the rapid evolution of cultural morality under the modern gay rights movement. Specifically, the Mormon faith tradition—like virtually all religion—is embedded in a sociocultural context

and reactive to the same (Draper, 2016). In other words, as society evolves away from religious values there is a corresponding response from religion re-emphasizing those same values. Thus, based on my analysis of the coexisting but subordinate Mormon narrative, I conclude that the intent behind the Policy was *not* to engage in homophobic bullying, but rather to clarify expectations of LDS Church membership in regards to marriage. Utilizing the position argued by Draper (2016), I submit that because the *Obergefell* decision institutionalized and thus normalized same-sex marriage—the LDS Church’s corresponding response was to reemphasize, through its Policy, the fundamental Church doctrine of heterosexual marriage.

It is curious to note, however, what arguably appears to be the heightened response of the LDS Church—which is an international institution headquartered in the United States—to federal laws and policies in the United States vis-à-vis its response to state laws and the laws of other countries. By way of example, prior to *Obergefell*, same-sex marriages were legal under the state laws of Massachusetts, California<sup>3</sup>, Connecticut, Iowa, and New Hampshire, just to name a few (Sullivan, 2013). Similarly, same-sex marriage has also been legal in the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Canada, and South Africa for over a decade (Pew Research Center, 2015). However, it was not until the *Obergefell* decision—which legalized same-sex marriage in the United States in 2015—that the LDS Church released its Policy on same-sex marriage. Based on the foregoing, it would appear that, but for the *Obergefell* decision, the Church would not have released its Policy. An argument could be made that this reaction to federal law in the United States is due to the

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<sup>3</sup> Subsequently overturned under Proposition 8 before being reinstated under *Perry v. Schwarzenegger*, 704 F. Supp. 2d 921 (N.D. Cal. 2010)

LDS Church's U.S.-based centrality of power. However, an equally plausible argument could be made that the Policy is not a reaction to U.S. federal law per se, but is instead a response to the increased global recognition of same-sex marriage. Such determinations, however, are beyond the scope of this article and are mentioned here only in an attempt to provide additional context to the Policy. Future research should explore this matter further, as doing so could provide additional insights into the LDS Church under the modern gay rights movement.

My research also examined the relationship between a Mormon family and their child who identifies as SGM. The results from my case study suggest that even when children from an orthodox Mormon family identifies as SGM and becomes disaffected from the Church, family relationships can still be maintained and even strengthened. Based on my research, key components of these familial bonds appear to be the willingness of parents to (a) focus on accepting and loving their child as they are, while at the same time (b) maintaining a personal and trusting relationship with deity in the form of Jesus Christ. My impression at this point is that as parents focus on Jesus as the respective Savior of both themselves and their child on an individual basis, they appear much more able to focus on creating an inclusive and loving relationship with their child who identifies as SGM.

## **5.2 Discussion**

Some argue that research enhancing our collective understanding of the complexities facing Mormons who identify as SGM, their families, and their faith is not “a significant social work or major social justice issue” and thus is not “of major importance to our profession at this time” (R. Butters, personal communication, April 14, 2017). Yet

such deliberate indifference arising from personal bias ignores the mandates of National Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics §6.04 (d) and countenances the disruption of families in our very communities (NASW, 2008). Cooper and Brooks (2016) emphasize that adolescents who identify as SGM are more likely to encounter the juvenile court system than their heterosexual counterparts. Indeed, "coming out to family, especially parents, is often the biggest challenge" for individuals who identify as SGM (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008, p. 329). Although the family in my case study remained close to their son who identifies as gay, I recently learned of a much different outcome in another Mormon family. In that instance, when the family's adolescent son came out as gay, he was kicked out of his home (P. Poulos-Markris, personal communication, April 17, 2017). The family's Mormon neighbors reportedly supported this extreme measure. Surely heterosexism resulting in familial disruption, teenage homelessness, and in extreme cases, suicide (Matis, Matis, & Mansfield, 2004; Nielson, 2016), is "a major social justice issue" worthy of examination by a social work researcher. What makes my work unique among other researchers similarly focused on Mormons who identify as SGM, however, is that I am focused specifically on the psychosocial context of those who identify as SGM. Based on my review of the literature and the information I have gathered to date, most scholars researching those who identify as SGM in the Mormon faith tradition focus primarily, even at times exclusively, on the needs and perspectives of *individuals* identifying as SGM. Although these perspectives are important and necessary to understand the challenges faced by Mormons who identify as SGM, I argue that in order to holistically address the needs of this population there must also be research on the respective *systems* encompassing these individuals.

I am attempting in my research to build bridges of understanding between Mormons and the LGBTQ community. Under the modern gay rights movement, the conflict between religious groups such as the LDS Church and social movements affirming SGM continues to play out in society in general and the field of social work in particular (Dessel, Bolen, & Shepardson, 2011; Ressler & Hodge, 2003). Based on the foregoing, I argue that it is imperative for social workers in particular to examine their biases regarding socially conservative religious minorities in general and the LDS Church in particular. Indeed, social workers are charged with the mandate to “obtain education about and seek to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression with respect to . . . religion” (NASW, 2008). In other words, social workers are ethically required to deconstruct their “own ideological biases” (Hodge, 2002, p. 411) towards religious groups in order to provide competent and ethical care to members of all religious minorities. In an increasingly secular society, this act of deconstruction necessarily requires research such as this that sheds light on Mormons and the LDS Church.

I have attempted to take into account the greater sociocultural context in which the LDS Church and Mormon families reside, participate in, and respond or react to. As I previously argued, as a religious minority in an increasingly gay-affirming society, Mormons may be subject to stigmatization and even oppression for their minority beliefs. Social workers are thus ethically bound to obtain knowledge about and understand this oppression of the Mormon religious minority group in order to combat the same (NASW, 2008). In other words, just as social workers must be vigilant in deconstructing their biases, if any, towards individuals who identify as SGM, social workers must likewise be equally attentive to deconstructing whatever implicit or explicit biases they may have towards



Mormons and the LDS Church. Again, research specifically shedding light on the LDS Church and its position on SGM within and outside the Mormon faith tradition—such as the research I have conducted here—is particularly relevant to the deconstruction of ideological bias and oppression in regards to the Mormon religious minority.

I argue that the rationale for my dissertation research is supported by the concept that research in the field of social work should have a decidedly practical bent, be focused to a degree on social justice, and by design should result in some sort of social action or change (Alston & Bowles, 2003). It is my position that this is the point and purpose of all research in social work. Research that focuses on oppression in regards to sexual and religious minorities enables social work as an academic and professional discipline to become better equipped to fulfill its mission as “a protective safety regime keenly involved in the governance of human vulnerability within the State apparatus” (Gray, Midgley, & Webb, 2012, p. 6).

At this point I should emphasize that in researching the topic of SGM within the Mormon faith tradition—specifically within the institutional LDS Church—I have repeatedly met with resistance from social workers in academia. On the other hand, Mormons—both academic professionals and nonacademic individuals—have been fascinated by my research topic. Academics not in the field of social work have likewise been intrigued by my approach to this topic. This leads me to believe that the field of social work itself is—and social workers themselves are—struggling with an unexamined bias towards Mormons. Anecdotal evidence seems to support this theory of bias. For example: (a) a Mormon graduate student in social work was repeatedly harassed by another social work graduate student who continuously made statements like “Mormons don’t think—

they just follow the prophet” and “If Mormons run over their baby in the driveway they just have another one” (Confidential Source, personal communication, April, 12 2015); (b) a social work PhD admissions committee refused admission to a graduate student because she is Mormon (the student learned this from a whistle-blowing member of that admissions committee but elected not to pursue legal action) (Confidential Source, personal communication, July 5, 2014); (c) a social work professor was informed that he would not be tenured because he is Mormon (Confidential Source, personal communication, August 19, 2016); and (d) a tenured professor of social work was told she should not apply to be the dean of a college of social work because she is Mormon (Confidential Source, personal communication, August 31, 2016). I submit that if Mormons in the academic field of social work themselves feel that they are being oppressed because of their religion—then this is likely a global issue that has also infected social work practice. Clearly, this issue needs to be examined more closely. Discrimination “against faith groups is anathema to social work’s values and ethics” (Bolen & Dessel, 2013, p. 544) and thus this matter should concern *all ethical* social workers.

In these sensitive matters, however, it is important not to paint with a broad brush. I agree with Fox (2000) that “walls of belief are political and will be defended” (p. 427). I submit that our walls of belief are related to, among other things, our religion and our sexual identity—two socially constructed identities that define who we are (Johnson, 2006). I argue that it is these parts of our core identities that cause us to become defensive when discussing matters of religion and sexual orientation. This, at least, is how I interpret resistance to my work on Mormons who identify as sexual minorities, their families, and their faith tradition.

In undertaking this research, I have also found that I must repeatedly clarify my position and address the various biases of those to whom I am seeking to propose or present my research. A frequent argument I encounter is the idea that I am acting in the role of an apologist, which by definition is “one who speaks or writes in defense of someone or something” (Apologist, n.d.). Let me expressly state, however, that I am *not* attempting to defend someone or something, and thus cannot appropriately be labeled as an apologist. My efforts are geared towards generating knowledge in regard to a religious minority group in order to allow for the deconstruction of ideological biases, if any, towards that socially conservative religious minority group under the modern gay rights movement. I submit, therefore, that any attempts to stigmatize my research with an apologist label are logically unsound.

A second argument that I frequently encounter is that, because I am Mormon, I cannot objectively research the Mormon faith tradition. I find that argument ridiculous on numerous fronts, but for the sake of brevity, I shall only address two. First, as a social constructionist (Andrews, 2012), I argue that no one can be truly objective in regard to their research. I expressly reject the positivist view that research can ever be completely objective, and I contend instead that *all* published research is biased in one degree or another (Pannucci & Wilkins, 2010). Second, I submit that the same logic that precludes a Mormon from researching Mormons or the Mormon faith tradition also precludes a researcher identifying as an SGM from researching populations identifying as SGM. Given that “research is often ‘me-search’” (Dr. Catherine Lugg, personal communication, February 17, 2016), such arguments are clearly untenable.

### 5.3 Recommendations

My research lays the groundwork for additional research on Mormon families and the Mormon faith tradition in regard to individuals who identify as SGM. While my dissertation research focuses on (a) the inclusivity of those who identify as SGM by the LDS Church, (b) the subordinate discourse of how the LDS Church constructs its Policy, and (c) the parents of Mormons who identify as SGM, there is ample room for additional future research on Mormons who identify as SGM. For example, future research should also explore the impact, if any, a child's coming out has on siblings. Additional research also ought to examine cases in which a family specifically removed their child from the home because the child came out as gay. Examining parental-child relationships when a child identifying as SGM has been excommunicated from the LDS Church is another topic of interest; so too is exploring the level of heterosexism existing among LDS lay-minister bishops.

Another compelling area of research concerns mixed orientation Mormon marriages—in which at least one spouse who identifies as gay or lesbian has intentionally entered a heterosexual marriage (Dehlin, Galliher, Bradshaw, & Crowell, 2014; Mansfield, 2014; Peterson, 2014; Weed, 2012)—is also an interesting topic given that 41% of these mixed-orientation marriages remain intact (Dehlin et al., 2014). Future research should continue to explore the rationale behind these mixed orientation marriages from the perspective of both the spouse who identifies as SGM and the spouse who identifies as heterosexual. Another unique area of research would be exploring the challenges faced by Mormons who identify as trans-gendered.

These topics—specific to religious and sexual and gender minorities—could

potentially increase understanding and further assist in the building of bridges between Mormons, sexual minorities, and the LDS Church in an increasingly gay-affirming society. I submit that such research *is* indeed “a significant social work or major social justice issue” that is “of major importance to our profession at this time.”

Having established the importance of research in this area, I now turn my attention to the “now what” question inherent in all social work research. It is not enough simply to know something; we must operationalize and apply this knowledge to society and the systems in which we currently find ourselves. We do this in part by becoming aware of our own biases towards Mormons, towards the LDS Church, towards families of those who identify as SGM, and towards the people who identify as SGM themselves. We cannot assist those who most need us if our unexamined prejudices blind us to those in need. Indeed, “It has been said that the gate of history turns on small hinges, and so do people’s lives” (Monson, 2004). Becoming aware of biases enables us to begin deconstructing our view of the world and then rebuilding that world itself.

In addition to this micro practice, we can and should engage in the mezzo practice of increasing dialogue with those within our sphere of influence. Initiating conversations about the complexities facing Mormons who identify as SGM, their families, and their faith tradition sheds light on a topic that may at times be overlooked and brings attention to needs that may be left unaddressed. Dialogue also allows us to socially construct safe spaces within our families, congregations, and communities.

Part of social work practice necessarily involves macro level social work. As outlined in the National Association of Social Workers’ Code of Ethics §6.04 (c), “Social workers should promote conditions that encourage respect for cultural and social diversity

within the United States and globally” (NASW, 2008). Under our increasingly diverse society, we must be wary of voices—particularly those with political and/or financial power—that seek to promote one vulnerable group at the expense of the other. I argue that to denigrate someone because they are Mormon is as much an affront to social justice as is the denigration of someone because they identify as an SGM. We must remember that religion has at times been used to oppress the rights of others, but we must likewise be constantly aware that secular beliefs have been used to persecute theistic views. At a minimum, we must be informed of the issues facing Mormons who identify as SGM, their families, and their faith tradition, and then ensure that they too have a place in the choir.

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